

Liberation

APRIL 2021

CENTRAL ORGAN OF CPI(ML)

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MLAs Brutally Beaten Inside Bihar Assembly, Police Raj Act Passed

The first use of the Bihar Special Armed Police Bill 2021 was perpetrated inside the Bihar Assembly itself on 23 March.

Shattering all rules and traditions of the constitutional and parliamentary system, police and goons entered the Assembly, brutally beat up opposition MLAs and pushed them out, after which BJP-JDU passed the draconian Bihar Special Armed Police Bill 2021 changing Bihar into a Police Raj.

Earlier, when the Assembly session commenced on 23 March the Opposition started protesting against the Police Raj Bill. The session was adjourned a few times due to opposition protests, and proceedings were obstructed throughout the day. At 5 pm before the session was to end, a large number of RAF police personnel were called inside the Assembly on the orders of the Speaker and the government. Marshals were of course already present. The Bihar DGP, Patna SSP and DM jointly oversaw the beating, kicking, fisticuffing of MLAs as they were pushed and dragged out of the Assembly. The SSP and DM were themselves among those who did the brutal beating. The entire Assembly was filled with police personnel and the Police Raj Act was passed in the complete absence of the Opposition. Journalists were also beaten up. Leader of CPIML legislative party Comrade Mahboob Alam's arm was twisted and wrenched. Comrade Sudama Prasad was pushed and shoved and he fell down the stairs, causing a serious finger injury. A CPIM MLA was so badly beaten up that he lost consciousness. A woman MLA's sari was pulled off. Some of those who perpetrated the beating up were in civilian clothes, probably BJP goons.

In the past there have been clashes amongst MLAs inside the Assembly, but this is possibly the first instance in Indian parliamentary history when the police have beaten up MLAs inside the Assembly. It is forbidden to bring weapons into the Assembly, but the police entered armed with weapons. Now the only thing that remains is police firing inside the Assembly.

23 March 2021 will be recorded as a Black Day in the parliamentary history of India.

Next day on 24 March there were protests inside the Assembly against this Bill by the opposition MLAs. CPIML MLAs attended the session wearing black bands and the day was observed across Bihar as Dhikkar Diwas (Day of Shame).

CPIML held protests all over Bihar and burnt effigies of CM Nitish Kumar. In Patna activists condemned the shameful attack on MLAs and burnt the effigy of Nitish at Chitkohra. Protesters demanded to take back the unconstitutional and draconian Bihar Special Armed Police Bill 2021 which has been passed using police force beating opposition MLAs inside the Assembly immediately. CPIML Bihar Secretary and Polit Bureau member Kunal condemned the beatings and termed that day a black day in the history of India's parliamentary democracy. He said this heinous crime explains clearly that the Nitish/BJP regime is taking Bihar towards a fascist state. The CPIML had expressed its apprehension of misusing the power if this Bihar Special Armed Police Bill 2021 was passed, and those apprehensions came true right on the day of its tabling and undemocratic passing inside the Assembly. The women MLAs were not spared and they too suffered same brutality. When MLAs are not safe inside the Assembly and they were not allowed to express their views on the draconian Bill, instead got beaten up and thrown out on the road, this is amply clear that after passing of this Bill what will be the plight of common citizens when police is given full immunity to perpetrate the attacks on citizens' rights? Kunal asked to identify the attackers who were in civil dress along with the armed forces inside the Bihar Assembly, and also why the district magistrate of Patna himself seen to be pushing and attacking MLAs inside the Assembly?

Opposition MLAs conducted the Assembly session outside the Vidhan Sabha

For the first time in the annals of the Bihar Vidhan Sabha, in protest of the incidents of 23rd March all Opposition MLAs conducted the Assembly session outside the Vidhan Sabha on 24 March. A Speaker was elected to conduct the proceedings, and opposition was registered to the manner in which MLAs were beaten and pushed out of the Assembly on March 24.

Many things are being witnessed for the first time in the Bihar Vidhan Sabha. This is the first time in its 100-year history that police entered the Assembly, and this is the first time that angry Opposition members conducted the session outside the Assembly. Despite blazing heat the session was conducted by the Opposition. Opposition members elected RJD MLA Bhudev Chaudhury as Speaker, and sat on the floor while he occupied the Speaker's chair and issued rules and regulations as the Speaker. Many members participated in the proceedings. CPIML MLA Satyadev Ram said that the beating up of members inside the Assembly was a very serious issue and demanded a discussion on the matter.

All this took place while proceedings were on inside the Assembly and Ministers were going on without the presence of any opposition party MLA. The question hour was being conducted only with ruling party members inside the Assembly. And Maheshwar Hazari was being unanimously elected Deputy Speaker inside the Assembly. Outside, Bhudev Chaudhury was in the Speaker's role, he also had filed his nomination for the post of Deputy Speaker did not go inside the Assembly.

With this protest Assembly, a new tradition was started in the history of the Bihar Vidhan Sabha by Opposition members conducting the proceedings of the session outside the Assembly.

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Golden Jubilee of the Independence of Bangladesh



Cover of Mukti Sang (1995)

India's eastern neighbour Bangladesh celebrates the golden jubilee of its independence on 26 March, 2021. The golden jubilee also coincides with the birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, leader of the Bangladesh liberation war and founding President of the nation which successfully seceded from Pakistan in 1971. Separated from India as East Pakistan in August 1947, it took less than twenty-five years for the new nation to attain its independence from Pakistan as the bonds of language, culture and geography proved to be much stronger than religion and state-defined nationalism. The battle which began in 1952 over the rights of Bengali language as the mother-tongue of the people of East Pakistan grew into a full-scale national liberation war in two decades and led to the emergence of the nation-state of Bangladesh defying the imposed integument of the state-nation of Pakistan. The emergence of Bangladesh vindicated the centrality of language in the formation of national identities and remains an inspiring lesson for the current of national liberation struggles.

The international climate has of course undergone a sea change in the last five decades. The liberation war of Bangladesh had received strategic support not just from India but also from the Soviet Union which had effectively nullified any threat of American military intervention. That was also the era of the Vietnam war and national liberation struggles and revolutionary upswings in many parts of the world. One could clearly see the ideological imprint of that climate in the direction chosen by the new country – socialism, nationalism, secularism and democracy. But before the fledgling republic could consolidate the gains of liberation and overcome the huge economic challenges of rebuilding the economy, a series of military coups and political convulsions gripped Bangladesh. Sheikh Mujib and his family were assassinated, several of his cabinet colleagues were arrested and later killed and the secular democratic orientation of the new republic suffered an early setback.

Today much like the Indian state's departure from the constitutional values and goals of secularism, democracy, justice, liberty, equality and fraternity, Bangladesh too is caught in a serious crisis of democracy. Amidst growing corruption, nepotism, chaos and misrule, fundamentalist forces and autocratic tendencies are on the rise. Elections are no longer considered fair and credible; dissenting citizens, writers and artists are being persecuted and even assassinated; and the state is unleashing severe repression and surveillance to curb democratic rights. The democratic opinion in India which had warmly supported and welcomed the liberation of Bangladesh fifty years ago and which is now having to resist a concerted fascist offensive at home wishes more power to the secular and progressive democratic forces of Bangladesh to steer the country ahead towards the promised goal of the liberation war.

In the domain of foreign policy, the relation between India and Bangladesh has generally been friendly and peaceful. As the biggest country in South Asia, India has the greatest responsibility to maintain an environment of friendship and cooperation in the region, and close Indo-Bangla bilateral ties are central to this regional perspective. The arrival of the Modi government has however posed a new challenge to these ties. While the two countries still await amicable solutions to outstanding issues of border security, water sharing, connectivity and trade, the discriminatory amendments made by the Modi government to India's citizenship act have created a major trust deficit. The BJP's entire political discourse in West Bengal, Assam and Tripura – Indian provinces bordering

Bangladesh – revolves around the bogey of 'influx of Bangladeshi infiltrators' and the shrill cry to deport them. India's Home Minister Amit Shah uses the word 'termites' to describe the alleged 'infiltrators', with the inescapable inference that the country must be saved by exterminating these termites.

The emergence of Bangladesh was a historic moment of affirmation of diversity and dignity in democracy.

Interestingly, the issue of this alleged infiltration does not figure in the bilateral agenda of the two countries. The NRC, which seeks to strip undocumented citizens of their citizenship rights, and the CAA which discriminates among undocumented citizens and documented refugees on the basis of religion, both use Bangladesh as a source of alleged illegal infiltration and religious persecution of minorities and fix statistical targets of deportation of infiltrators, only to create a permanent state of communal polarisation within India and intimidate India's own minorities. Incidentally, the reported itinerary of Modi's forthcoming Bangladesh visit includes visit to the shrines of the Matua community in Bangladesh around the same

time as voting begins in West Bengal and Assam. The attempt to mix up foreign policy matters with domestic political calculations can only complicate and distort our foreign policy framework.

The emergence of Bangladesh was the most telling refutation of the two nation theory and the perilous project of defining nation and culture on the basis of religion. It was a historic moment of affirmation of diversity and dignity in democracy. It should be understood as a permanent warning against the absurd and disastrous implications of any attempt to reframe India's plural mosaic as a monolithic entity, redefine multi-religious multicultural India as a Hindu nation, and paint democracy with a majoritarian Hindu-supremacist brush. For the Sangh-BJP establishment, the 1947 partition of India is not a tragic past that we must transcend and never repeat, but an unfinished project that needs to be reopened and completed. On the golden jubilee of the emergence of our eastern neighbour, we in India must resolve to have close friendly bilateral ties and learn from history to attain a better future. □



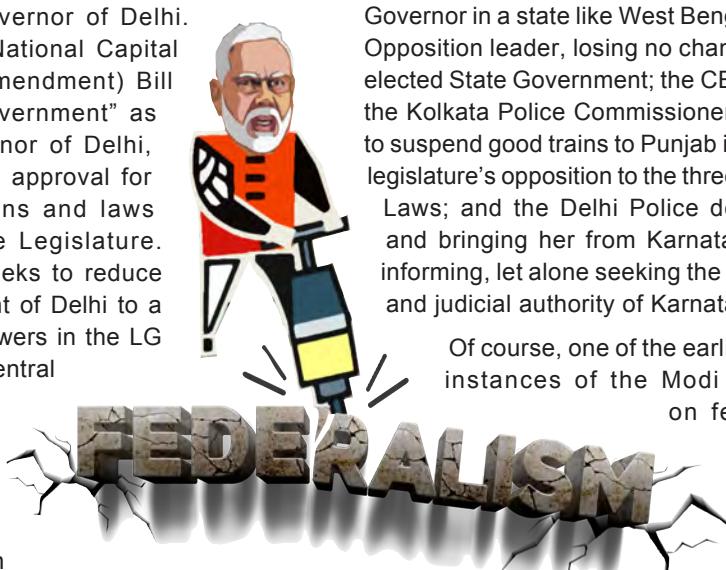
Modi Regime's Latest Assault on Federalism and Democracy

In the latest assault on federalism and the Constitution, the Modi Government has introduced a Bill in the Lok Sabha seeking to drastically restrict the powers of the elected government of Delhi, and hand over all effective power to the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi. The Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Bill 2021 defines "the government" as the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi, and requires the LG's approval for all executive decisions and laws enacted by the State Legislature. This Bill effectively seeks to reduce the elected government of Delhi to a cipher, and vest all powers in the LG who represents the Central Government. The Bill is therefore not just an assault on the federal structure mandated by India's Constitution, it is an assault on the basic democratic principle of elected representation.

The Bill seems to have been introduced to overrule 2018 and 2019 Supreme Court judgements which had clearly and unambiguously restrained the Lieutenant Governor from overstepping his powers beyond the ambit of police, public order, and land. Delhi has been promised full statehood by Congress and BJP alike – though neither has delivered on its promise while enjoying power at the Centre. Prime Minister likes to preach "cooperative federalism" – even as he not only refuses complete statehood to Delhi, but seeks to override the will of Delhi's electorate simply because it has chosen to defeat BJP in the last two successive Assembly Elections.

It may be recalled that the freedom movement had successfully resisted attempts by the British colonial power to impose the Government of India Act 1935 because it sought to concentrate power in the hands of the Governor General and the Viceroy. The Modi regime is once again, acting like the British Raj, with the Governor being placed in the position of Viceroy over elected state legislatures.

Nor is the Delhi Bill the only instance of the Modi regime's attacks on federalism. Other prominent instances include the GST law; the attempts to misuse the Governor's post to topple elected Opposition Governments in states and union territories; the Governor in a state like West Bengal acting as a virtual Opposition leader, losing no chance to undermine the elected State Government; the CBI raid on the office of the Kolkata Police Commissioner; the Centre's move to suspend good trains to Punjab in response to the State legislature's opposition to the three pro-corporate Farm Laws; and the Delhi Police detaining Disha Ravi and bringing her from Karnataka to Delhi without informing, let alone seeking the consent of the police and judicial authority of Karnataka.



