

frontier

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A Political Bribery

THE BUDGET OUTLAY, PRESENTED BY INDIA'S FINANCE MINISTER, Nirmala Sitharaman, prioritises partisan politics over people. It exemplifies how the party in power that runs the government weaponises the country's finances for political gain.

Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand—states where the BJP and its allies, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and Janata Dal (United), are in power—have been allocated a significant chunk of resources. Prime Minister Narendra Modi didn't look beyond Bihar and Andhra Pradesh in order to protect his government. In protest four chief ministers, including three from Congress ruled states announced their decision to boycott NITI Aayog [formerly Planning Commission] meeting.

Andhra Pradesh was allocated 15,000 crores to develop the state capital, Amaravati. Bihar was given 11,500 crores. Himachal Pradesh will receive 'multilateral development assistance.' So will Uttarakhand, Assam and Sikkim. Ostensibly, this financial assistance is meant to help the states recover from the devastating impact of climate calamities such as flash floods, cloudbursts and landslides.

The special assistance to Andhra Pradesh and Bihar is a significant departure from the previous decade. Despite numerous demands, the Modi government did not offer financial assistance to the two states in the last ten years. In fact, they were starved of the resources necessary for the development of the state.

However, post-2024 elections, that equation changed. Chandra Babu Naidu and Nitish Kumar, key allies with whose support Modi became the Prime Minister for the third term, have seemingly managed to arm-twist the Modi government to allocate funds to their states.

In that sense, Nirmala Sitharaman's budget outlay signals fiscal adjustments to accommodate 'political compulsions' rather than a genuine concern to help the people of the states. It also shows how the Modi government penalises states that voted against Modi's brand of politics. Simply put, the Budget, which should reflect prudent fiscal outlay, has been weaponised to favour political allies. It is a 'political bribery'—grease that helps keep Modi in power.

There is no denying the fact that flash floods have ravaged Assam, Bihar, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and Sikkim in the last year. People of those states have faced significant challenges, and a fiscal package to

help rebuild those states is much needed.

But what about other flood-prone states, such as West Bengal? West Bengal has 37,660 sq. km of flood-prone area spread over 111 blocks. An analysis of the flood statistics shows that the state did not face severe floods on only five occasions. Why wasn't West Bengal offered special monetary assistance to rebuild its infrastructure?

Why didn't the Modi government, which provided fiscal assistance to

Assam, offer it to the neighbouring state, which was equally affected by climate catastrophe? Why didn't the Finance Minister offer 'special financial packages' to the people of Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, or Punjab?

Slogans like 'Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas' ring hollow when the country's financial outlays are weaponised to penalise those who did not vote for the party in power. A country's Budget must not be a political statement. It must be a financial state-

ment that works for the development of the country, not an ugly manifestation of partisan politics that prioritise the interests of a few political allies.

In short the budget is basically anti-people. There is no plan to create jobs though mounting unemployment is the burning issue of the day. Farmers have been demanding the enactment of minimum support price Act for five years. But there is no mention about it in the budget. □□

[Contributed]

COMMENT

Name Plate Controversy

THE RECENT ORDER REQUIRING eateries in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand to display name plates—which has been stayed by the Supreme Court—has drawn chilling comparisons to apartheid-era South Africa and Nazi Germany, where Jews were forced to identify their businesses, precursing brutal persecution.

In the 2024 general elections, the decline of the electoral clout of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its failure to reach the majority mark sparked hope that the democratic decline in values of pluralism and diversity may see a recovery. No, that is not happening. For the BJP it is business as usual.

In Muzaffarnagar, the deputy inspector general of police (DIG) issued instructions that on the route of the Kanwar Yatra (a Holy procession devoted to Lord Shiva) all the eateries, stalls, and hotels should display the names of owner and workers right in front.

Notably, the Supreme Court on July 21 stayed these directions issued by the Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand governments, which directed eateries in the Kanwar Yatra route to display name plates. Several parties, Association for Protec-

tion of Civil Rights, Delhi University Professor Apoorvanand and former India head of Amnesty International Aakar Patel, challenged the direction on the ground that it targets Muslim owned businesses by compelling individuals to reveal their religious identity.

As per the directive that was issued by the Uttar Pradesh local administration, "All the food outlets, eateries, and food joints across the state will have to put up a 'name-plate,' displaying the names of owners/proprietors and staff members."

"This has been done to maintain the 'purity of faith' for Hindu devotees who undertake the Kanwar Yatra, in the month of Shravan (a holy month as per the Hindu calendar)," the administration had claimed, justifying the move. Uttarakhand had joined Uttar Pradesh in announcing the rule, and multiple other BJP-governed states were set to follow suit, signalling a broader adoption of this policy.

In the face of criticism, the state administration added that this has to be done voluntarily. This is a very interesting order, where does the volition exist for those who are supposed to follow it? The honourable

prime minister, the supreme leader has maintained a stoic silence on this order, indicating that this is the policy of the party. This move has been criticised by the BJP's NDA allies like Janata Dal United (JD-U), Lok Janshakti Party (Ramvilas Pasvan), among others. In truth the allies of BJP, otherwise opportunist to the core, don't matter to the prime minister, and the BJP will rule the roost. BJP's new partners of Bihar and Andhra Pradesh are happy that Modi's budget has awarded them enough doles to keep quiet.

However, this is probably the most divisive step taken by the BJP. Already Muslim employees of Hindu establishments on the route have been laid off. The whole notion of purity and pollution should not be applicable in present times. The Kanwar Yatra from Haridwar to the local Shiva temples is a fairly old phenomenon. It became more prominent during the last few decades, from 1980s onwards, quite in tune with the rise of politics in the name of religion, beginning with the Ram Temple movement. Now lakhs and lakhs of people participate in it.

In Nazi Germany, the Jews were on the receiving end of fascist politics. They were asked to display the 'Star of David' in front of their establishments and wear the same on their body. Their persecution became

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easy as already their establishments could be easily identified. On the Kanwar route, the step seems to be an anticipatory one and it is likely that the BJP in other states, on other pretext may find this an easy way to identify Muslims.

At present, it seems that sectarian politics has deep roots in the body politic of the nation. Electorally defeating this party and its opportunist allies is a mere first step to restoring pluralism in the country. □

[Contributed by Ram Puniyani]

NOTE

Two Streams of Freedom Movement

Bharat Dogra writes:

SEVERAL ANALYSTS OF THE freedom movement of India have described two important streams of the freedom movement, particularly during the important decade of 1921-31, as very different movements with different ideologies. However in reality what is more important is that despite some apparent differences, these two movements often complemented each other in significant ways, with actions of one movement appearing as a source of strength of the other movement.