Of course, one of the earliest and most glaring instances of the Modi regime's assaults on federalism was the abrogation of Article 370 and the move to strip Jammu and Kashmir of statehood and split it into multiple union territories. It

may be recalled that for the abrogation of Article 370, the Constitution of India required the consent of the Constituent Assembly of J&K. It would have been stretching truth even to argue that the elected Assembly of J&K could stand in for a Constituent Assembly. But in 2019 August, the J&K State Assembly stood dissolved and the state had no elected government. The Modi regime declared that the Governor – the representative of the Central Government – represented the will of the people of J&K and that his consent was enough for the Centre to abrogate Article 370.

Unfortunately, parties like the AAP, TDP, BSP, AIADMK, BJD and YSR Congress which passionately defend the federal rights of states in which they enjoy or hope to enjoy power, cheered on the Modi regime's unconstitutional, anti-democratic, and anti-federal abrogation of Article 370. The abrogation of Article 370 – cloaked in the legitimacy offered by these prominent regional parties – emboldened the BJP's anti-federal drive and paved the way for the spate of assaults on federalism that we are witnessing today.

The Delhi Bill is not a matter of academic debate about some abstract federal principle. It directly attacks the rights of the voters of Delhi. It confirms that the BJP will not hesitate to use Central Government powers to punish voters who dare to elect non-BJP Governments. Can there be any doubt that the BJP intends to use the NRC-NPR-CAA corpus of laws also to control and penalise voters, by using the Central authority's powers to disenfranchise and cast "doubt" on voters whom the ruling BJP sees as hostile to its interests?

We all see how the BJP under Modi-Shah targets and even imprisons every dissenting or protesting citizen – whether they are a student, a farmer, a writer or a journalist– as "anti-national". Now the BJP is curtailing the powers of entire elected state governments, by equating BJP's political interests with those of the nation's. Ruling class Opposition parties may be inconsistent in defending democracy – speaking up when their government is threatened but remaining silent against draconian and anti-constitutional laws, unlawful arrests, arbitrary abrogation of Articles of the Constitution. But the people of India must defend federal and democratic principles from every assault. The defence of federalism in Delhi can only be effective when it is joined with the defence of the entire spectrum of democratic rights in India. □



The Challenge of Saving West Bengal from Fascist Takeover: Liberation's Reply to PD Commentary



People's Democracy, the weekly journal of the CPI(M), has carried a political commentary in its 14 March, 2021 issue accusing the CPI(ML) of taking a 'wrong turn' in West Bengal. The same issue also contains a 'PB communique' issued by the CPI(M) Polit Bureau following its online meeting held on March 11, 2021. Apropos the forthcoming elections to the Assemblies of Kerala, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Assam and Puducherry and the Autonomous District Council of Tripura, the communique says 'the main focus of the CPI(M) shall be to defeat the BJP'. Why and where does the CPI(M) then think the CPI(ML) is going wrong in West Bengal?

Let us first tell our readers the stand the CPI(ML) has taken in these elections. CPI(ML) is not contesting in Kerala and Tripura and is extending support to the LDF in Kerala and LF in Tripura ADC elections. In Tamil Nadu and Puducherry, CPI(ML) is independently contesting a few seats (12 in TN and 1 in Puducherry)



while extending support to the main opposition alliance against the BJP and its allies. In Assam, CPI(ML) and CPI(M) are part of the same opposition alliance (of course, with the Congress going back on its seat sharing proposal in Karbi Anglong, CPI(ML) will be independently contesting in the hill district).

In West Bengal, the CPI(ML) is contesting twelve seats independently. Lest anyone thinks the CPI(ML) has broken ranks with the CPI(M) in West Bengal, let us make it clear that the CPI(ML) has never been

part of the Left Front in the state and has never had any electoral understanding with the CPI(M) in the past even as the party has generally supported LF candidates in many elections especially after 2011 when the LF has no longer been in power. Beyond the 12 seats where the CPI(ML) is contesting, the party has openly declared support to Left candidates on all those seats where they had won in 2016 and where MLAs have not defected to TMC or BJP (as many as 8 of the 32 victorious MLAs defected). Surely the CPI(M) can have no problem with this position.

Presumably, their problem is with the CPI(ML) position for the rest of West Bengal, where the party has appealed to the electorate to defeat the BJP without specifying any party or candidate to vote for. Strangely, the PD commentary has interpreted this position as an ‘indication’ that in ‘over 200 seats, their [CPI(ML)]’s support is for the TMC’! Does this mean that, in the CPI(M)’s own reckoning, in over 200 seats the electoral battle is really between the TMC and the BJP? The PD commentary then goes on to conclude: ‘It is unfortunate that the CPI(ML) is perversely considering the TMC as a better political force to fight the BJP than the Left Front in West Bengal.’

How on earth does this conclusion follow from the CPI(ML)’s stance? Even though CPI(ML) is not part of the Left Front or the larger electoral bloc comprising the Left Front, Congress and the newly launched Indian Secular Front (which apparently is fielding candidates in the name of some other party), CPI(ML) has supported LF candidates in at least two dozen seats while the CPI(M) is not reciprocating this support on a single seat. Shall we then

ask the CPI(M) if it considers the Congress or ISF ‘better’ forces than the CPI(ML) to fight the BJP? For the overwhelming majority of forces concerned about the real threat of the BJP coming to power in West Bengal, electoral strength is the crux of the matter. While several opposition parties have openly supported the TMC against the BJP, the ‘No Vote to BJP’ campaign in West Bengal and the Sanyukt Kisan Morcha campaigning against the BJP have left it open to the wisdom and choice of the electorate.

The CPI(M)’s real problem is with the fact that the CPI(ML) has exposed and questioned the glaring shortcomings of the CPI(M)’s tactical line and political role in West Bengal at this very critical juncture for Indian democracy. It is not difficult to foresee how the BJP coming to power in West Bengal would lead to a massive escalation of the Sangh-BJP fascist assault (by the way, we never put the word fascist within quotation marks in this context, something the PD commentary routinely does for reasons best known to the writer/editor). As a party which has been in power in West Bengal till only a decade ago and which had historically emerged as the biggest inheritor of the communist base and influence in the state built over decades since pre-Independence days, the CPI(M) cannot explain away this alarming rise of the BJP by just blaming the TMC. If TMC being in power is held exclusively responsible for the rise of the BJP in West Bengal, by the same token one could also hold the CPI(M) responsible for the rise of the BJP in Tripura.

The TMC reign in West Bengal has of course been marked by terror, violence and corruption on

one hand and a spate of populist slogans and welfare schemes on the other. The migration of CPI(M) ranks and even MLAs towards the BJP was initially seen as a response to the TMC’s terror as the CPI(M) was not considered to be in a position to offer any effective resistance. But since 2016, the erosion of the CPI(M) base has assumed alarming proportions and in 2019, only one CPI(M) candidate could save his deposit and the vote share dropped to single digits (7%). Even as the experience of Tripura should have warned the CPI(M) in West Bengal, large sections of the party in West Bengal got lulled into the ‘aage ram, pare bam’ (first Ram and then Left) trap. Even after the alarming 2019 decline, there is no visible effort by the CPI(M) to combat the suicidal “Ekushey Ram, Chhabishey Bam” (Ram – i.e. BJP in 2021, Left in 2026) formula.

The PD commentary tells us that to draw the attention of the people in West Bengal you must first furnish your anti-TMC credentials. Certainly, the CPI(M) is not to be found wanting in this respect! Yet if CPI(M) voters have been gravitating towards the BJP as the stronger and more viable alternative to the TMC, is it not time for the CPI(M) to reconsider its approach and correct its course? Rather than anti-TMC credentials, the issue is the anti-BJP edge of your campaign. The PD commentary tells us that the CPI(M) is not underestimating the BJP or equating the BJP and the TMC. Yet, every political observer following the CPI(M) discourse in real life can cite any number of statements and speeches by CPI(M) leaders, and slogans raised in CPI(M) rallies that equate the TMC and the BJP.

Since the TMC had joined the NDA for some time during the

Vajpayee period, the CPI(M) wants to treat the TMC as a virtual NDA constituent even now. The fact is the TMC-BJP alliance never found much resonance in West Bengal. In fact, the 2004 Lok Sabha elections and the 2006 Assembly elections marked the lowest point for both BJP and TMC, and the CPI(M)'s best Assembly performance happened in 2006. The PD commentary reminds us that as late as 2014, Modi had indicated TMC as a potential ally. True, but real life took a different turn. While Nitish Kumar in neighbouring Bihar went back to the NDA fold, the West Bengal government refused to follow that course. Today when circumstances have driven even erstwhile NDA allies like the Shiv Sena and Akali Dal away from the BJP, what purpose does it serve to bracket the TMC with the BJP?

It is one thing to expose the TMC as an inconsistent force in the fight against the BJP and establish the Left as the consistent vanguard in the anti-BJP battle, but it is an altogether different proposition to club the TMC with the BJP and even lump them together as 'BJmool'. Even in the face of the BJP's frenzied post-Pulwama 2019 campaign, the TMC polled more than 43 percent vote share. Who are these voters? Large sections of the rural and urban poor population in West Bengal, millions of women and arguably the majority of the state's Muslim voters. Many of them have been Left voters and supporters in the past, and even now they refuse to buy into the BJP's theme of communal polarisation and corporate control. How does it help to treat this base at par with the sections of people who have already been lured and numbed by the vicious communal campaign of the BJP?

The PD commentary reminds us that West Bengal is facing a State Assembly election. Of course, it is an Assembly election and the state government must be held accountable. But we must also remember that this Assembly election is being held in 2021 when the Modi government is rapidly centralising all powers and is trampling upon the Constitution and the ideas of secularism, democracy and diversity which are central to our constitutional values. West Bengal is one of the last surviving opposition-ruled states and the BJP is desperate to conquer it. At stake is the inclusive ethos and progressive legacy of West Bengal, and the BJP capturing West Bengal will further shrink the opposition space and dent the federal framework in the country. This is why the entire country is so keenly watching the West Bengal elections. To underplay the extraordinary all-India significance of the West Bengal elections at this juncture can only be seen as a most unfortunate mechanistic response.

Indeed, it is the BJP which desperately wants to keep the West Bengal elections confined to the state context. It knows that today the clamour for change within West Bengal can primarily favour the BJP. The deepening communal polarisation and the call for giving a new party a chance are both working in favour of the BJP. The Left election campaign must challenge this BJP-promoted common sense of delinking West Bengal from the national context and put the Modi government and the BJP squarely in the dock. But the 28 February Brigade rally of the LF-INC-ISF combine conveyed quite a different message. Even against the extraordinary backdrop of the historic farmers' movement, and acute economic crisis marked

by unprecedented price-rise, unemployment and corporate aggression, the rally posed the dethroning of the TMC as a more important goal than saving West Bengal from falling in the BJP's hands. The pronouncements of the ISF, for which the rally virtually became the launching pad, seem to be directed almost exclusively against the state government.

The PD commentary has reminded us that the TMC is no RJD. As a communist party playing an independent opposition role we have had to pay heavy prices in almost all our major states, whether RJD-ruled Bihar, Congress-ruled Assam, BJP-ruled Jharkhand, or even Left-ruled West Bengal. We have had to suffer any number of massacres in Bihar, but the 1993 Karanda massacre in Bardhaman in Left-ruled West Bengal and the 1978 Hurua killings in Tripura were no less barbaric. We have lost several leaders in political violence perpetrated by feudal forces and our political opponents in Bihar, and also in Assam, Jharkhand and West Bengal. Comrades Mani Singh, Chandrashekhar and Manju Devi in RJD-ruled Bihar, Comrade Mahendra Singh in BJP-ruled Jharkhand, Comrades Anil Barua and Gangaram Kol in Congress-ruled Assam and Comrade Abdul Halim in Left-ruled West Bengal were some of our most prominent and promising leaders who were killed by our political opponents. But this has not made us lose sight of the BJP as the principal threat to the Left movement and to the very foundations of democracy in India. The key defining feature of fascist forces worldwide is their politics of unleashing hatred, discrimination and violence by the state and non-state actors against minorities and ideological dissenters. It is the BJP and its efforts to turn India into a

Hindu-supremacist nation that constitute the crux of the fascist danger to democracy in India.

As an independent communist party, we played a consistent oppositional role in Bihar during the fifteen years of RJD rule in Bihar and the 34 years of Left rule in West Bengal. Yet we never helped Nitish Kumar after he joined hands with the BJP. In West Bengal we are the only Left party outside of the Left Front with no record of any cooperation with the TMC. You can recall no example of Mamata Banerjee thanking us when she came to power replacing the CPI(M). Today if she thanks us for our bold anti-BJP stand it only points to the totally changed context. And it is strange that while the PD mentions Mamata Banerjee thanking the CPI(ML), it says nothing about BJP leaders openly thanking the CPI(M) ranks for the help extended in 2019 with appeals for greater help in 2021. Today when West Bengal is in acute danger of an outright fascist takeover, as a communist party our primary concern is to save the state from this imminent threat.

We had expected that post-2011, and more particularly post-2014, the political alignment in West Bengal would be conducive for the development and consolidation of a broader Left unity. But the CPI(M)'s focus on staging a comeback by stitching an alliance first with the Congress and now with the newly formed ISF has diluted the thrust on Left revival. The Left can only revive in West Bengal today by playing a powerful anti-BJP role on the ground. Unfortunately when Left and democratic forces across India expected the Left in West Bengal to discharge its historic responsibility as a bulwark against fascism, the CPI(M) is more obsessed with its anti-TMC credentials. We still hope the people of West Bengal will stall the BJP's 'double engine expedition' and rebuff its fascist offensive and the Left in West Bengal will be able to find its bold voice to surge ahead again as a champion of democracy. □



Resisting The BJP Threat In West Bengal: Examining PD's Arguments

 AISHIK SAHA

The debate in Bengal over the identification of the principal enemy has elicited a response from the CPI(ML)'s mouthpiece. Let us examine the claims made by People's Democracy.

It has been claimed that "Unlike what the CPI(ML) alleges, the CPI(M) and the Left Front have not equated the BJP and the TMC. There is no underestimation of the threat posed by the BJP in West Bengal". However its own campaign does not bear this distinction out. The term 'Bijemool' has specifically been developed by the CPI(M) in order to categorise this equation, and has been openly used by CPI(M) activists. What explains this divergence between PD's assertion and the reality of CPI(M)'s campaign? The slogan

Ekushey Ram Chabbishey Bam is well known, and has been a part of BJP's strategic attempts at weaning away CPI(M) voters, but such slogans have been overlooked by the CPI(M) itself. Is this not an indication of the fact that CPI(M) is underestimating the threat of the BJP in Bengal?

PD goes on to further argue "The CPI(ML) is underestimating the depth of popular discontent against the TMC regime. This is a state assembly election. If the Left Front will not firmly, vigorously and unequivocally fight for the defeat of the TMC government, a large part of this popular discontent will be garnered by the BJP". There is no denying that the BJP has gained a lot of ground precisely due to TMC's corruption and terror, in fact CPI(ML)'s resolution

on the national situation in the 2018 party congress highlights this. However, competing with the BJP for anti-TMC votes is a losing strategy altogether for the left. BJP has weaponised this competition against the Left itself given its superior money-muscle power and its control over the union government and central forces. Over the past two years, tens if not hundreds of news channels have sprung up in West Bengal, funded by dark money aimed at propping up the BJP. The BJP isn't just another opposition party attempting to win over a state. West Bengal holds ideological significance for the BJP as a surviving bastion of anti-fascism. While BJP has rarely targeted the TMC for its corruption or anti-democratic practices, it has principally focused on TMC's alleged 'appeasement' of Muslims.

Considering this election an 'assembly election' undermines the significance of this election. This election is a referendum on the BJP's attempt to enforce the NRC-CAA-NPR in Bengal as well as the 'national' character of the ongoing Kisan Movement.

PD argues that the TMC is unlike RJD or SP, but fails to provide any class analysis to substantiate its assertion. Perhaps it should do well to remember the violence unleashed upon the cadres of CPI(ML) in Bihar during the 1980s and 1990s. CPI(M)'s own allies in the Congress had unleashed violent repression of adivasis during UPA I & II. In fact much like TMC's corruption has opened up space for the BJP, it was the corruption and crony capitalism of UPA I & II that allowed for the rise of the BJP in our time. Once again this is not to suggest that the CPI(M) should ally with the TMC, but rather to highlight the fact that PD's own logic doesn't hold in this case.

The LF had allied with the

Congress in 2016, when BJP's rise in Bengal was not as apparent as today, instead of emphasizing on a broader left unity. Then too, the people found the logic of the alliance as unpalatable, and resulted in the LF losing the position of principal opposition to the Congress.

The people in Bengal are becoming aware of the BJP's unholy designs with every passing day, and the election is increasingly becoming a battle against the BJP's attempt to wrest Bengal. The 'No Vote to BJP' campaign has even involved political sections that have traditionally stood against any electoral participation. In both urban and rural areas these campaigns have found support from a wide cross-section of society. The uncertainty created by the NRC-CAA-NPR process has also made people increasingly aware of the threat posed by the BJP and it is necessary that BJP become unviable as a political party in West Bengal.

The CPI(M) has impeccable 'anti-

TMC' credentials that can only be questioned by the intellectually dishonest. Especially when BJP is openly embracing corrupt turncoats from the TMC without having their commitment to fight against TMC questioned. It must therefore be realised that this election is not being fought on the questions posed by TMC but rather the ones posed by BJP. The political party that will be able to furnish its 'anti-fascist' credentials the best will be the one that will become relevant in Bengal.

Mamata Banerjee's thanking of CPI(ML) for highlighting the threat posed by the BJP has led to a lot of ruffled feathers in the CPI(M). Yet few questions were raised when Amit Shah thanked CPI(M) activists after the 2019 results. In reality it hardly matters who thanked whom. What matters is that PD assumes that a campaign to defeat the BJP is automatically in support of TMC! Is this an admission that CPI(M) will not present a serious fight against the BJP? □



The Tightening Noose of Fascism and the Rising Tide of Protests

 ARINDAM SEN

Last month, Liberation carried a cover feature that showed how the Modi Regime and the BJP/NDA

governments in States have been using the sedition law and sundry other tools to book protesters and silence critics and activists while encouraging communally insidious groups like Kapil Mishra's Hindu Ecosystem spread Islamophobia and instigate violence. In this article we would like to carry the discussion forward by questioning the constitutional validity of the

archaic sedition law itself and looking into issues like growing onslaughts on freedom of expression and other fundamental rights as well as on the autonomy of constitutional bodies like the EC and CAG and the federal structure of Indian polity.



Sedition Law should be Immediately Abolished: Retired SC Judge

The Indian sedition law (Section 124A of the IPC) is a relic of the colonial era when freedom of speech was not considered as important as it is today. It penalises a person who "by words, either spoken or written...excites or attempts to excite disaffection towards, the Government"^a. But it is no longer exactly the same as what it says in print. Because, as far back as in 1962, the Supreme Court in the Kedar Nath Singh case had read down Section 124A, saying a speech/piece of writing/call or slogan would be considered seditious *only if* the police could establish that it contained an incitement to violence and *directly led to an actual act of violence*. So this is the law of the land today, as reiterated by the apex court umpteen times. But the problem is, oftener than not police officials and magistrates have been ignoring the redefined spirit of the law and acting on the dead letter on the statute books -- either because of ignorance or, in most cases, under pressure from the political bosses.

The blatant misuse of Section 124A has faced stringent criticism in courts of law on two successive occasions this March. In both cases

[a] The US sedition law, rarely invoked, defines sedition as an act carried out "by force" (not just words spoken or written) against the government. And the UK -- the country of origin of our sedition law, so to say -- abolished its sedition law way back in 2009. The rationale was, as the then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Ministry of Justice put it, "Sedition and seditious and defamatory libel are arcane offences - from a bygone era when freedom of expression wasn't seen as the right it is today. ...Freedom of speech is now seen as the touchstone of democracy, and the ability of individuals to criticise the state is crucial to maintaining freedom". Clearly, under Narendra Modi India is going in the opposite direction, as evidenced by the rising graph of sedition cases in recent years.

the charges were baseless and made with malicious motives.

Out on his campaign trail ahead of the assembly elections, the Prime Minister once again sought to divert attention from burning problems on ground and popular protests around the country by launching a scathing attack on "international conspirators" bent on "discrediting India". Without directly taking the names of Disha Ravi and Greta Thunberg (but referring to the 'toolkit'), Modi warned that the country will "respond to these conspiracies with all its might". And the 'response' came in less than a week. On February 13 the Delhi Police, which takes directions from Amit Shah, arrested Disha from Bengaluru, brazenly violating the due process of law. During her bail hearing they repeatedly harped on the conspiracy theory floated by the top boss while the pliant media, as usual, sought to sensationalize the 'toolkit' -- a term not so familiar with the general public -- with an eye on influencing the trial.

However, the Delhi Sessions Court rejected both the charges: of Disha's involvement with a 'larger conspiracy' for inciting violence and

of sedition. It ruled that "the offence of sedition cannot be invoked to minister to the wounded vanity of the government", adding further that the government couldn't put people "behind bars simply because they choose to disagree with the state policies".

Around the same time, the Supreme Court dismissed a PIL against former J&K Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah. The PIL alleged that Abdullah was conspiring to "hand over" Kashmir to China as he had "made the live statement that for restoring Article 370 he would take help of China". The SC ruled that "expression of views which is dissent and different from the opinion of the government cannot be termed seditious" and imposed a fine of Rs 50,000 on the petitioners — Rajat Sharma and Neha Srivastava, both belonging to an organisation named Vishwa Guru India Vision of Sardar Patel — when they failed to substantiate the allegation that Abdullah was being helped by China and Pakistan against India to speak up against the abrogation of Article 370.

It was in this backdrop that Justice Deepak Gupta, who had

Disha Ravi's Statement when she was Released on Bail

...my actions were pronounced guilty - not in the court of law, but on flat screens by seekers of TRPs. ...The immense outpour of love from the people gave me strength. I am grateful for everyone who stood by me. The past few days have been beyond painful, yet I know that I am one of the privileged. I was lucky enough to have excellent pro bono legal assistance but what of all those who do not? What of all those still in jail whose stories are not marketable? What of the marginalised that are not worthy of your screen time? What of those who face the world's brazen indifference? Although their physical forms are trapped behind bars because of our collective silence, their ideas continue to live on as will the united resistance of the people. Ideas do not die. And, truth, no matter how long it takes, always reveals itself.

retired from the Supreme Court last year, said in a recent interview with Karan Thapar from *The Wire* that Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code should be “immediately abolished”. And why? Because it is used by governments to create fear in the citizenry and to prevent or throttle dissent and cases of its misuse are increasing “exponentially”.

Justice Gupta was asked if it was seditious or even a crime to talk to someone who champions Khalistan or is a member of a banned organisation and his clear answer was that it’s neither i.e., not sedition and not a crime. He also said it was not sedition for journalists to tweet that they had been told a protester on Republic Day had died because he was shot, something the man’s grandfather claims to be the case. Even if the content of the tweet subsequently proved wrong, he clarified, it could, arguably, be poor journalism but certainly not sedition or a crime.

Finally, Justice Gupta was asked, given that in 1995 the Supreme Court had ruled in the Balwant Singh case that it was not sedition to shout ‘Khalistan Zindabad’ – something that happened the day Indira Gandhi was killed and in a public place – is it sedition for JNU students to shout ‘*Bharat tere tukde tukde honge inshallah inshallah?*’ His answer was that it would only be sedition if the police could directly link this call or slogan to an act of violence. He said over three years have passed and no such evidence or proof has come forward. Therefore, he said, he does not believe this is likely to be sedition.

Global Watchdogs on Political Rights, Civil Liberties and Media Freedom in India

In April last year, the US government’s Religious Freedom Monitor noted that religious freedom had improved globally but singled out India for seeing a “sharp downward turn”. Then in December, India was ranked 111th out of 162 countries in the Washington-based Cato Institute’s Human Freedom Index 2020. Between the 2019 and 2020 indices, our country plummeted 17 spots.

This year, “Freedom in the World” -- the flagship annual report from Freedom House, a United States government-funded NGO -- lowered India’s status in the global ranking from “free” in 2020 to “partly free”. The latest report says, “Political rights and civil liberties in the country have deteriorated since Narendra Modi became prime minister in 2014, with increased pressure on human rights organizations, rising intimidation of academics and journalists, and a spate of bigoted attacks, including lynchings, aimed at Muslims ... The decline only accelerated after Modi’s reelection in 2019.”

Referring to the vilification of members of the Tablighi Jamaat last year, the report observed, “The ruling Hindu nationalist movement also encouraged the scapegoating of Muslims, who were disproportionately blamed for the spread of the virus and faced attacks by vigilante mobs...”

The V-Dem Institute, an independent research institute based at the University of Gothenburg, has observed that India is no longer an ‘electoral democracy’, classifying the country as an ‘electoral autocracy’ instead. It

pointed out that much of the decline in democratic freedoms occurred after the BJP’s victory in 2014 and put India in the same bracket with states like Brazil, Turkey and the USA, where “an accelerating wave of autocratisation” (recall Georgi Dimitrov’s description, made nearly hundred years ago, about the prolonged process of “fascistization” within an apparently democratic set-up) is taking place. The process of autocratisation, it says, “typically follows a similar pattern across very different contexts”. It begins with ruling governments attacking the media and civil society, followed by polarisation of the society by “disrespecting opponents and spreading false information” and culminates in elections being undermined. As far as censorship is concerned, the Institute reckons that India is now as autocratic as is Pakistan, and worse than both its neighbours Bangladesh and Nepal.”

The international press is replete with similar reports from several other sources based in friendly countries. Thus the World Press Freedom Index 2020, published by the Paris-based reporters without borders, ranked India 142nd (sliding two places from 140 a year ago, and just three places ahead of Pakistan, which now stands at 145). To put it in perspective, India’s rank was much better at 106 in the year 2006.