Prof Jagmohan Singh, Chairman of Shahid Bhagat Singh Centenary Foundation who has been studying such aspects of the freedom movement for a long time quotes the great freedom fighter and philosopher Aurobindo Ghosh as stating that the division of the people then was basically between the nationalists and the loyalists. This appears to be a much better way of understanding the situation prevailing then instead of saying that the main division was between the path led by Mahatma Gandhi and the path led by revolutionaries like Shahid Bhagat Singh.

The loyalists basically took the stand that either the British rule should not be challenged or cannot be challenged. They may or may not have supported the colonial rule but they were not willing to be a part of any struggle against the British rule. On the other hand nationalists were committed to ending the British rule

to get freedom for India, regardless of their time frame for this or the path they adopted for this.

An important point made by Prof Jagmohan Singh relates to the significant contribution made by Mahatma Gandhi in terms of removing the fear of ordinary people which had been holding back their participation in the freedom movement for so long. The call for Satyagraha and non-violent struggles was able to bring people in such huge numbers on the streets for various protest actions that both the colonial rulers and the loyalists were shocked beyond belief. Movements for non-cooperation and for boycotting various symbols and means of cooption including government jobs, courts and colleges, attractive imported goods that were destroying local employments, shops selling liquor and intoxicants also linked to increased government revenue received very encouraging support from people. Lawyers, teachers and traders also started joining the freedom movement in increasing numbers, ignoring the immediate losses suffered by them. Women too started joining in significantly increasing numbers. The boycotts, the willingness to face police batons and bullets, to go to jail brought out vividly the growing fearlessness of people.

It is this growing fearlessness which helped the revolutionary movement to grow. At the same time it were the several very courageous actions of

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the revolutionaries which captured the imagination of many people and brought them to the streets protests and mobilisations led by Mahatma Gandhi and the Congress. As stories of the great courage of revolutionaries spread, the Congress was also motivated to declare the objective of complete independence much before several of its own conservative leaders were ready for this. Hence the role of the revolutionaries and the main stream of the freedom movement complemented and helped with each other, contributing to the overall strength of the freedom movement.

Prominent leaders of both of these streams were very committed to creating a society based on justice and much higher equality in post-independence India. They were also committed firmly to resisting sectarianism, and to promoting the unity of people of different religions and sects.

This unity of the two streams is not just a matter of academic interest but continues to retain its relevance for present times in terms of the broad unity and complementarity of the various forces of justice, peace and social harmony. □□□

 HUMRA QURAIISHI'S COLUMN

Dark Times

Humra Quraishi

THE LATEST ON CAUSING rifts and divisions and hatred between the two communities, Hindus and Muslims, was the order to display the name of owners and workers of the food carts and eateries and dhabas, all along the Kawariya route. Thankfully that order stands cancelled after the Supreme Court's intervention and directions. A sigh of relief for daily wagers and hapless sellers, trying to survive in these absolutely tough times where costs of everyday basic items seem going beyond reach.

Today the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ruled states of North India—Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand and Madhya Pradesh—seem as though determined to hit the minority community, along the social and economic and educational spheres. If bulldozing of homes doesn't take place then there's lynching and killings amidst an atmosphere where communal poisoning seems spreading out as never before.

As an Indian Muslim I sit not just apprehensive but pained by the ongoing communal build ups in my country. I have been asking myself: Why is it that the changing political patterns have begun to worry me; relaying threats to my identity, to my survival, to my existence? Why nostalgia tightens it holds, dragging along memories of my childhood and adulthood spent in the state of Uttar Pradesh? Why is it that my parents nor grandparents didn't prepare us for this day and age—when not a day passes without dragging along communal attacks on my form, and rape of my psyche? Why didn't the leaders sense and warn that a day will come when Hindutva

brigades will call the shots, relaying fear; threatening to make the Muslims refugees in their own country!

Apprehensive sits the Muslim community, as fears mount. I would describe this as the very massacre of the very spirit of the minority population. Dents on the very identity of the Muslims. Gone are the days of living-on-par. The apolitical Muslims cannot openly voice their disgust or dissent, for fear of the aftermath. They could be branded terrorists if not anti-nationals; with that killed in encounters or else dumped in hell holes.

Today many more Muslims are threatened if not attacked or lynched, many more Muslim children are bullied in schools, many more Muslim families are moving into ghettos, many more Muslims are harassed along the various alibis by the Hindutva goons. Not to overlook the fact that many more Muslim men are sitting imprisoned—the percentage of the imprisoned Muslim men is higher than their population percentage.

Today the very machinery looks at every second Muslim with suspicion! Why is it that under the Right Wing the weirdest possible dangerous notions are getting heaped on the Muslims? Why is it that traitor labels and terror tags are pinned on innocents?

The fact is that the largest minority community is going through the worst possible crisis. Today the Indian Muslim is on the lowest possible rung on any even given sphere. As a young girl or even as an adolescent I couldn't have visualised that a day will come when I, an Indian Muslim, have to think twice what to cook or eat or wear or talk!

The tragedy is that today nobody even bothers to independently investigate and probe; fed that we are on that dangerous dose of outrageously biased propaganda against the Muslims. Can't the administrators and planners see the disasters unfolding! What's left of our democracy! Correct me if I'm wrong, a day could soon come when each one of us could have to carry an ID card or a placard with these words scribbled on it- 'I'm a Muslim/Dalit /Christian/Sikh/Tribal/Leftist/Marxist/Trade Unionist... but no terrorist!'

Or come up with this basic introductory note: 'Surviving in a Hindu Rashtra, ruled by a bunch of pracharacks and maha-pracharakas. Don't know till about when I can breathe before I am lynched and murdered by the political mafia, on any given pretext—cow trader, triple-talaq giver or taker, azaan-lover, mosque-goer for namaaz!'

Needless to add that the state machinery is doing little to harness these rounds of humiliations! Nor any apparent curb on the spread of myths and misconceptions and propaganda and utter lies! It's not just dangerous but downright insulting. Mind you, this has not been happening overnight. Been on for several years, but fast accelerating now with the backing of the political mafia.

Bollywood film star, Farooq Sheikh had, during the course of an interview, detailed to me the negative slants given to the Muslim characters on the big and small screens. And a senior bureaucrat, Parvez Dewan, (a non-Muslim; imagine the decay of our times when I have to add this as a footnote, so that there's no misconception along the lines that religion didn't come in the way of his findings) had conducted a research on what's relayed through Bollywood films and the television serials. And

his findings focused on stark realities : Christians shown in a particular negative light with their men drunk and women in skirts that bare, Dalits and the tribal in another shade of the make-believe and Muslims with a bunch of negatives hovering around them—invariably the villain or the terror striking characters equipped with a Muslim name and surname! Have you wondered the effect the lopsided projections can have on the psyche

of the viewer?