In addition to data-based analyses and indexes, the rapidly growing criticism of the Modi government’s harsh treatment of dissenters, journalists and activists also comes in the form of more focused and issue-based initiatives. The New York-based Clooney Foundation for Justice (CFJ), which seeks to promote accountability for human rights abuses around the world, has announced it will monitor the trial of Kashmiri journalist Aasif

Sultan, who has been in detention for more than two years on terror charges. He had received the John Aubuchon Press Freedom Award from the American National Press Club in 2019 and was featured in TIME magazine's 10 'Most Urgent' cases of threats to press freedom around the world last year.

More recently, seven UN Special Rapporteurs wrote to the Indian government seeking information on the factual basis of investigations involving cases against human rights defenders and journalists in Kashmir including Parvaiz Bukhari, Khurram Parvez and Parveena Ahangar.

US Farmers and Farmworkers Criticize Indian Farm Laws

In February this year, as many as 87 farmers' unions in the US hailed the ongoing protests at Delhi's borders as "one of the world's most vibrant protests in history."

"Their rallying cry" the letter from the unions reads, "is to repeal the three unjust laws that were passed without their knowledge or consultation. We extend our solidarity to countless farmers who are peacefully and boldly standing up for their rights and dignity, with other farmers from across the globe."

The unions extol the virtues of MSP, noting that it is a key price signal to other traders, and ensures that farmers receive a fair price for crops. Drawing attention to the role of the US government in pushing the farm laws, they say: "The US has been a key opponent of India's limited use of MSP at the World Trade Organization (WTO). The US, with Australia, Canada and European allies, has claimed that India's MSP distorts trade."

The unions blame "forces of neoliberalism" in India and the US for the sorry plight of small farmers in both countries and assert that what Indian farmers are enduring now happened in the US almost four decades ago:

"Reagan era furthered the farm crisis through deliberate federal policy changes, with systematic erosion of parity prices and other deregulatory efforts. 'Get big or get out' has been our government's mantra. Farmers with the means to consolidate have been rewarded for growing monoculture commodities. Tribal nations and traditional producers as well as small farmers who have always practiced or shifted to diversified agro-ecological farming have effectively been subsidizing the US agriculture sector. It is rare for these food producers to make a living without supplemental income. Unsurprisingly, farm suicides in rural America are 45% higher than the rest of the population....

While the U.S. agricultural sector receives inordinately large support compared to many countries, access to that support remains inequitable. In particular, Black, Indigenous, Latino, Asian-Pacific and other people of color producers, who lack secure land tenure and are concentrated in vegetable and small-scale cattle sectors, have been excluded historically. Support flows to larger agribusiness farming operations instead of the independent family farmers whose voices we amplify."

"We have great respect for the unified struggles the farmers and farmworkers of Samyukt Kisan Morcha have built, and we stand with them," the unions announced.

UK and US Legislators Question India's Democratic Credentials

The Indian government came under fierce criticism in the House of Commons in early March for allegedly violating the freedom of journalists to report on the farmer protests and the alleged use of brute force against protesters when British MPs debated a petition on the topic which has garnered over 115,000 signatures. "The UK government values its trade relationship with India, but it must be broader and deeper than just trade, it must also be about joint promotion of democracy, human rights and upholding international law," said Stephen Kinnock, Labour's shadow minister for Asia. "Mr Modi does need to recognise the world is watching", he added.

Even Conservative MP Paul Bristow said the actions of the Indian Government in response to the farmers' protests had "crossed a line". "Upholding the law should never be allowed to slide into authoritarian oppression," he said. The lone voice defending India amongst the 20 odd MPs who took part in the debate was that of Conservative MP Theresa Villiers.

Finally, Nigel Adams, minister for Asia at the foreign, commonwealth & development office, responded to the debate saying "We look to the Indian government to uphold the freedoms guaranteed by its Constitution and international instruments to which India is party. Whilst this is an exciting time for the UK-India partnership it does not hinder us from raising difficult issues."

A new report by the US Congress's non-partisan and autonomous research service has taken a critical view of India's handling of the

farmer protests, warning that New Delhi's position on the ongoing stir could "present a challenge" for the Biden administration as it shapes its Indo-Pacific policy with India as a key partner. "By some accounts, the crackdown on dissent has been excessive and reflective of a broader trend towards authoritarianism in India," said the report.

Are these Baseless Allegations to Discredit our Country?

Yes, that is what the rulers would like us to believe, although the criticisms are emerging from UN bodies and countries considered to be very good friends of India, not from China or Pakistan. But the fact is, our experience over the past nearly seven years fully corroborate the observations made by the comity of nations. The NIA raids and police atrocities, the indiscriminate UAPA and sedition charges, the endless and limitless violations of human rights and civil liberties in Jammu and Kashmir and all across the country, fake news and hate speech factories running overtime -- the all too familiar features of fascist bellicosity are part of our everyday experience. A new stratagem, which affects not just media freedom but the freedom of speech and essential communications of ordinary citizens, is the frequent imposition of bans on the usage of the internet and social media. And almost every morning we wake up to hear about some new onslaught on lives and livelihoods, privacy and dignity of the people. To take a quick glance at some grisly recent developments,

- A new set of stringent rules for strengthening the Centre's oversight on social media,

digital media platforms etc. has drawn flak from all who value privacy and freedom of expression.

- On March 15, the Centre introduced the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Act, 2021 in the Lok Sabha. The bill seeks to give overarching powers to the Lieutenant Governor (L-G, who is appointed by the President on the Centre's advice). According to the proposed amendments, 'government' referred to in any law passed by the legislative assembly would mean the L-G. The elected government will also be barred from making any rule that empowers it or its committees to take up matters of day-to-day administration or conduct inquiries into administrative decisions. After being rejected by the people of Delhi in both assembly and municipal elections despite the communal riots instigated by it, the BJP is thus trying to grab effective power in the national capital through a back door. By handing over almost absolute power to the L-G from the elected Government and legislature, the bill clearly goes against the relevant constitutional provisions and the Supreme Court verdict of July 2018. That unanimous judgement from a five-judge bench headed by Chief Justice Dipak Misra said, inter-alia, that the L-G is bound by the "aid and advice of the Kejriwal government, which has the public mandate" and the elected government need only to "inform" the L-G of its decisions and need not obtain his "concurrence" in every issue of day to day

governance.

- In Jammu and Kashmir the panel for redrawing the parliamentary and assembly constituencies has been given a one-year extension, which means assembly polls -- due since the BJP-PDP alliance fell apart in June 2018 -- would be further deferred as they cannot happen until the exercise is concluded. Clearly, the ruling dispensation is deliberately delaying elections because they know they will face a humiliating defeat at the hustings.
- In an order aimed at checking police brutality, the Supreme Court had on December 2 last year instructed the Centre, States and Union Territories to install CCTV cameras in every police station and in the offices of central investigating agencies such as CBI, ED and NIA. The order was not implemented and the Court on March 2 pulled up the Centre for "dragging its feet". When Solicitor General Tushar Mehta argued that doing so might have serious ramifications and sought extra time to implement the court's order, the Bench headed by Justice RF Nariman said, "We are not concerned about the ramifications...This concerns the rights of citizens...We are not accepting the excuses."
- The findings of both V Dem and Freedom House have been fully endorsed and further substantiated by the Citizens Commission on Elections (CCE) which has as its members people like former Supreme Court judge Madan. B. Lokur, former Chief Information Commissioner

- Wajahat Habibullah, Arun Kumar and John Dayal while many others including Harsh Mander, Paranjay Guha Thakurta and Anjali Bhardwaj contributed to preparing its various thematic reports. The CCE believes that "the decline" in India's status to 'partly free', "is due to the increased pressure on human rights organisations, rising intimidation of academics and journalists, and a spate of bigoted attacks, including lynchings, aimed at Muslims."
- The resignation, under political pressure, of Professors P B Mehta and Arvind Subramanian is indicative of a new low in academic freedom in our country. It reveals that the Modi Regime, after positioning their henchmen in advanced institutions that promote freedom of expression and critical thought -- such as JNU, Jadavpur University as well as central universities like Visva Bharati -- is desperately working for regimentation and saffronization of the entire academic space. More significantly, it shows that the academic freedom even of the PM's former economic adviser Arvind Subramanian and renowned author and former Vice Chancellor of Ashoka University P B Mehta is far from secure. It is highly encouraging, of course, that distinguished academics and intellectuals from India and abroad have lodged their strong protest against gross political interference in the academia. Most important, the students in Ashoka University have shown the courage to launch a two-day

strike, specifically blaming the VC, the Chancellor and the founders of the university for their failure to protect the university "from external political pressures".

- According to a report published in *Sunday Times* on the 7th of March, the Comptroller and Auditor General's reports came down from 55 in 2015 to just 14 in 2020, a fall of nearly 75% while defence audit report fell from eight in 2017 to zero last year, raising concerns that the government's financial accountability is not coming under the CAG's gaze very closely. This was revealed in a reply to an RTI application filed by the newspaper. Former IAS officer Jawahar Sircar quipped, "The last two-three CAGs have not been very aggressive like Vinod Rai. In fact, they were unusually lenient and soft." Sircar added that even serious issues such as the impact of demonetization was not taken up by the CAG for audit.

Now, what Sircar said about the CAGs applies equally to many other institutions and high officials. Look at the RBI for example. Even Urjit Patel, who was handpicked by Modi after a Governor of Raghuram Rajan's stature was shown the doors, opposed the government's macabre endeavour to seize the Bank's Contingency Fund. He also opposed the Centre's Electoral Bonds scheme through an amendment to the RBI act, on the grounds that it could be misused through shell companies and "can subject the RBI to a serious reputational risk of facilitating money laundering transactions". So he too had to resign. And then,

perhaps for the first time in the history of RBI, a bureaucrat with hardly any training in economics or public finance – one whose only qualification seems to be absolute obedience -- was catapulted to the governor's chair. The grateful gentleman immediately handed over nearly Rs two lakh crore from the nation's contingency fund to the government and the lion's share of this huge amount was doled out to big corporates in the shape of various concessions and incentives.

No less scandalous has been the conduct of the Election Commission -- one of the most crucial constitutional bodies in a parliamentary democracy like India -- in recent years. During the 2019 parliamentary elections a series of "clean chits" were extended to Modi despite his provocative speeches that brazenly violated the model code of conduct. For instance, at a rally in Maharashtra, Modi invoked the armed forces in his speech while making an appeal to first-time voters. "Can your first vote be dedicated to those who carried out the airstrike [and] to the veer shaheed (brave martyrs) of Pulwama?" he said. The local electoral officers found Modi's appeal to be "inconsistent" with the poll watchdog's instructions, but the EC exonerated him. Earlier, it cleared Modi over another speech in Maharashtra in which he invoked religion. Election commissioner Ashok Lavasa had to register his protest and recuse himself from the Commission's meetings.

Under the stewardship of the CEC, the Commission is once again helping the BJP by scheduling the forthcoming assembly elections in West Bengal in eight phases. This would allow Modi and other Central

leaders, on whom the party's election campaign is critically dependent due to the absence of any marketable leader from within the state, to tour all districts and most constituencies. All these have seriously eroded public trust in the EC.

Like a free press and credible constitutional bodies, an independent Judiciary is regarded as a necessary component of a free, just, democratic society. However, India's reputation on this score has been considerably dented since the time of CJI Dipak Misra, who faced not just an impeachment motion in Parliament but, in a first, indictment by his colleagues in a Press Conference. Justice Ranjan Gogoi, who claimed a high moral ground in that press conference, encountered harsh

criticism not just for many of his rulings in politically sensitive cases, but also for his highly authoritarian and disgraceful handling of an allegation of sexual abuse leveled against him by a lady working in the Court and, immediately after retirement, for accepting the post of a Rajya Sabha MP. And now we have a CJI who is constantly on the limelight for all the wrong reasons. He earnestly followed his immediate predecessors in condoning the huge human rights violations in Kashmir. While granting bail to Arnab Goswami who approached the top court under Article 32, he upheld the right of a citizen to approach the apex court as a fundamental right under Article 32 of the Constitution but, only weeks later, while hearing Kerala journalist

Siddique Kappan's *habeas corpus* plea, ruled that the Kerala Union of Working Journalists should have gone to the relevant High Court instead of the apex court, adding that the Supreme Court was "trying to discourage Article 32 petitions".

To go beyond the CJIs, the abysmal failure -- if not reluctance -- of the top court in seriously adjudicating the electoral bonds case really poses a serious question involving its institutional integrity or constitutional morality. In whose interest is the Court refusing to prioritize this case over nearly four years even after conceding, during a short hearing in April 2019, that the case involved "weighty issues which have a tremendous bearing on the sanctity of the electoral process in the country"? □



Growing Repression Begets Stronger Resistance And at the End of the Day, the People Wins

So in our country the battle between electoral autocracy and people's democracy, between subjugation and freedom, between opacity and transparency, between institutionalized oppression and social justice, between majoritarianism and pluralism, between good and evil is hotting up in ideological, political and economic domains. On one side we find the extended Sangh Parivar and their cohorts within and beyond India, who not only wreak havoc from the corridors of power but, like termites (to borrow a term from a filthy politician who used it to describe Muslim infiltrators), eat into the very vitals of the secular democratic republic -- howsoever imperfect that may have been -- which we the people of India achieved at the cost of enormous sacrifices during the freedom movement. On the other side there is a much stronger army comprising farmers protesting against the three farm laws, workers and employees agitating against privatisation and the new labour codes, emerging icons of Young India such as climate activist Disha Ravi, dalit labour organiser Nodeep Kaur and her comrade Shiv Kumar, stand up comedian Munawar Faruqui and all those who are under attack

simply because they work for the downtrodden and speak truth to power, the few judges and the many activists, journalists, artists, intellectuals and others who go against the tide to reclaim and rebuild the Republic. When protesting farmers observe Women Peasants' Day, International Women's Day, Human



Rights Day, and fan out to different parts of the country on a campaign to defeat the BJP in the impending elections, when the ruling dispensation finds itself in a very tight spot both in economic and political terms and when convergence of various popular movements in different forms is visibly growing, there is every reason to hope that the coming months and years will be marked by bitter battles and hard-won victories. □



**“It is time all democratic movements came together
to expose this government.”**

The Bharatiya Kisan Union (Ekta-Ugrahan), the biggest group among the 32 organisations, marked Human Rights Day by demanding the release of several democratic rights activists and intellectuals who are lodged in prison.

The Union, which is camped near Delhi’s Tikri border at Bahadurgarh, hosted a function to show its solidarity with other democratic and human rights movements. In a full-fledged attack on what it called an “authoritarian” Central government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the farmer leaders asserted that it was time to stand with different democratic movements of the country, as their larger struggle was against “corporatisation” of Indian agriculture, and not merely against the contentious farm laws.

“We are confronting a prime minister who is behaving like an exploitative king. All these activists and intellectuals have been arrested on false charges merely because they highlighted the plight of the poor, without bothering about their own safety. It is now our responsibility that we extend our support to them. That is why we are also demanding the release of all these intellectuals and activists, apart from our resistance to the farm laws,” Joginder Ugrahan, president of the BKU (Ekta-Ugrahan), told The Wire.

Anti-Privatisation Day Observed All Over India



1 5 March 2021 was observed as Anti-Privatization Day in response to the joint nationwide call given by central labour organizations and Samyukta Kisan Morcha.

Bank employees went on two-day Bank Strike on 15-16 March against Privatization of banks by the Modi regime. The joint front of central trade unions and federations and the Kisan Samyukta Morcha have declared full support to the bank strike on 15-16 March, General Insurance workers' strike on 17 March and nationwide LIC strike on 18 March.

CPIML and All India Central Council of Trade Unions joined strikers at all major centres in the country. On 15 March 2021 the first day of the 2-day bank strike called jointly by bank officers' and workers' organizations against privatization, all CPIML MLAs in Bihar went to various banks in Patna and extended full support to the strike and gave the assurance that they

would put pressure on the Bihar government to pass a resolution in the Assembly against privatization.

What are the consequences of rampant privatisation in various sectors?

Banking Privatisation

The Modi government is handing over banks to the corporates who have already been looting banks and are the biggest loan defaulters. By defaulting on loans, corporations have already been speculating with people's savings. Now, by privatising banks, the Government is allowing them a more direct way to do the same.

Privatization of banks will result in:

- Control of corporate houses over people's life savings
- Closure of rural bank branches
- More risk in public savings and less interest on savings accounts
- Decrease in farm loans

especially to small and marginal farmers

- Decrease in loans to MSMEs and small businesses
- Decrease in student education loans
- Increase in service charges
- More contract jobs instead of permanent jobs in the banking sector
- End to reservation in bank jobs
- More aggressive and violent tactics by loan recovery sharks

Other, structural reasons are outlined below

Private players in the financial sector fail and demand bailouts from public funds: Can we forget the the financial markets collapsed in 2008, caused by private players, and bailed out by public funds? None of the fraudsters responsible went to jail. Why should Indian banks be handed over to similar irresponsible private parties?

Private banks fail all the time: The website of the US Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) — an independent body created by the US Congress to maintain stability and public confidence in financial system — shows that in the 20 years from 2001 to 2020, as many as 559 private banks with assets of \$721 billion failed in the US. What happened to the depositors? It was the problem of the FDIC to bail them out.

The principle followed by private banks is this. When they make profits, it goes to shareholders. When they make losses, it gets socialised and falls in the lap of the government to make good the deposits either through insurance or taxpayer bailout.

Rail Privatisation

Rail privatisation has been a failure in other countries – why is India pushing it then, in a country where railways is the preferred means of travel for the vast number of Indians, who are poor?

The British Example

Excerpts from an article for the Centre for Financial Accountability (CFA) by Kavita Kabeer below.

In 1994, the British government began a sectional privatisation of the network, leading to the existing franchise system under which 25 companies, including British Rail, operate trains across the country. Railway infrastructure such as tracks, signalling and stations is maintained by another company – Railtrack – while freight is operated by six others. Railtrack didn't always reinvest profits in the railway infrastructure, leading to a deterioration of the tracks and, as a consequence, accidents. A public outcry compelled the British government to take over Railtrack's operations. The British rail network

today is plagued by crowded trains, cancelled services, and high fares. The coronavirus pandemic further exposed the fragile state of the network. Nationally, the use of railway dropped from 100 percent to 4-6 percent between April and May, making it unprofitable for the private players. The government had to spend £3.5 billion to keep the trains running for essential services and workers. Several surveys have shown the British public favour re-nationalising the rail network and pressure is growing on the government to do so. On February 7, the Welsh Government brought back the Wales and Borders franchise into public ownership. Similar measures are being anticipated elsewhere in the UK.

Rail in India

The Indian Railways is the lifeblood of the country's economy, moving people and goods at affordable prices every day. It has also contributed significantly to the socioeconomic development of small towns and cities, enabling movement of labour and goods and linking manufacturing to markets. In 2019-20, the railways ran 13,169 passenger trains and 8,479 freight trains on average daily, carrying 22.15 million passengers a day, before the pandemic.

The railways has vast landholdings, infrastructure and assets. As per its 2019-20 yearbook, the railways owns 4.81 lakh hectare of land, 12,729 locomotives, 2,93,077 freight wagons, and 76,608 passenger coaches. The railway also runs hospitals, schools, and museums as a social obligation.

The railways isn't just India's largest employer, it is a reasonably equal employer. It had 12,53,592 regular employees as of March 31,

2020, of whom 16.84 percent and 7.81 percent, respectively, were from the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. In a society ridden with caste inequalities, the public sector, including the railways, is seen as an equal opportunity employer. By privatising its operations, its carriages, its routes, the Modi government will push the railways away from this socioeconomic vision.

Yet, a recent small survey for this study by the author of train passengers from Mysuru and Bengaluru found that while almost all of them were concerned about the rising cost of travel, not many were aware about the privatisation process underway. Some 60 percent of the respondents said they were not aware that private trains will have only AC compartments, and they will run only on the profit-making routes.

Protest Against Steel Plant Privatisation

There was a Statewide Bandh in Andhra Pradesh on 5 March against Vizag Steel Plant privatisation. Workers of the Steel Plant have been on a relay hunger strike.

The protestors are raising the slogan 'Konadaniki Vadenvadu, Ammadaniki Vadenvadu Vishaka Ukku Andhrula Hakku' (Who are they to buy, who are they to sell? Vizag Steel Plant is Andhra people's right).

Trade unions, left parties joined by members of Telugu Desam Party, the ruling YSRCP party and other people's organisations held a massive rally as part of the statewide bandh against the privatisation of Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Ltd. (RINL), the corporate entity of the Vishakhapatnam (Vizag) Steel Plant.



AICCTU Team Visits Vizag : Workers From Bhilai & Bokaro Steel Plants Express Solidarity With Protesting Workers Of Vizag Steel Plant

A statement by AICCTU against the move to privatise the Vizag plant is below:

After taking steps to handover majority shares in different public and govt. sectors, like Defence, Insurance, Banking, Petroleum, Airways and Railways, to corporates, now it has come up with another destructive step to sell out Visakhapatnam steel plant, which is providing employment to more than one lakh employees directly and indirectly. VSP employs about 15,000 permanent and 20,000 contract workers and provides indirect livelihood to over 65,000 people. The plant thus supports one lakh jobs and about five lakh people – about a quarter of the Vizag city population, unions say.

To give away the Vizag Steel(RINL - Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Limited) to private players, the government is blatantly lying and claiming the plant is incurring losses. At the same time, as per

its policy, it is giving away the Iron ore to corporate companies at throw away prices, granting mining permissions to private companies, while on the other hand it is not allocating its own mines as captive mines, to RINL which is a Navratna PSE under ministry of Steel.

This move pushes the future of lakhs of employees into insecurity in the hands of private owners and the decision has come at a time where the future of workers of all other sectors is also pushed towards despair by amending all the labour laws and bringing in four labour codes.

VSP which became operational in 1992 after the foundation was laid in 1977 by the then prime minister Indira Gandhi, after a prolonged agitation in the seventies, when people rallied with a popular slogan “Visakha ukku-Andhrula hakku” (Vizag Steel is Andhra's right). The agitation has also claimed 30 lives.

- AICCTU stands in solidarity with the struggling employees of RINL against the arbitrary decision of central govt.

- AICCTU demands to immediately withdraw the decision of Disinvestment in RINL.

- AICCTU demands to streamline the mining policy, allocation of govt owned captive mines to RINL, stop selling mined raw materials at throw away prices to corporate companies and secure the future of all employees of Vizag Steel.

- AICCTU demands passing of a resolution in the floors of the assembly condemning Modi govt and also to join the peoples movement against wholesale sell out.

- AICCTU calls upon the people to join workers movement to stall the privatization of Vizag steel plant. □

India's Draconian Lockdown: One Year Later



A year ago on March 24 2020, the Modi regime, in the name of curbing the Covid-19 pandemic, imposed a sudden and total three-week lockdown with a mere four-hour warning. The lockdown lasted nine weeks. Millions of migrant workers, left stranded, walked home, suffering starvation, heat waves, accidents, and many dying along the way. For India's economy, already staggering under the Modi regime's 2016 demonetisation blow, the draconian lockdown was a virtual death blow.

A year later, where does India stand? Was the lockdown essential to control the spread of the Covid-19 virus? How did the lockdown impact India's poor? India's middle class? India's richest? Liberation takes a quick look.

The Virus

A report by the India Forum observes:

"When the lockdown was finally lifted, infections and deaths started to rise sharply, with India in a few months becoming the country with the second largest number of infections. It also turned out that neither the central nor the state governments had used the lockdown to strengthen public health facilities on an emergency footing to cope with the spurt in infections that was to follow, though that was one of the unstated justifications for the lockdown. ..."

"In hindsight, the lockdown only created dangerous incubation spots in the cities, and as workers scrambled to the safety of their homes with the relaxation of lockdown, they became unwitting

carriers of the virus into small towns and villages. And finally, when the lockdown began to weigh down dangerously on the economy and wearily on people's morale, the Centre simply receded, passing on the responsibility to the states to cope with the aftermath, including in the poorly provisioned hinterland."

"As of mid-October 2020, India suffered the highest number of Covid-19 deaths per million population in a select group of Asian countries (see image.)"

32 Million People Pushed Out of Middle Class, Into Poverty

The US-based Pew Research Centre found recently that the number of Indians in the middle class, or those earning between \$10 and \$20 a day, shrank by about 32 million, compared with the number that could have been reached in the

absence of a pandemic.

A year into the pandemic, the numbers of those in the middle class has shrunk to 66 million, down a third from a pre-pandemic estimate of 99 million, it added. The number of poor people, with incomes of \$2 or less each day, has gone up by 75 million as the recession brought by the virus clawed back years of progress.

Migrant Workers

A news report, speaking to migrant workers in Delhi-NCR, found that “A year after the lockdown, jobs are not only harder to find, they pay less.” One worker said he only worked three months in 2020, and now having found a job, is “slowly trying to pay back Rs 35,000 in rent dues for his Rs 4,500-a-month single room in Sagarpur.” He has sent his two daughters home to his village in West Bengal, where they have dropped out of school.

The same worker said that the salaries being offered now were well below the around Rs 18,000 minimum wage for skilled workers set by the Delhi government. From Rs 12,000 a month for 12 hours of work, which is what he was earning earlier, he says companies were offering Rs 10,000 for the same, and workers were desperate enough to accept even Rs 7000 or Rs 8000.

16-year-old Reena from Jhansi is now forced to earn through domestic work in Noida. She had to drop out of school when her sister lost her job during the lockdown, and the family could not pay her school registration fees.

14-year-old Anjana has also had to drop out of school and take up domestic work, because her daily wage construction worker mother is unable to find regular work and cannot pay school fees.



(Source: Damini Nath, ‘Migrant workers face debt, job loss and separation from families’, The Hindu, March 20, 2021)

Super-Rich Grew Richer, Poor Grew Poorer

The wealth of the Modi’s crony CEOs grew in the pandemic year: Gautam Adani’s wealth more than doubled to \$32 billion; Mukesh Ambani’s grew by a quarter to \$75 billion.