The poisonous unleash by the Right-Wing seems lethal. Hitting psyches on a mass scale, in the backdrop of divides along communal lines, myths and misconceptions and twisted notions in circulation. In the background stand out the discriminations and biases and double standards. Also, the non-implementation of the suggestions made by the especially set up Commissions and

Committees on the condition of the Muslims. There's also the shrinkage or slow disappearance of the traditional and the aristocratic class. Above all, the mounting danger of the destruction of the very ethos cum secular fabric, as the Right-Wing is spreading its fangs, intruding into everyday life and living. It may sound harsh but this is the harsh truth of the dark times we are surviving in.

BUDGET 2024-25

Much Ado about Nothing

Anindya Bhattacharya

THE BUDGET DOES NOT really matter. Like all other times, this time too, the Budget-centric discussion is immaterial and pointless.

Rather, it's much more important to pay attention to the economic survey that was presented at the Parliament on 22nd July, as is done every time right before the Budget. It might seem both imperative as well as commonsensical for this economic survey to carry some relationship with or degree of influence over the Budget, given that it is so closely followed by the latter, but it doesn't; which is why the Budget is ultimately inconsequential. For all functional purposes, the Budget is reduced to the likeness of any random notebook full of household accounting scribbles—just as conjectural, inaccurate, and imbalanced.

However, this year's economic survey brings up a few key points:

Point 1: The massive unemployment rates of the country are currently facing a daunting challenge, which is artificial intelligence. This is the first time it was rather emphatically admitted in the survey that 'The biggest disruption for the future of work is the accelerated growth in AI, which is poised to revolutionise the global economy, India would not re-

main immune to this transformation.' So, as per the survey, it is of paramount importance that the government as well as the corporate sector join hands in withstanding this potential juggernaut.

Point 2: To manage the ever-increasing mass of labourers in the country, it will be necessary to employ 78.5 lakh people on average in the non-agricultural sector every year.

Point 3: Between 2029 and 2039, the number of gig labourers will swell to 2.34 crores, which would make up 4.1% of the entire labour force. This massive increase in the labour force will also entail adequate social security for the same.

Point 4: The majority of the employment is provided by the private and corporate sectors, and the corporate world has now recorded its highest profit numbers in the last fifteen years (in fact, the numbers from 2022-2023 have increased four times since 2019-2020.) So, the responsibility of striking the appropriate balance between labour and capital will continue to fall on these sectors. According to the survey, while it is common knowledge that corporations cherish an overwhelming sense of wonder and reverence for anything AI, they still don't get to completely circumvent the question

of supporting livelihoods and generating employment, because this is directly and intricately related to social stability.

The economic survey brings out a fairly accurate picture of today's ground realities but this year's Budget, unfortunately, does not reflect any of it. All that the government has been able to do is identify the central issue at best— it isn't even remotely close to conjuring any magical solutions to it. The responsibility of regulating and running the economy rests on a non-human wielder of power and control, powered exclusively by a world of corporate giants heavily dependent on technology on the one hand, and artificial intelligence on the other. In this context, the government is but obsolete.

So what the government can do is public welfare. It cannot guarantee nation-wide employment, and the few stable or unstable sources of income it can provide won't really suffice for the proliferating informal labour sector. Naturally, presenting the Budget this year was quite the hassle for the Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. She announced three schemes to generate employment and provide livelihoods: Under Scheme A, the government will provide employers with the salaries for newly appointed employees for the first month— not more than INR 15,000— to ensure that they receive a fair wage. Scheme B will provide

financial aid to the manufacturing process through EPFO. Scheme C lacks clarity on the details but has been proposed to assist business owners. But these beg several questions because the schemes in question are ridden with confounding contradictions. If the government arranges for the salary of a fresher for their first month at their job, then why will the employer bother to keep them employed post that period unless the employee, who has been at the job for barely a month at this point, proves to be absolutely indispensable to the firm? This is a lot like the Ujala Gas Scheme, where impoverished families would be entitled to their first gas cylinder and gas oven free of cost, but given the consistent nature of these elementary needs, who is to guarantee that they would have the resources to afford them the next time? Also, provisions to produce 1 crore internships in 500 companies have been proposed in the Budget. These internships are meant to be a year long, with a monthly stipend of INR 5000 allocated for the interns. All of this sounds suspiciously similar to the blueprint of the Agniveer scheme!

As the Budget progresses, the Sensex and Nifty indices have plummeted. From the face of it, even the corporate sector does not seem to be making much off of this year's Budget. Provisions to build new airports have been made in it, so maybe, if these airports turn out to

be profitable projects once they become functional post-construction, the corporations (which are so dear to the government) can lap them up. Making such a prediction doesn't even require any particular awareness and expertise regarding the budget! A lot of financial governmental aid has been allotted to the two pesky states of Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, which is admittedly a politically smart move on the part of the ruling party. Of course, making the public bear the brunt of its political motivations is completely acceptable! Sure, it would be a brilliant step to increase welfare funding given the unstable, dubious financial state people are currently going through as a country. If one spares a glance at the British Budget for 2023-24, one will find that they had kept £341 billion, which is about 29% of the total money allotted to different sectors in the Budget, for welfare. Health and education received £245 billion (20%) and £131 billion (11%) respectively. But of course, none of that would be of any use to the government, because then, they wouldn't be able to generate profits and hand them over to their poor little corporate dependents! So instead, the government is utilising all of its resources to bloat the profits for the private sector.

The economic survey is basically saying that the future of employment generation is dark; it is almost with a degree of helplessness and despera-

tion that business owners and industrialists are being asked to reduce their dependence on AI and provide employment to human agents. There is just about no sign of any welfare schemes barring some bizarrely inconclusive—and potentially ineffective—schemes for employment generation. So why is the government clearly shying away from its responsibilities? Well, when their entire gameplan has been divisive politics all along, it is a bit delusional to expect them to deliver any policies that will actually facilitate holistic and non-discriminatory welfare, and unfortunately, welfare policies would have to uniformly uplift all in need of it, irrespective of the government's concocted polarities. In the economic survey preceding the 2016 Budget, the then Finance Minister Arun Jaitley had proposed the formulation of the 'Universal Basic Income', which unfortunately didn't even make it to the Budget after that. In fact, Mr Jaitley himself never broached the subject again.

So, unless the Budget allots adequate funds for Direct Public Welfare, then it just is a pointless ramble. People don't really need a Budget to tweak the taxes here and there, which happens all year round anyway. Needless to say, the Budget is just like an overview of minor household accounts at this point; it doesn't serve much of a purpose any more. □□□

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VOICE FROM JALANDHAR CONVENTION

Withdraw Cases against Arundhati Roy and Prof Shaukat Hussain

MC

WE MUST NOT HARBOUR any illusion about the present government being weak. It will be in an offensive mode more than what it was in its earlier avatar. On the other hand, Arundhati

Roy symbolises how to struggle, write, speak and smile in difficult times. The power that be fears only this smile and the people's struggles. Arundhati Roy is the voice of these struggles; and the government is ter-

ror-stricken because of this voice. That is why she is being implicated in criminal cases. If the opposition would not raise its voice against such injustices, the people would also not care about it." This is how the veteran journalist Bhasha Singh characterised the present situation in the well-attended convention organised at Desh Bhagat Yadgar Hall, Jalandhar by more than three dozen mass and democratic organisations of Punjab to oppose the recently implemented

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criminal codes and the sanction given by the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi to prosecute Arundhati Roy and Professor Sheikh Shaukat Hussain under the draconian UAPA. The representatives of the participating mass organisations of peasants, workers, farm labourers, employees, students, youth and literary and cultural figures presided over this convention held on 21 July, and it was coordinated by the Association for Democratic Rights, Punjab and Rationalist Society, Punjab.