India’s top 100 billionaires had been able to preserve their wealth during the year and “fewer billionaires had seen an erosion of their wealth than in 2019”. Yet, the Modi Government refused to hike taxation for the rich – even as India’s poor and middle class continue to suffer unemployment, deprivation, hunger, and crises of education and health. In April 2020, the income tax department rejected a report by a team of 50 young Indian Revenue Services (IRS) officers suggesting the government

to hike income tax rates for super-rich and imposing a Covid-relief cess of 4% for those earning above Rs 4 lakh.

According to Oxfam’s Inequality Report, India’s top 100 billionaires saw their fortunes increase by Rs 12.97 trillion — enough money to give every one of the 138 million poorest Indians a cheque for Rs 94,045 each. In stark contrast, 170,000 people lost their jobs every hour in the month of April 2020, the report points out. In fact, the increase in wealth of the top 11 billionaires of India during the pandemic could sustain the NREGS scheme for 10 years or the health ministry for 10 years.

India Among The Ten Least Happy Nations of the World

India ranked 139 out of 149 countries in the World Happiness Report 2021, released by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network. □

The Past That Shines A Light On Our Present

India's farmers are several months into a historic sit-in at the gates of Delhi, and a historic countrywide movement demanding repeal of three laws enacted by the Modi regime to serve agri-business corporations at the cost of India's farming and food security. In the midst of this, have fallen certain memorable dates from the history of agrarian struggles in India.

4 February 2021 marked the centenary of the Chauri Chaura struggle – an important chapter of the freedom struggle.

April 2021 marks 104 years of the Champaran Satyagraha – a historic peasant movement challenging British colonial rule, another

important chapter of the freedom struggle.

March 11 marks the birth anniversary of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati – the pioneering leader of the Kisan Sabha, and the peasant movement in Bihar.

The Narendra Modi regime, of course, tries with all its might to appropriate these historic legacies, and link them with various casteist or communal narratives. But these legacies resist such appropriation, because they are not "dead history", they live not just in the pages of the history books but in the struggles of fighting farmers and Indians resisting Company Raj and defending freedoms today.

Under the excuse of the Chauri Chaura rebellion, upper caste narratives are being established. Some historians have also been roped in present hearsay as evidence to erase the sacrifice of the poor at Chauri Chaura, and instead establish the event as the contribution of feudal bigoted forces to the freedom struggle.

These deceptions began through the memorial and celebrations. The Chauri Chaura memorial foundation stone was laid by Indira Gandhi on 6 February 1982 and inaugurated by Narasimha Rao on 19 July 1993. Five years later a museum was established in 1998 but nothing was done to collect material for the museum.

There is another memorial in Chauri Chaura to honour British soldiers who fired the shots, inaugurated by Governor William Morris in 1924. Two "Chauri Chaura" memorials raise the question – why memorialise soldiers who killed Indian freedom fighters? It would be better if the latter is shifted to the museum with a description of the British efforts to memorialise those who committed atrocities.

In preparation for the centenary the Memorial has been painted outside but the condition inside remains bad. The library on the ground floor is on its death bed. The statue of a Sanyasi adorns the entrance to the staircase but it is unnamed. No one is able to tell who this Sanyasi is and what is his connection with the Chauri Chaura rebellion.

Chauri Chaura Centenary: Rescuing History From Saffron Misrepresentation



SUBHASH KUSHWAHA

[Subhash Kushwaha is the author of *Chauri-Chaura: Vidroh Aur Swadhinata Andolan* (*Chauri-Chaura: Rebellion and the Freedom Struggle*), Penguin 2014. His book had pointed out the glaring errors in the memorial erected for the Chauri Chaura martyrs, and has since then repeatedly asked the UP Government to correct the errors. In preparation for the big centenary event at the memorial attended by PM Modi, the Yogi Government refurbished the memorial on the outside, but even so has failed to correct the factual errors and incomplete or misleading names on

the busts of the martyrs. When a superficial refurbishing exercise is undertaken but the errors allowed to remain, then one must assume these are now errors of commission not omission. Do the errors serve a misleading narrative that helps the BJP, and have they thus been allowed to remain?)

The centenary year of Chauri Chaura began on 4 February 2021. The ruling powers' efforts are on to escalate jingoist nationalism through advertisements worth crores.

Playing Politics With Names of Chauri Chaura Martyrs

19 martyrs were hanged in the Chauri Chaura rebellion. There should only have been busts of those 19 martyrs in the Memorial, but instead there are about 40 statues. One of the statues is of Bandhu Singh who was part of the 1857 revolt. This raises the question whether this Memorial is dedicated to the martyrs of Chauri Chaura or to the memory of the entire freedom movement. It should be specified here that it was atrocities committed by a family relation of Bandhu Singh, Zamindar Babu Bandhu Singh Bishunpura, that led to the Chauri Chaura peasant upsurge. If it was necessary to put up statues of 1857 martyrs at the Memorial, they should be put up in a separate room, separate from the Chauri Chaura martyrs. In Chauri Chaura's context, Bandhu Singh's presence could give the wrong impression.

Most of the Chauri Chaura martyrs were from the oppressed and backward castes. 16 out of the 19 martyrs were from OBC/SC communities. Names of martyrs have been tampered with in order to erase the identity of the martyrs from these castes. For example, the name on the bust of Bhagwan Ahir (Yadav) reads just 'Bhagwan'. The caste surname has not been added in any of the names of oppressed/backward caste martyrs. Moreover, two busts (with surnames Pandey and Dubey) found a place among the martyrs' busts, when actually there is no record of these two among the Chauri Chaura martyrs. There is a method to these "mistakes".

One of the busts at the Memorial is of Rampati s/o Mohar. There was no such martyr in the Chauri Chaura revolt. A list of 225 persons who participated in the revolt has been recorded in the Sessions Court verdict.

Another bust is of Lal Ahmed

s/o Hakim Kota. No person of this name was martyred. British archives record the name of Lal Mohammed, s/o Shri Hakim Shah as one of the chief rebels. In other words, mischief has been played by wrongly recording the name of one of the leading martyrs.

The bust of Dwarika Prasad Pandey s/o Shri Nepal Pandey has been put up at the Memorial. The Sessions Court verdict lists 'Dwarika Prasad s/o Shri Nepal' at Number 48 in the list of 225 names. He was awarded not death sentence but life imprisonment and he died on 27-2-1981. Fourteen persons were sentenced to life imprisonment. When none of the other 13 have statues put up to them, the question is bound to arise whether, by selectively erecting busts to one of them, complete with caste surname, the aim is to highlight Brahmin identity at the cost of hiding the sacrifices of OBCs and dalits. The reality is



Dwarika Prasad received a life sentence - why is he alone singled out to join the martyrs' busts



Lal Mohammad bust misnamed at Chauri Chaura memorial

that efforts are being made to belie the fact that Chauri Chaura was a revolt fought under the leadership of lower castes.

One of the martyrs' busts at the Memorial is of Baldev Prasad Dubey. The date of martyrdom is given as 2 July 1923. This date is shown as the martyrdom date of the Chauri Chaura rebels. This is the only bust which does not carry the father's name. This has been done in order to hide the accurate identity of the statue, so that no one can identify it as the statue of the Brahmapur zamindar Dubey who gave full help to the British in nabbing the fighters. What message is trying to be conveyed by putting up the bust of a person whose name does not figure in the Chauri Chaura upsurge, and who in fact betrayed the struggle?! Worse still is the fact that a bust of former MLA Shriniwas Mani and one of former PM Indira Gandhi have been included among the martyrs' statues!

Factual Errors

The historical write-up on a granite stone at the Memorial says that Gandhiji came to Gorakhpur in 1920, whereas a board at the cultural department of the Uttar Pradesh State Archives gives the date as 8 February 1921. This board shows Dumri village as the starting point of the rally on 4 February and says that the rally reached Thana gate 1.5 km away on 5 February. This implies that the rally took a full day to cover that short distance. How come 4 February is accepted as the anniversary of the upsurge, yet it is claimed here that the rally reached the Thana on 5 February!

On the other hand, the history inscribed on the granite stone makes no mention of Dumri Khurd village. What is recorded is the name of Brahmapur. The rally is said to begin from Brahmapur, which is nothing but a blatant lie. Page 15 of the Sessions Court

verdict gives a map of the rally route which I have reproduced at the beginning of my book. The High Court made it clear in its detailed verdict that the centre of the revolt was Dumri Khurd village and that the lower castes led the revolt.

Why is it then that instead of clearly stating 'Dumri Khurd village' the Memorial and museum both mention just 'Dumri'? Here also the attempt is to delude and misinform. Dumri village signifies Dumri Khas or Dumri Kala which was the village of Sardar Jagirdar. As Dumri and Dumri Khurd are 2 different villages at a distance of 7 km from each other, both villages should have been specifically and distinctly mentioned.

The Memorial gives the date all the martyrs were hanged as 2 July 1923, which is incorrect. The martyrs were hanged in different jails on different dates between 2 and 11 July 1923. There is



Surname missing from Bhagwan Ahir bust



There was no Rampati among the Chauri Chaura martyrs

evidence to prove this. I have supplied evidence for the dates in my book. These errors should have been corrected. A program should have been organized at Dumri Khurd, centre of the revolt, to mark the centenary year. But on 4 February the place was not even swept. Two of the leading martyrs, Nazar Ali and Bikram Ahir (Yadav), hailed from Dumri Khurd. I met the descendants of both these martyrs on 5 February. Both appeared hurt at being ignored during the centenary celebrations. The British government had made more than 30 people from this village accused persons, and this fact itself should have been acknowledged and honoured.

Instead of throwing away money on advertisements for the government, it would have been more fitting if this village had been honoured as a revolutionary centre.

Chauri Chaura Upsurge: Who Were the Real Culprits?

4 February 1923 (date of Chauri Chaura revolt) records a few unforgettable pages in history where poor peasants, defying armed policemen and bullets, set fire to the Thana. 23 soldiers and constables including the Daroga were killed in the fire. The colonial and ruling class narration of history talks of the taint of the 'violent Chauri Chaura crime'. Looking back at the incident in the Chauri Chaura centenary year, we see the role of the then zamindars as the main cause of the revolt. This conflagration flared up after the zamindars - Sant Baksh Singh of Munder, his followers Raghubar Dayal and Awadhu Tiwari, Jagatnaryan Pandey and Harcharan Singh, manager of Sardar Umrao Singh from Dumri Khas – incited the police to fire at

protesting farmers.

The Non-cooperation Movement was heralded in Dumri Khurd village on 13 January 1922. The struggle for "Swaraj" that Gandhi had called for, began here with picketing of feudal bazaars by farmers. On 1 February 1922 Bhagwan Ahir (Yadav) was beaten up by the Daroga. On 2 February a letter was sent to summon the farmers of the Division and at 7 am on 4 February volunteers gathered in front of Bihari Pasi's home in Dumri Khurd village. The people remained fearless in the face of threats by followers of feudal dominant sections and marched on towards the Thana. Incited by Awadhu Tiwari, the Daroga ordered bullets to be fired on the crowd about 3000-4000 strong. Many farmers died. The bullets were running short. When the people hit back with stones from the railway lines, the police were forced to take shelter inside the Thana. It was then that the Thana building was set afire.

A series of acts of repression were unleashed after that. The zamindars helped the police in the witch-hunt of farmers. They saved their own people and betrayed those they saw as enemies. Sardar Harcharan Singh managed the job of turning one of the main volunteers, Shikari, into a government informer and witness.

Promoted by the zamindars, the cruel Deputy Inspector Gupteshwar Singh was declared 'Hero of Gorakhpur' by newspapers like the Herald, eulogising his Vaishya gotra and condemning the oppressed and backward caste men as hateful.

Holding Chauri Chaura to be a violation of the principle of non-violence by the "mob",

Gandhiji stopped the national Non-cooperation Movement and went on a 5-day fast as atonement. Reacting with displeasure, Subhash Chandra Bose wrote, "Backing down when the people's passion was at a boil is a great disaster for the nation". Jailed leader Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das bristled with anger and Nehru wrote from jail, "when the agitation was called off after the Chauri Chaura incident, all leaders in the Congress except Gandhiji felt very angry."

In a debate in the House of Commons, this upsurge that shook the British Empire was likened to the French Revolution.

After the Sessions Court sentenced 172 accused persons to death, the sentences were amended by the High Court (after efforts by Madan Mohan Malaviya): death by hanging for 19 persons; life sentence for 14; 8 years for 19; 5 years for 57 and 3 years for 20 persons.

Leaders of the Chauri Chaura upsurge were Nazar Ali from Dumri Khurd, Lal Mohammed from Chaura, Bhagwan Ahir, Abdulla from Chudihar Tola, and Shyam Sundar Mishra from Ramnagar.

Chauri Chaura In Popular Memory

The upsurge has been poignantly described in folk songs:

Those who fired on us, the white tyrants are burnt up,

The raging fire burned 14 Englishmen,

The youth of Hind escaped from the Thana

The sinful greedy white people died,

Those who are gone never to return.

O mother, your children will go forth to seek justice.