The convention was addressed by Professor Jagmohan Singh, President of the Association for Democratic Rights, Mr Rajinder Bhadaur Organising Secretary of Rationalist Society, and Advocates N K Jeet and Daljeet Singh besides Bhasha Singh.

Professor Jagmohan Singh pierced through the claims of the central government that the new criminal codes have come out of the hegemonic shadow of the colonial laws and discerned in them the spirit of the infamous Rowlatt act. Their real intent is to turn the Indian state into a police raj, he said. While characterising the intended prosecution of Arundhati Roy and Professor Shauket Hussain and the punishment meted out to Medha Patekar in a so-called defamation case as an attack on the right to expression and to struggle, he also focused upon the relationship of these fascistic manifestations of the working of the present regime with the agenda of the pro-corporate new liberal policies to loot

and exploit the natural resources and wealth created by the Indian people.

Advocates Daljeet Singh and N K Jeet said that the new criminal laws are aimed at annihilating the democratic rights of the people achieved through their heroic struggles. These laws also contravene various human rights covenants to which India has been a signatory.

Mr Rajinder Bhadaur hoped in the categorical sense of the word that this convention would prove to be a milestone in the struggles of the people of India against the fascist machinations of the Modi regime. He was confident that the people would succeed in these ventures as they did in the instance of the withdrawal of the three draconian farm laws.

At the end of the convention, a protest demonstration was taken out against the fascist steps of the present government. The protest march culminated in a brief rally which was addressed by Dr Parminder, Vice President of the Association for Democratic Rights. In his address, he said that the emerging consciousness and movement of democratic rights in Punjab would prove to be a milestone in the people's struggles in the country and a warning to the government to desist from embarking upon the oppressive anti-democratic acts. He said that the people of Punjab always kept the anti-colonial legacy of the Ghadarites and Bhagat Singh alive in their beings and would continue their protests till the new criminal codes and the case against

Arundhati Roy and Professor Shaukat Hussain are annulled.

The convention also demanded through various resolutions that the four new labour codes, Digital media regulations, Personal Data Protection Act, Public Security Act, Maharashtra Public Security Bill, and all the black laws like UAPA be annulled forthwith; cases registered under sections of IPC 295/295A be withdrawn; intellectuals and activists arrested in Bhima Koregaon case be released; all the convicts who have completed their sentences be also released; an end to the displacement of the tribal people in the name of development by the corporates and their incarceration and killings in false police encounters; journalists and lawyers arrested under Public Security Act in Kashmir be released; fraternal fratricide and sexual violence against women in Manipur be stopped; and also an end to the genocide of the Palestinian people in Gaza by Israel and the sole right of the Palestinians to their land are accepted.

The convention also demanded that the Punjab government must get a resolution passed in the legislature for annulment of these new criminal codes. All the resolutions were moved by Mr Narbhinder Singh and the people passed them unanimously by raising their hands. The proceedings of the stage were conducted by Mr. Jaswinder Phagwara of the Rationalist Society. □□□

[Released by the Media committee]

PRIVATISING RAILWAYS

Nightmare for Ordinary Railway Commuters

Anandi Pandey
Sandeep Pandey

PROBABLY EVEN THE BRITISH, who introduced railways in India, would not have done what the Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP] government is doing. The

number of Sleeper and General Class coaches in various trains are surreptitiously and ominously disappearing accompanied by a simultaneous increase in Air Conditioned coaches.

In the characteristic style of BJP government there was no discussion or debate on this move by the Indian Railways either in the Parliament or outside of it. In a democratic country where majority of the population cannot afford to travel in AC coaches, and if anyone needs a proof of this just look at the condition in which people travel in General Class. No weak hearted person

would dare to enter these coaches where one may have to struggle at the gate to get inside the coach. One can imagine the fate of a sick, disabled, old, child or woman trying to travel in these coaches. Why would people travel in such a condition except for it is their compulsion? The fact is most of the people travelling in Sleeper and General classes simply cannot spend any more money in travel. The difference between the cost of a General class and Sleeper class is about 60-70% but the quality of travel comfort is markedly different. The cost of a Third AC class ticket is about 140-160% that of Sleeper class and is about the same as a non-AC ordinary bus fare for the same distance. Hence for a General class or Sleeper class passenger even an ordinary bus journey is prohibitively costly. Some of the trains called AC Expresses, Rajdhani, Shatabdi and the newly introduced Vande Bharats have only AC coaches which a large majority of the population cannot afford. This implies that closing the option of Sleeper and General classes for ordinary passengers in India is a violation of the fundamental right of the citizen Article 19(d) of the Constitution, 'to move freely throughout the territory of India.'

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In the age of Artificial Intelligence why should it not be possible to dynamically adjust the number of coaches in accordance with the demand? Keeping the same number of total coaches the number of General class or AC coaches could be according to the number of passengers willing to travel that particular day in different classes.

The idea of having different classes for travel is itself incongruous with the idea of democracy. Furthermore, in AC coaches the passengers also get the benefit of bedsheets, blanket and pillow and in some trains the cost of ticket covers food as well. This exhibits the class bias of policy makers. Otherwise, logical reasoning would favour the idea of more benefits for poorer passengers rather than the rich. After all, as part of Public Distribution System food grains are given to the poor, not the rich. Similarly, blankets and clothes are ordinarily distributed to the poor. For the General class passengers the Railway authorities may not even bother about the cleanliness of their toilets or availability of water on a long distance journey. The class of the society which is granted the benefit of reservation on the basis of socio-economic-educational backwardness and untouchability has to travel in the Indian Railways unreserved and the elite, who are critical of the system of caste based reservation, obtain reservation of berths in coaches sometimes using a quota which is disbursed by the Railway Head Offices. Obviously a system of privileges for the elite prevails in the Indian Railways.

The manner in which various services like catering, sanitation and even ticket checking have been privatised, a government run company Indian Railways Catering and Tourism Corporation has been allowed to run several private trains, the Tejas Express from Delhi to

Lucknow being the first one introduced in 2019, the infrastructure at railway stations are being upgraded there is a clear indication of things moving in the direction of privatisation. With increasing privatisation the Indian Railways will further become inaccessible to the poor or the poor would not be able to afford most services like the paid waiting lounges, etc.