Caste, Class, and Chauri Chaura

The communities that played a main role in the Chauri Chaura revolt hailed from Dumri Khurd and Chaura villages. British archives describe them as low castes: "The persons affected were largely tenants and agricultural, many of them from low castes." The High Court in para 4 of its verdict in the case Abdullah et al vs Sovereign wrote, "Most of them came from the lowest strata of society." The High Court judges called Raghbir Sonar "a person of good social position" because of his higher caste in comparison with the other accused persons. Clearly, the "low" caste of the Chauri Chaura fighters was a major factor accounting for their vilification as a violent, barbaric mob.

The following is a caste/class-wise classification of the 225 persons tried by the Sessions Court:

26 Muslims; 21 Chamars; 29 Kewats; 24 Bhars; 21 Pasis; 18 Yadavs; 17 Kahars; 16 Kurmis; 6 Kalwars; 4 & 4 Teli/Barai/Bind/Lohar; 2 & 2 Lunia/Mallah/ Dhobi/ Kundu; 1 & 1 Kamkar/Koiri/Bhuj/ Khar/Pathera/Rajbhar and Gusain; and 10 persons from Savarna upper castes.

Thus we see that the Chauri Chaura revolt was a result of anger due to atrocities by local zamindars. The resonances with today's ongoing farmers' movement can be found in the Chauri Chaura revolt. After World War I, when the poor were groaning under the burden of skyrocketing prices, a war tax was imposed on the people. Farmers were being evicted from their lands because they were unable to pay taxes or offer 'gifts', similar to what can be expected from today's pro-corporate anti-

farmer laws. Awareness about the Russian Bolshevik revolution had reached villages through soldiers returning from WWI. The people were looking to the ongoing Non-cooperation Movement to give them self-rule. They were invested in the idea of liberating themselves from feudal and colonial rule, not in any abstract principle of "violence" or "non-violence."

Centenary Event Insulted Martyrs

If the ruling powers really wanted to honour the valour of these farmers, they would not have displayed cutouts of zamindars' progeny in the centenary programs. Cutouts of the martyrs were not visible anywhere, and the name of Dumri Khurd village found no mention, whereas cutouts

of the local MP/MLA, Municipal Chairman, and even petty political office-bearers were put up. No one remembered Dumri Khurd village in the centenary year of the Chauri Chaura revolt. This is the ugly truth of the Chauri Chaura centenary programs.

Till today most of the martyrs' families have not received any pension. Descendants of martyrs have no houses to live in. Abdullah's grand-daughter Suburtun has migrated from the village for lack of means of livelihood. Oppressed caste martyrs' families have been ignored and neglected, while imposters have been given pensions. This is an unfortunate and condemnable state of affairs, especially in the centenary year of the Chauri Chaura uprising. □

Champaran Satyagraha: Erased Histories

[As in the case of Chauri Chaura, the "official" centenary celebrations of the Champaran Satyagraha erased and manipulated history to suit ruling class interests. Excerpts from a write-up by historian Mohammad Sajjad in the May 2017 issue of Liberation.]

In 2017, the provincial government of Bihar chose to celebrate centenary of the Champaran Satyagraha. By funding a lavish academic seminar, it also chose to commemorate some of the leaders of the peasants as well as the companions of Gandhi who was persuaded to intervene into the issue; such sarkari events also felicitated some of the heirs of the peasant leaders, who have remained relatively lesser known in the better known books on the history of Champaran Satyagraha. This is despite the fact that the

significant memoirs, diaries and correspondences of the better known leaders of the movement have either omitted or downplayed some of the significant names associated with the Satyagraha. Not only this, such accounts have also tried to conceal certain important facts about the class/profession characters of some of the leaders.

For example, the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG), vol. 15, deals with Gandhi's stay in Patna and Muzaffarpur, on his way to Champaran in April 1917; subsequently, in January–February 1929, once again Gandhi recollects the details of his initiatives and correspondences about the Satyagraha of 1917, and gives details about all these in CWMG, vol. 44. In both these accounts as well as in his autobiography,

there is no mention of Batakh Miyan Ansari (1867-1957), who had saved the lives of Gandhi, and of Dr Rajendra Prasad, who was accompanying Gandhi in 1917 to Champaran. This significant episode finds no space whatsoever in the accounts of Rajendra Prasad, not even in the memoir, *My Times: An Autobiography*, of Acharya J. B. Kripalani (1888-1982) which was written in the 1970s, long after the British had gone, and was published, in 2002. Pir Mohammad Ansari 'Munis' (1882-1949) has been acknowledged by Rajendra Prasad, very sparingly, and by Gandhi not at all. Munis, (son of a toddy seller, named Fatingan Miyan), managed to get a smattering of education in Nagri-Hindi. That was an era when primary and secondary education in Persian was almost a mainstream. Rajendra Prasad (1884-1963) and many more of such figures went to maktabs and received their education in Persian. Despite this fact, from the late 19th century onwards, the Hindi-Urdu dispute acquired overtones of a Hindu-Muslim conflict as well. In this scenario, Munis emerged as a Hindi writer and graced the sessions of Hindi Sahitya Sammelan. Rather

than writing for the religious identity he could be identified with, he chose to fight for his class identity. This in itself awaits historical exploration even while some of the towering nationalists have largely chosen to almost erase him out of the narratives. Acknowledgements of the roles played by the peasant leaders like Shital Rai, Haribansh Sahay, Sheikh Gulab (1858-1943), Sheikh Rajab Ali, and many such leaders remain inadequate even in the proverbial footnotes and margins.

Even the more acknowledged name of Rajkumar Shukla (1875-1929), raises some serious questions as to why did the accounts of Gandhi, Rajendra Prasad, Kripalani, etc., conceal the fact that Shukla was a moneylender who earned around 1600-2000 a month from interest out of the money-lending. This is a fact stated by Shukla himself while deposing before the enquiry which was conducted by Gandhi himself. Incidentally, even in the sarkari felicitation of 2017, the government of Bihar once again forgot to call the heirs of Batakh Miyan.

A few more questions emerge about the historiographies of the

Champaran Satyagrahaa. Why did Gandhi and his companions, the upper caste urban advocates of Patna and Muzaffarpur, as well as the likes of Shukla, leave the suffering peasantry of Champaran in the lurch? Why did Gandhi and the Congress choose to target the European Indigo planters of Champaran, but leave out the more exploitative Opium zamindars?

Thus, erasure of such poor subaltern people from 'official' accounts, endures even during the official centenary celebrations. One may defend it by arguing that all these erasures in 1917, and in 2017, happened unwittingly. But how strong would such a defence really be?

The peasantry, the disadvantaged and oppressed classes and the progressive forces need to recall the histories of Champaran Satyagraha and of the Naxalite Movements in these ways rather than being deceived and cheated by the official celebrations where erasures of the brave histories of the subalterns and of the exploited sections and their leaders are being perpetuated as consciously now, as it was in the colonial era. □

Remembering Swami Sahajanand: Excerpts from Flaming Fields of Bihar

[At a time when feudal forces seek to project Sahajanand Saraswati as a "Bhumihar" icon representing feudal values, rather than recognising him as a radical peasant leader who leaned left, Liberation reproduces excerpts profiling him from The Flaming Fields of Bihar (the document published by IPF in 1986).]

The evolution of the ideas of Sahajanand provides a glimpse of

the changing course of the peasant struggle in Bihar and of the process leading to the radicalisation of the Kisan Sabha. Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, alias Navrang Rai, of Ghazipur district of UP, had initially joined the Bhumihar Mahasabha in an apparent bid to buttress the Bhumihars' claim to Brahminical status. But he did not stop there and was soon found encouraging the younger generation of Bhumihars to

participate in the Non-Cooperation Movement in large numbers.

By 1925-26 the two wings within the Mahasabha—the 'moderates' led by Sir Ganesh Dutt, a big landlord and a British puppet and the 'extremists' led by Sahajanand—parted ways. Soon Sahajanand's ashram at Bihta near Patna became the focal point of the peasant movement in Bihar, attracting not only Bhumihars but tenant farmers of other castes

as well. Sensing the gradual shift in Sahajanand's direction, the Bhumihar rich landowners stopped subscriptions. But this only confirmed Sahajanand's suspicion that caste associations and donations given for caste and religious purposes are essentially devices by the rich to control organisations and to thereby protect their landed and trading interests and generally continue their supremacy rather than for any altruistic purpose.

It is interesting to note that the original purpose behind the formation of the Kisan Sabha was not to promote peasant struggles, but to prevent the eruption of tensions in the countryside. As Sahajanand himself later admitted:

My sole object in doing so (setting up the Kisan Sabha) was to get grievances of the kisans redressed by mere agitation and propaganda and thus to eliminate all chances of clashes between the kisans and the zamindars which seemed imminent and thus threatened to destroy the all-round national unity so necessary to achieve freedom. Thus I began the organised Kisan Sabha as a staunch class-collaborator.

While the Bakasht issue lay unresolved, in 1929 the government proposed to introduce a bill to amend the Tenancy Act which, if passed, would have adversely affected the interests of the tenants. It was at this juncture that the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha (BPKS) was formed at the annual gathering of the peasants during the Sonepur fair in 1929 with Sahajanand as the president. Among its numerous local activists were Jamuna Karjee, Jadunandan Sharma, Karyanand Sharma, Dhanraj Sharma, Kishori Prasanna Singh, Indradeep Sinha, Bhogendra Jha and Sheel Bhadra Yajee. They were later joined by

celebrated intellectuals like Rahul Sankrityayana and Nagarjuna on the one hand and Congress Socialist leaders like Jaya Prakash Narayan, Rambriksha Benipuri, Ganga Saran Sinha, Awadheshwar Prasad Singh and Ramnandan Mishra on the other. But the organisation remained basically centred round Sahajanand and his close associates like Jadunandan Sharma, Jamuna Karjee, Karyanand Sharma and Dhanraj Sharma.

The very foundation of the BPKS in 1929 was marked by the dropping of the proposed tenancy amendment. This was construed by the peasants as a significant victory and proved to be a tremendous morale-booster for them. And then came a series of stirring political and economic events—the Civil Disobedience Movement, the Great Depression, and Provincial Autonomy—and the Kisan Sabha grew from strength to strength on the crest of these waves. But if these events of national and international significance provided the right external atmosphere, the Sabha drew its strength basically from within, from the scores of struggles in which it led the peasants of Bihar. One can rightly say that the BPKS was more a movement than an organisation.

Meanwhile in 1934 Sahajanand broke away from Gandhi, having followed him for no less than 14 years. Following this, the Congress grew rather hostile to the Sabha and sought to obstruct its growth by all possible means. While the Kisan Sabha was leading the peasants in militant struggles defying several firings, countless lathi-charges and thousands of arrests and trials, the Congress government that assumed office in 1937 was busy negotiating an agreement with the zamindars who offered their 'help and cooperation in instituting

tenancy laws to ameliorate the lot of the kisans'. ...But despite all these attempts on the part of the landlords and the Congress, the Kisan Sabha continued to grow from strength to strength. Estimated at 80,000 in 1935, the membership of the BPKS rose to 2,50,000 by 1938.

In April 1936 the All-India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) came into existence and the BPKS became its foremost provincial unit. The initiative was taken primarily by the CSP leaders, N G Ranga being the prime mover. Sahajanand was named president of the first meeting of the AIKS held at Lucknow, but he had reservations regarding its formation as he felt that in the absence of well-developed provincial units the national organisation could not possibly play any effective role. Once involved, Sahajanand, however, extended total support to the AIKS and worked wholeheartedly for it, but his doubts were proved undoubtedly right. Afterwards, he also cooperated with Subhas Chandra Bose in organising the Anti-Compromise Conference against the British and the Congress, and subsequently during the Second World War he worked with the CPI. Though in the last few years before his death on 26 June, 1950, Sahajanand dissociated himself from the Communists, too, he remained a resolute representative of the rural poor, and his faith in 'class struggle as the only method to liberate the oppressed masses from the many-folded slavery and subjugation' that was prompted by his early encounters with the landlords remained unshaken.

Initially the BPKS took little note of the internal differentiation within the peasantry, relying more on rich and upper-middle peasants in the name of representing the entire peasantry. By 1941, however, the

shift was slowly becoming evident. Said Sahajanand:

The Kisan Sabha belongs to those exploited and suffering masses whose lot is connected with cultivation and (who) live by it. The more they are oppressed and distressed the nearer they are to the Kisan Sabha and the nearer it is to them.

And in the 1944 session of the AIKS in Vijaywada he was still more forthright when he said:

They (middle and big cultivators) are using the Kisan Sabha for their benefit and gain, while we are using or rather trying to use them to strengthen the Sabha, till the lowest strata of the peasantry are awakened to their real economic and political interests and needs and have become class conscious It is they, the semi-proletariat or the agricultural labourers who have very little land or no land at all, and the petty cultivators, who anyhow squeeze a most meagre living out of the land they cultivate and eke out their existence, who are the kisans of our thinking and who make and must constitute the Kisan Sabha ultimately.