This raises a basic question of the purpose of existence of railways or any means of transportation for that matter. Transportation and communication are two additional basic needs of human being to the commonly acknowledged food, clothing and shelter. These are fundamental rights as they are required for life with dignity. When Aam Admi Party government made bus travel for women free, it was not doing a favour to the people. Food, Clothing, Shelter, Transportation and Communication should be free in any society in addition to education and health-care. The idea of free travel, at least for women, is now gaining popularity. Hopefully, it'll extend to the entire population and will cover all means of transportation. A truly Socialist government will make all public transportation free and most transportation will be public. People should hardly need to use private vehicles. Railways will be the most preferred means of long distance travel from the point of view of contributing least to global warming and for the same reason of global warming air travel will phase out. However, for medical emergency some provision of air travel could be kept.

The tendency of the BJP government to commercialise must be checked. These policies are meant to only favour private corporations of various kinds at the cost of the common citizens of this country. The increasing privatisation restricts the democratic rights of the citizens.

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An ordinary passenger cannot complain against services rendered by private entities compared to when they were handled by the Indian Railways. For example, the cost of food is fixed by the Indian Railways authorities but the private contractor hires contract employees who argue in favour of protection of their interest when selling items at more than

the prescribed cost. In a similar manner all services have been compromised and the passenger is left to the mercy of more and more private players. This trend has to be reversed if the right of citizens is to be protected. The rulers of the BJP government think they are lording over this vast infrastructure of Indian Railways and are free to con-

vert every service into profit making business venture. Indian Railways serves a social purpose and is the life line of India so far as movement of ordinary citizen is concerned. The rulers have no business to make a business out of it. □□□

[Anandi Pandey is a student of politics and Sandeep Pandey is General Secretary, Socialist Party-India]

WHERE TO GO?

Falling Standards of Education

Abhay Mokashi

INDIA SEEMS TO BE AT THE crossroads to decide whether to give priority to education or religion. The government at the centre has laid more emphasis on religion as compared to education, and stood exposed towards that end, by falling into the trap laid by Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi.

Though Gandhi wanted to lay a trap for the Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP] and especially its leader and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, his act in Parliament is not at all laudable.

It was not expected of the former to display photographs of gods and religious heads in the Lok Sabha. As a parliamentarian and the Leader of the Opposition in a secular country he should have refrained from displaying images of gods and heads of religion in the House. However, it was part of his strategy to corner Speaker Om Birla, Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Modi himself on the issue of Hinduism and he was successful in doing so.

The otherwise aggressive Birla and Shah were seen softened when opposing Gandhi for his act. Birla was caught in a tricky situation. He could not take action against Gandhi, according to the rules for the conduction of proceedings of the House, which prohibit display of images.

Birla, known to snub members, even when they have not violated the rules of proceedings, meekly tried to tell Gandhi not to display images. If he had taken firm action, it would have meant that the display of Hindu god Lord Shiva was not allowed in the Lok Sabha and the Congress and other members of the INDIA bloc would have made it a public issue by flaying the BJP and the Speaker for insulting Hinduism. On the contrary, at one point Birla told Gandhi to show respect to the gods as regards handling of the images.

Gandhi used the opportunity to flay the BJP and its leaders, labelling them as untrue Hindus. In the same speech he questioned the government about the mishandling of the NEET examinations and the numerous cases of leakage of papers of various competitive examinations in the country. He exhorted the prime minister to speak on the NEET examination scam, which has affected lakhs of students. But that was after Gandhi provoked him on Hinduism and that was it.

Modi spoke on religion and devoted his reply to silly and nonsensical issues, the way he normally does. The student community would have been delighted if Modi had assured them that the NEET examination system would be rectified so that

there are no more cases of paper leak and that brilliant and hardworking students would not suffer.

The condition of school education in most states is nothing to be proud of; rather it is a matter of shame not just for those in power, but for all those who wish to see India as a leading nation.

The educated understand the power of education and if they are in power, they can ensure that every child in the country has access to affordable, if not free education so long as the person wishes to learn.

Those who find themselves successful without the benefits of formal education can rarely understand the value and importance of education to the development of an individual and that of the nation.

School education in a large number of states is found to be wanting in terms of teaching, knowledge of the teachers and students and infrastructure. Though primary education is a state subject, a prime minister would do well to speak on it and to promote quality education.

A recent survey had exposed that students of class eight were not able to solve simple mathematics problems and could not read properly. But why blame only teachers and students? The newly appointed Union Minister of State for Women and Child Development, Savitri Thakur, could not write "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao" in Hindi during a programme. What a shame that she shares the name of the pioneer of

women's education in India. The prime minister's blunder on the name of the programme, while speaking about it at a campaign last year, cannot be forgotten.

The situation of education in Maharashtra is also wanting. Maharashtra was once the seat of education, with the finest schools, colleges and universities, but now the quality of education is going down and many state-run schools are either closing down or are in a bad shape, as regards infrastructure.

A survey by Child Relief and You (CRY), along with other organisations, showed that of the 122 government

schools surveyed in Maharashtra, 57% did not have a fulltime head, while in 69% schools, the teacher or students cleaned the toilets.

The survey was carried out by several organisations and individuals working in the field of education under the banner of Bal Hakk Abhiyan and was carried out in the wake of the state government's decision to shut down 1,300 schools run by it.

According to the survey, 13% of the schools did not have a proper or strong building and 37% were without a compound wall. Many schools were devoid of playgrounds, proper

toilets and filtered drinking water.

An investigative report by a Marathi television channel this week exposed the lack of proper infrastructure in several districts. These Zilla Parishad-run schools had broken benches and leaking roofs, among other issues.

The situation may not improve soon since the ruling and the opposition parties are busy in their verbal attacks against each other, while the public has lost its power to put pressure on elected representatives to rectify things. □□□

[The author is a senior journalist and media trainer. He tweets at @a_mokashi]

RESURRECTING RAJAKAR

Bangladesh in Turmoil

Sourish Ghosh

AMRA KARA? RAJAKAR, Rajakar"! This is the popular slogan which is presently resonating on the streets of Bangladesh. But this slogan testifies one of the biggest mistakes of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina who had labelled every protestor to be a 'Rajakar'. A Rajakar is a cuss word in Bangladesh which is used to define the Pakistani henchmen who had created mayhem during Bangladeshi liberation struggle and have been accused of torturing and assassinating many freedom fighters who are known as 'Muktijoddha' in Bangladesh.

On March 21, 2018, Sheikh Hasina announced the quota system in government jobs for descendants of freedom fighters. On April 8, 2018, at midnight hundreds of students began protests in Shahbag area in demand of bringing down the quota system and filling up vacant posts by candidates from the merit list. The protest spread like wild fire engulfing the whole of Bangladesh which coerced the

Hasina government to issue a circular dismissing the quota system for recruitment. But it erupted once again in June 2024 with Supreme Court's verdict which revived the 30 percent quota for descendants of freedom fighters. An obvious protest began against it and soon things became violent and it crossed the walls of institutes and spread throughout the country because of the government's heavy-handed violent response, as well as public dissatisfaction stemming from enduring oppression under a so-called authoritarian government. The situation has further complicated by several other ongoing issues, like- the government's inability to manage a prolonged economic downturn and the absence of democratic channels for initiating change.

There are three major mistakes that Hasina has made which led to escalation of the conflict which is becoming brutal every passing day. The first grave mistake is to deliberately weaken the democratic setup and gradually turn it into an au-

thoritarian regime. Since 2008, Awami League under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina has been ruling Bangladesh and has used high-handedness and stringent tactics to completely weaken the opposition. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (principal opposition party) under Khalida Zia were allegedly not allowed to contest elections with Zia been put behind bars in 2018 on corruption charges and her health has significantly deteriorated since then. The BNP leaders have accused Hasina of personal political vendetta as she is allegedly hindering Zia's medical treatment abroad.

The Awami League has been accused of rigging, terrorising and squashing the election system in Bangladesh for last few years and that has created enough resentment among the common masses. People want to cast their votes in democracy, and if that gets hindered by authoritarian processes and the government continues to function without popular mandate then there is always a possibility that the situation will someday lead to chaos. If a centrist government like the Awami League becomes authoritarian then it does not need a rocket scientist to understand that the situation will

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eventually facilitate the rise of right wing communal forces.

The second mistake is to facilitate the rise of Bangladesh Jamaat e-Islami (BJI) and its functioning through Bangladeshi Islami Chatra Shibir. In 2008 elections Hasina had campaigned on the promise of placing all Jamaat e-Islami leaders (Rajakars) who were accused of colluding with the Pakistani army in 1971 on war trials. After winning the election Hasina not only facilitated the death of many Jamaat members and banned them from taking part in political activities but also weakened the BNP and even accused of political killings of those who were opposed to her regime (in the guise of dismantling Jamaat). This authoritarian tactics of weakening the opposition allowed Jamaat to function at the grassroots using religion as a tool and reportedly even the BNP leaders became overtly dependent on the organisation of Jamaat. Rampant corruption and incidents like Russia-Ukraine conflict and Covid pandemic put the brake on the growing economy of Bangladesh. People became wary of their lives and joblessness became a major issue which allowed Jamaat to gradually consolidate its influence. Hasina also failed to protect the liberal bloggers who were campaigning against religious orthodoxy and wanted to maintain the secular environment in Bangladesh.

Above all, the US became ostensibly concerned about Hasina's increasingly authoritarian stature, and stated that it would clamp down on any Bangladeshi politician (past or present) that undermine democracy in the nation. This happened because the US became worried about Hasina's close proximity with China and also because Jamaat has a significant support base among the massive Bangladeshi diaspora living in the US and Europe. This diaspora

acted as lobbies in Washington to pressurise the Bangladeshi government on issues of human rights (and previously on war crime issues). The move forced Hasina to allow the BJI to participate in the elections fearing restrictions on travelling to the US. In June 2023, BJI organised a huge rally in Dhaka heralding its come-back to fore in the Bangladeshi politics. BNP also got a breather and conducted its first unfettered rally in May 2023 without any interference from the government.

The third crucial mistake is to brand every protestor and critics as potential 'Rajakar'. This attitude is quite common among authoritarian rulers who are always in fear of people on the streets who are on the verge of becoming political. Hasina's attitude of coercing its critics has created rampant disappointment and resentment among the masses which has tarnished her image as an able leader. This resentment has been erupting for some time and presently it has taken shape of a popular uprising which has potential to oust Hasina from power. Undoubtedly, Jamaat played a crucial role in this movement as they can sense the opportunity but Hasina branding the protestors as 'Rajakars' has added steam to Jamaat's fortune. The word "Rajakar" has now been naturalised as the protestors have adopted it to counter Hasina and this will only help Jamaat to consolidate its influence and purify the word from all its previous crimes and sins committed during the Bangladeshi freedom struggle.

If in the near future, the word "Rajakar" becomes synonymous with protest in Bangladesh, Hasina should only be blamed for this. Her hard tactics of killing and maiming the students will be remembered as a dark chapter in the history of Bangladesh.

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INDIAN STUDENTS IN USA

Victims of Hate Crimes

Deepak Bajaj

WITHIN A SHORT PERIOD of 5 months since October 2023, there have been 9 Indian and Indian-American origin students who have either been killed or have died, and one grievously injured in an unprovoked attack, leaving the minority community devastated and looking for answers.

The United States is home to many prestigious universities and colleges known for their high academic standards, cutting-edge research facilities, and renowned faculty members. Whether students are interested in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields, liberal arts, business, or the humanities, they can find programs tailored to their preferences.

Graduating from a US university can enhance a student's domestic and international career prospects. Many employers value the skills, knowledge, and cultural experiences

gained through US education, making graduates more competitive in the global job market. The promise of these positive outcomes has drawn Indian students to seek higher education in American universities and colleges.

To provide some statistics, according to the Open Doors Report (ODR) released in November 2023, the number of international students from India to the United States increased by 35 percent and resulted in an all-time high of 268,923 students in academic year 2022-23, compared to the previous year. Indian students constitute more than 25 percent of the over one million foreign students studying in the United States. The number of Indian graduate students rose by 63 percent to 165,936 students, an increase of nearly 64,000 students, compared to 2022, while Indian undergraduate students also increased by 16 percent. The data also showed India leading in the number of individuals (69,062) who pursued optional practical training (OPT), a type of temporary work permission that allows eligible students to get real-world experience related to their field of study.

Unfortunately, the promise of a better life has been short-lived for many Indian students with their shocking deaths, some under mysterious circumstances.

There have been concerns raised by parents of these students about the lack of responsibility or urgency shown by college administrators. What's abysmal is the perceived apathy of the Indian consulates in asking tough questions and holding these universities and local authori-

ties accountable for the safety and security of the Indian students here.

The Indian civilisation has, for millennia, been a knowledge-seeking civilisation which is evident even now with hundreds of thousands of Indians coming to the US for higher education. In many cases, the families of these young students spend their entire life-savings to have their children educated in prestigious US campuses.

The shock of hearing about their child's death and in some cases their murder in a distant country devastates them, especially when it would have been preventable.

As in the case of Akul where his body was found just 500 feet from his last known location casts a doubt on the search conducted by the campus police in locating him in a timely manner, to save his life. Furthermore, Sameer Kamath was driven to suicide which perhaps could have been avoided, had counseling services been available to him.

With the increasing number of students coming from India to the US the concerns of racist attacks on them have a propensity to increase. For example, Varun was stabbed to death just because he seemed "a little weird".

Statistics provided by US Department of Justice, show a staggering 59% of the total number of recorded hate crimes in the US in the year 2022 were attributed to Race/Ethnicity/Ancestry. Of the known offenders 51% were White, 21% were Black or African-American and others were Race Unknown.

College administrators have a responsibility to provide an optimal environment to students coming from abroad. It must be free from racism, verbal and physical intimidation. Second, focused and ongoing counseling must be made accessible to all students coming from abroad to help adapt to their college campus

WOMEN AND CYCLE IN INDIA

**Joy, Mobility, Freedom
and Empowerment**

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life and to their new country to adjust to a life so far away from their families and their country.

Third, outside of campuses, the local authorities and elected representatives from the government also need to step up to protect the Indian American minority community, which through its perseverance and hard work has contributed tremendously to the US success story as is evident by many Indian-origin lead-

ers in diverse fields of technology, medicine, law, government etc. Finally, the offices of the Consulate General of India must provide strong support and follow up for the devastated families when their child is missing or deceased.

The US prides itself as being the beacon of hope for millions of people globally looking for a better life here with the promise of security, free speech, fair treatment and equal

opportunity. How the situation unfolds with respect to Indian and Indian-American youth losing their lives, and the urgent remedial steps needed to be brought in by the concerned authorities will determine if the US is able to deliver on that promise it has made to the world. □

[Deepak Bajaj is a resident of San Francisco Bay Area for over two decades. An avid photographer with liberal views, he likes to dabble in citizen journalism on topics pertaining to the Indian American community in California.]

SHUTDOWN IMF AND WORLD BANK

Fight for Food, Land and Climate Justice!

PCFS

RURAL PEOPLES' MOVEMENTS and communities demand the shutdown of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. Over the past 80 years, imperialist governments and their transnational corporations (TNCs) have used the IMF-World Bank, in collusion with their client states and local elites, to undermine rural peoples' rights to food, land, and resources, worsening hunger, climate, and environmental crises for corporate profit.

Through neoliberal conditionalities tied to structural adjustment programmes and loans, the IMF-World Bank imposed the liberalisation, deregulation, and privatisation of food and agriculture in many poor countries. About 43% of IMF loan programmes in 100 countries from 1980 to 2014, for instance, targeted food and agriculture—of which more than 59% of conditionalities involved the abolition or reduction of state support and promotion of unregulated market forces. Before the wave of neoliberal reforms in the 1980s, World Bank loans promoted the Green Revolution in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, requiring the massive use of expensive and toxic agrochemical

inputs and proprietary seeds supplied by TNCs that pushed poor farmers into debt and bankruptcy, poisoned farmlands and biodiversity, and aggravated global warming.

The extensive neoliberal restructuring bankrolled by IMF-World Bank loans deepened the export-oriented and import-dependent character of food and agricultural production in many backward economies that severely destroyed their food security, rural livelihoods, and overall development. Combined with other structural reforms facilitated through free trade agreements such as the Agreement on Agriculture (AOA) under the World Trade Organization (WTO) and other imperialist tools, IMF-World Bank's debt-funded reforms pushed the poorest countries from food trade surpluses in the 1960s and 1970s to annual food trade deficits that are doubling in size decade by decade.

Moreover, these imperialist financial institutions have played pivotal roles in the corporate grabbing of agricultural land and resources in poor countries while subverting genuine land reform. Through technical assistance and financial loans, the World Bank, for instance, promoted neoliberal market-assisted land reform (MALR) and distorted land

redistribution as a simple market transaction between landlords and landless farmers facilitated by the state. Without the power of the state to carry out compulsory land redistribution based on social justice principles, MALR allowed landlords, compradors, and their imperialist patrons to retain and expand monopoly control over vast tracts of agricultural lands. Chronic and widespread peasant landlessness continues to fuel rural unrest in countries that embraced MALR, such as Brazil, Colombia, the Philippines, and others.

Recently, the World Bank organised its Land Conference 2024 with the theme Securing Land Tenure and Access for Climate Action. The objective is to promote climate change adaptation and mitigation investments and guide land governance amid competition for land and resources. While secure land tenure is essential for small farmers, framing it in terms of investment promotion in the context of the World Bank's MALR and overall neoliberal policy environment often leads to dispossession. In this case, land tenure merely legitimises the easy transfer of land rights through sale from small landholders to big landholders and corporations. Such a programme is alarming, especially when linked to the growing trend of highly pollutive industries rushing to buy lands for their carbon-offsetting

goals, which are false climate solutions and come at the expense of farmers and food production.

Such initiatives are on top of direct investments from the World Bank's private sector arm, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), that result in massive land grabs and displacement like its 11 projects in Africa covering 700,000 hectares. These investments include projects contributing to climate and environmental crises and human rights violations, such as large-scale mining and monoculture plantations. Indeed, the World Bank's hosting of the loss and damage fund is the height of insult to the billions of victims of climate injustice, displacement, and rights abuses, many from rural communities.

Decades of the World Bank's espousal of MALR and the IMF's broader push for financial sector deregulation created the conditions for financialisation to thrive in food and agriculture, driving speculative

food price spikes resulting in greater food insecurity and hunger, especially among the rural poor and encouraging more land grabbing. Over 230 investment funds are operating in the food and agriculture sector, collectively managing around US\$ 44 billion in assets, including private equity funds managing farmlands, as investors turn to farmlands not primarily to produce food and other agricultural products but as assets to hedge their other investments or squeeze profits from the land's value and rent. These investments mean ownership or control over lands has been taken away from farmers in favor of the parasitic financial firms.

All these contribute to the chronic and ever-worsening crisis facing the world's rural peoples today. Farmlands have remained heavily monopolised, with just 1% of farms controlling 70% of farmlands worldwide. In the past two decades, ownership or control over more than 65

million hectares of land has been taken away from farmers through land deals involving foreign or transnational investors. Land and resource grabs, combined with high food prices due to financial speculation and other factors, are exacerbating global hunger, with 2.4 billion people globally experiencing food insecurity.

Rural peoples' resistance against the IMF-World Bank and their policies and programmes has persisted throughout the 80 years of existence of these imperialist financial institutions. The rural peoples' movements and their allies, which comprise the Global Peoples' Caravan for Food, Land, and Climate Justice, will continue these struggles. A future without hunger, dispossession, and destruction necessitates the shutdown of the IMF-World Bank to advance food sovereignty, people-led agroecology, genuine land reform, and climate justice.

□□□

LETTERS

Budget and Manual Scavengers

The Union Budget for the year 2024-2025, placed by the Finance Minister in Parliament on July 23, has completely deceived Safai Karmachari community. There is no mention of persons engaged in manual scavenging, in entire Budget. Even the scheme meant for the rehabilitation of manual scavengers (SRMS) has been outrageously scrapped. This disappointing budget has once again demonstrated the clear apathy of union government towards Safai Karmacharis, especially the manual scavengers.

It is a fact that manual scavenging is still blatantly and illegally practised in many parts of country, specifically in states like UP, MP, Bihar, J&K. Providing no budget for the rehabilitation of manual scavengers

simply means that this government has no intention to eradicate manual scavenging, and it has even refused to recognise manual scavengers as human beings. This government has no respect for human life and human dignity.

Turning a blind eye, Ramdas Athawale, Union Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment, has been giving false statements about non-existence of manual scavenging.

The Safai Karmachari community demands that the Prime Minister should come out with a white paper on work done by government for manual scavengers in last 10 years. He should also announce a special package for liberation and rehabilitation of manual scavengers.

Bezwada Wilson
National Convener,
Safai Karmachari Andolan

Stop Hunting

In days, Tanzania's President could condemn Africa's most magnificent elephants to death—by issuing new licences allowing rich trophy hunters to kill them for sport.

These male elephants are called "super tuskers" for their enormous tusks. They're members of a population that's been studied for over 50 years, and who were recently found to have names for one another, the first non-human animals known to do so without imitation!

Crossing freely between Kenya (which bans trophy hunting) and Tanzania, the Amboseli elephants were protected from trophy hunting, until Tanzania allowed the shooting of five mature males last hunting season—at least two of them were extremely rare super tuskers.

Scientists, conservationists, and Indigenous people have called on Tanzania's President to stop the kill-

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ing and protect these elephants before it's too late. This month, the Tanzanian government will decide whether to issue more hunting permits for the coming season.

These elephants are central to the complex social structures of bull groups, often serving as leaders and mentors, and preferred mates of the females. They are part of the last gene pools of elephants carrying exceptionally large tusks, and experts believe their loss would be unsustainable.

Conservationists are shouting their warning call from the rooftops.

AVAZZ

Armstrong Murder

The brutal murder of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) Tamil Nadu chief K Armstrong on July 5 outside his residence in Chennai has shocked and angered the Dalit community. The viciousness of the attack—he was hacked with sickles; and the place of attack—within metres of a police station—was particularly concerning, exposing the law and order situation in the state. Though Armstrong belonged to a party with a minuscule presence in the state (0.31% vote in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls), he enjoyed enormous clout in the Ambedkarite Dalit community—with his networking skills, benevolence, and the efforts he took to spread Buddhism in the region with an emphasis on education. Dalits thronged the streets to protest the gruesome murder and demand justice.

While it was the most brutal killing of a Dalit politician in recent times, more shocking was the reaction—or the lack of it—of Dalit leaders, in particular those from the INDIA bloc. Prominent Dalit leaders across the alliance chose to remain silent, to avoid irking the MK Stalin-led Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) government.

Considered the progressive home of Dravidian rationalism, Tamil Nadu ironically has been pretty hostile towards Dalits historically. Recent data revealed by the Ministry of Home

Affairs showed that 37 out of the state's 38 districts have been identified as 'atrocities prone' for crimes against the oppressed SC and ST communities. Imagine the state of affairs when last year Dalit members in Tiruppur's Rajavur village walked down the Kambala Naicken Street donning footwear for the first time since independence.

Ravikiran Shinde

Gauri Lankesh Case

The Karnataka High Court on Tuesday, July 16, granted bail to three accused in the murder of journalist and activist Gauri Lankesh, who was shot dead in September 2017. The bail was granted to Amit Digvekar, KT Naveen Kumar, and HL Suresh by a bench headed by Justice S Vishwajith Shetty of the Kalaburagi bench.

At the same time, a key witness in the murder case—46-year-old Madetira Thimmaiah—turned hostile and told the court that he was forced to make a confession by the police that he was in contact with some of the accused in the case.

In his confession statement in 2018, Thimmaiah had said that he had given his office space in Madikeri to Amit Digvekar and three other accused to meet and discuss various matters.

In November 2018, the Special Investigation Team (SIT) probing the case had filed a 10,000 page charge-sheet naming 18 persons, including the three who got bail. The men belonged to different outfits such as the Sanatan Sanstha, HJS, and smaller Hindutva outfits like Shiv Pratishthan Hindustan.

Although the charge-sheet in the case was filed in 2018, the trial in the case began only in 2022, citing reasons such as the COVID-19 pandemic and because of a series of petitions that were being filed by the defence.

Korah Abraham

No to Eviction

In the last week of June, an administrative review meeting by the Chief

Minister of West Bengal mentioned the issues of Urban Development and 'beautification', encroachments throughout the city landscape, especially in Kolkata and in the adjacent suburbs. The day after the announcements, the police, administration and local authorities began organised crackdown on the street vendors and hawkers in different parts of the state. In Kolkata, places like Esplanade, Hathi Bagan and Gariahat which are conventional marketplaces for the commoners and are constituted mostly by street vendors and small businesses, incurred most damage. Eventually, after protest and resistance erupted in many parts of Bengal against the eviction drive, the Chief Minister had publicly announced to grant a period of one month to review the situation and take action accordingly.

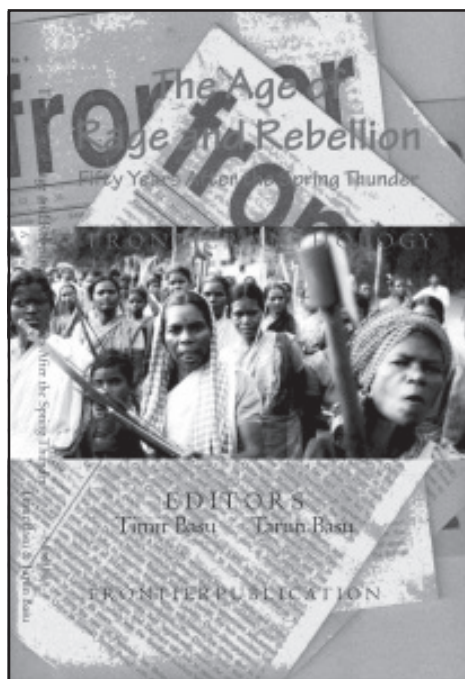
In this time of distress, the left parties and trade unions are standing tall against the bulldozers policies that are wreaking havoc on the lives and livelihood of the poor. Be it in Kolkata or in other places, AICCTU and its affiliated Hawkers' federations are vehemently opposing this eviction drive. Calcutta Street Hawker's Federation (an affiliated body of AICCTU) initiated a city-wide campaign and organised marches and protest demonstrations and submitted deputations to the local Police stations in many parts of the city, condemning forced eviction by police and local authority. Trade unions affiliated to AICCTU like Birsulhat Leather Hawker's Union are in the forefront of this struggle.

On 11th July, a joint platform of TUs and Hawker Federations 'Hawker Joutho Mancha' organised a march to Kolkata Corporation Headquarters and submitted deputation to the Mayor demanding immediate implementation of the central Street Vendors Act, 2014 and an end to illegal evictions drives without proper rehabilitation.

Dibakar Bhattacharya
AICCTU State Secretary

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