After independence, the Socialists set up splittist organisations like the Hind Kisan Panchayat and many Kisan Sabha activists also joined the Forward Bloc. At this juncture Sahajanand set up a separate All-India United Kisan Sabha whose fundamental demand was ‘the nationalisation of land and waterways and all sources of energy and wealth ... such nationalisation must also result in a planned system embracing not only agriculture and the land but also industries and social services’. And as for the immediate demand, the newly formed organisation put it as ‘acquisition of land ... from those who possess vast domains (and)

distributing them on reasonable basis among landless labourers or holders of very small plots’.

From class collaboration to class struggle, from the limited objective of extracting certain concessions from the zamindars to the demand of abolition of zamindari without any payment of compensation, Sahajanand had really traversed a long way. The one-time champion of the interests of middle peasants and well-to-do tenants finally came to pin all his hopes on the rural proletariat:

The rural proletariat ... is becoming aware of its rights, duties and responsibilities—When it becomes fully aware, there will be the final dance of destruction and then the present iniquitous agrarian system will start crumbling.

After Sahajanand’s death, his close associate Karyanand Sharma sought to carry on the

movement. Sharma had led the famous Barahiya Bakash struggle of 1937-39 and disillusioned with the Congress, he later joined the CPI. It was under his leadership that the CPI waged some important agrarian struggles in the 50s, the most notable among them being the Sathi Farms struggle in Champaran. Attempts were also made to develop separate agricultural labourers’ struggle on wage demands as well as struggles on the question of the bataidars’ rights and also on issues of homestead tenancy, famine relief measures, taqavi loans, canal rent in canal-irrigated areas, sugarcane prices etc. Till his death in 1960, Karyanand was a front ranking CPI leader in Bihar and also the leader of the party’s legislative wing. During his last years, he came to lay increasing stress on organising the agricultural labourers and poor peasants, particularly on building the Khet Mazdoor Sabha. □

How Bihar’s Peasants Chose to Honour Sahajanand

Kisan Mahapanchayat and Kisan Marches on Swami Sahajananda Saraswati Anniversary in Bihar

On the birth anniversary of great farmers’ leader Swami Sahajananda Saraswati who led the movement

against British Company Raj and the zamindari system, a kisan march was organized in Patna on 11 March under the banners of CPIML and All India Kisan Mahasabha.

The march culminated in a meeting



at Swami Sahajananda Park where tributes were paid to him and a pledge was taken to carry forward his legacy. The march reverberated with slogans for repeal of the three farm laws, legal status for MSP, reinstatement of APMC Act in Bihar and inclusion of small farmers and sharecroppers in PM Kisan Samman Yojana.

Addressing the Mahapanchayat, Dipankar Bhattacharya said that Swami Sahajananda's journey started with fighting the Brahmin community to achieve social status for Bhumihars, but he soon realized that the range of social oppression was much bigger and dalits and backward castes were much more oppressed. He saw the misery of farmers and recognized that the zamindars were not the real farmers. He organized the Bihar Pradesh Kisan Sabha in 1929. The movement he led soon became a national movement and he was elected the first National President of the All India Kisan Sabha in 1936.

Sahajanand declared the fight for freedom from British rule for India and from zamindari for farmers would be fought simultaneously. His ideology was the Left ideology and he said that the red flag was the most reliable flag for achieving freedom. Today also the red flag is at centre stage in the ongoing farmers' movement at the Delhi borders.

Sahajananda worked for the Left Coordination Committee but soon after Independence he passed away in 1950 and left the country bereft of a great leader.

The farmers' movement in the 1970s took its inspiration from Sahajananda. When IPF won in many constituencies in the 1989 elections in Bihar, people felt that Sahajananda's legacy had come

back to life. Today also we are committed to carrying forward his great legacy. He cannot be constrained within caste boundaries and will be remembered as one of history's greatest farmer leaders.

The Modi government forced through farm laws during the Lockdown, against which the ongoing farmers' movement has completed 100 days. Modi Ji says some people are 'Andolanjis'; yes, we are proud to be Andolanjis who fight for just rights, unlike the people who were informers during the freedom struggle and who kowtow to Adani-Ambani today.

He appealed to the Mahapanchayat to ensure a huge participation of the poor of Bihar in the nationwide farmers' struggle.

At the conclusion of the Mahapanchayat a resolution was passed to appeal for the resounding success of the Vidhan Sabha march on 18 March and Bharat Bandh on 26 March.

7 Kisan Yatras were flagged off from Bihta which travelled to 35 Districts of Bihar between 11 and 15 March. During the yatras they organized more than 300 big and small street meetings, public meetings and village farmers' meetings, and also invited farmers and workers to participate in the Mahapanchayat. The yatras covered about 5000 kms in Bihar and spoke directly about the farm laws to about one lakh farmers in 2000 villages.

Various demands of farmers came to light during the yatras in which they want immediate intervention. Some of these demands are: repairing the Son canal system in Shahbad and Magadh region; provision for water to reach the lower banks of canals; completion of the long-awaited Indrapuri Reservoir project. Maize producing farmers in Eastern

Bihar were deeply concerned about maize not being procured at MSP and food grains being used to manufacture ethanol. Farmers in Seemanchal-Mithilanchal want a permanent solution to the recurring flood problem. Sugarcane farmers in Champaran raised the issue of payment of arrears which are due to them in lakhs of rupees. The demand for restarting sugar mills was also forcefully voiced. Farmers expressed grave worries about the 3 farm laws and criticized the Modi government for its stubborn attitude.

Landless farmers and sharecroppers also participated in the kisan yatras and expressed their worry that if the government stops procuring food grains how will the PDS system continue to function? How will the poor get rations? They understood perfectly well that ending the mandi system will affect not just farmers but also the poor.

Kisan-Mazdoor Mahapanchayat in Patna

Thousands of farmers and workers participated in the Kisan-Mazdoor Mahapanchayat organized at Gate Public Library in Patna on 18 March 2021 under the joint banners of CPIML, AIKM and AIARLA to demand repeal of the three farm laws, resolution against them to be passed in the Bihar Assembly, legal status for MSP, reinstatement of APMC Act, inclusion of landless and sharecropping farmers in PM Kisan Samman Yojana and other demands.

Main speaker at the Mahapanchayat CPIML General Secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya said that the Bihar government has perpetrated the worst betrayal against the farmers of Bihar by ending the APMC Act in 2006 and pushing farmers into a vicious cycle of misery. The issue of MSP is an issue not just for

big farmers but for small farmers also who are suffering for lack of procurement at MSP. The farmers of Bihar get the lowest price for their crops.

Comrade Dipankar said that this Mahapanchayat has shown that the farmers of Bihar today stand firmly with the ongoing farmers' movement. The attempts of BJP to pit the farmers of Punjab against the farmers of Bihar have failed. He appealed to farmers and workers to make the bandh called on 26 March by the Sanyukt Kisan Morcha a historic success.

Comrade Dipankar said that the farmers' issue will be the main issue in the forthcoming elections in various States. He appealed to people to vote against BJP and defeat them.

Farm leader Gurnam Singh Bhakhi from Punjab Kisan Union who came to attend the Mahapanchayat from Tikri Border in Delhi, said that farmers have been firmly camping on the Delhi borders despite all obstructions and oppression by the government. This fight against the three laws is a fight for the food security of the entire country. It is a matter of life and death for common people across the country.

Navkiran Natt the editor of the popular news bulletin being published from the protest sites in Delhi, Trolley Times, and youth leader also addressed the Mahapanchayat where she said that women are participating in the farmers' movement as farmers in their own right. Women account for 50% of farming work but their ownership of land is only 2%. This fight belongs to each and every citizen, as it is a fight for the right to food. She expressed the hope that a tranche of farmers from Bihar would soon join the farmers sitting on the

Delhi borders.

The Mahapanchayat was also addressed by RJD leader and former Bihar Speaker Uday Narayan Chaudhury, renowned litterateur Prem Kumar Mani, CPM leader Ganesh Shankar Singh, Kisan Sabha-Ajay Bhavan leader Ashok Kumar, former MLA Manju Prakash, CPIML MLAs Satyadev Ram, Virendra Prasad Gupta, Sudama Prasad and others. The proceedings were conducted by AIKM General Secretary Rajaram Singh and a vote of thanks was proposed by farmer leader KD Yadav. Present on the dais were senior leader Swadesh Bhattacharya, State Secretary Kunal, AIARLA General Secretary Dhirendra Jha, AIPWA General Secretary Meena Tiwari, Shashi Yadav, Vishveshwar Prasad Yadav, Ramadhar Singh, leader of CPIML legislative party Mahboob Alam, MLAs Sandeep Saurabh, Manoj Manzil and Mahanand Singh.

The Mahapanchayat paid tributes to Swami Sahajananda Saraswati, leader of the historic farmers' struggles in Bihar and all martyrs of the ongoing farmers' movement. Cultural team Hirawal presented a song in honour of the martyrs.

All Mahagathbandhan parties of Bihar and many intellectuals associated with the farmers' movement were invited to participate in this Mahapanchayat.

Thousands of farmers and farm workers attended it with a strong resolve to further intensify the movement in Bihar.

Resolutions passed at the Farmer-Worker Mahapanchayat

1. The three anti-farmer anti-national farm laws passed by the Modi government will not only enslave our agriculture to corporate companies, but will also end food security, PDS, and nutrition

schemes. The worst affected will be the poor and the working class. Thousands of farmers and workers who have come from all corners of Bihar to attend this Mahapanchayat in Patna demand the repeal of these anti-farm laws and a resolution to be passed against them in the Bihar Assembly.

2. The ongoing farmers' movement has entered its fourth month despite cruel attacks and defamatory conspiracies by the Modi government. The government wants to prevent any unity between farmers and non-agricultural citizens. In order to isolate the farmers' movement the government is violating constitutional provisions and laws to repress citizens who come out in support of farmers. This Mahapanchayat strongly criticizes this tyrannical behaviour by the Modi government and appeals to all sections of society to unite and lend active support to the farmers' movement. We demand the release of all persons who are jailed for supporting the farmers' movement and all other movements for justice and rights.

3. This Mahapanchayat fully supports the Bharat Bandh called on 26 March 2021 by the Sanyukt Kisan Morcha and calls for making it a historic bandh. The farmers' movement that started in Shaheed Bhagat Singh's Punjab is finding fresh momentum and extension in Bihar, the land of kisan leaders like Swami Sahajananda Saraswati and Ramnaresh Ram.

4. Immediately on coming to power in 2006 the Nitish government ended the APMC Act, snatched away government Mandis from farmers and handed them over to the market. If ending government Mandis were indeed to be beneficial for farmers, the condition of farmers in Bihar should be the best in the

country. But the reality is exactly the opposite. Nowhere in Bihar does the farmer get MSP. Farmers here are forced to sell their paddy at Rs 900-1000 per quintal to middlemen and traders. The dire condition of agriculture results in continuous migration from the State. Gradually Vyapar Mandal, FCI, SFC and other institutions have been made weak and inactive. This Mahapanchayat demands legal status for MSP, renewal of Agriculture Market Committees and reinstatement of AFMC Act.

5. With a view to dividing the farmers' movement the Modi government is trying to protect itself as the well-wisher of landless and sharecropping farmers. But everyone knows that BJP is the biggest enemy of this section of farmers. Landless and sharecropping farmers are excluded from the benefits of PM Kisan Samman Yojana. The BJP-JDU government in Bihar has already refused to give minimum legal rights to sharecroppers. This Mahapanchayat demands inclusion of landless and sharecropping farmers in PM Kisan Samman Yojana and commencement of registration

process for sharecroppers.

6. Along with Railways, aviation, insurance and agriculture the government is now playing with privatization of public banks. Privatization is a huge attack on our job opportunities and social security. Banks have played an important role in the country's economic development and by privatizing public banks farmers, students, youth and the poor will be deprived of loans and they will become slaves to private owners. This Mahapanchayat demands ending of this privatization process and strengthening public institutions.

7. This Mahapanchayat supports the demand for jobs with dignity for youth, end of contract and outsourcing for ASHA-Anganwadi-Rasooya-teachers and all scheme workers and supports their movement for permanent jobs, demands repeal of anti-worker amendments to labour laws, and appeals to all forces of struggle to come together and build a strong unity.

8. The continuing deaths due to starvation are extremely worrisome. 5 persons from one

family in Supoul committed suicide due to financial straits. Despite being 103rd out of 117 countries in the Global Hunger Index, the Modi government's manufacture of non-food substances like ethanol from food grains is nothing but a conspiracy to kill the people who are battling hunger. This Mahapanchayat demands that the Bihar government should not implement such anti-poor hunger-enhancing policies in Bihar.

9. This Mahapanchayat strongly opposes the Bihar government's conspiracies to curb social media, issue a diktat denying government jobs and contracts to persons who participate in protests, and crush the basic right to protest across Bihar including capital Patna.

10. The real liquor mafia is sitting right inside the lap of the government, but it is the poor who are being sentenced to death through the draconian prohibition law. This Mahapanchayat demands the removal of liquor trade tainted Minister Ramsurat Rai and immediate release of the lakhs of innocent poor thrown into jail in the name of the Prohibition Act. □



Solidarity with the people of Haiti

in their struggle for democracy, justice, and reparations

Haiti is once again going through a profound crisis. Central to this is the struggle against the dictatorship imposed by former president Jovenel Moïse. Since last year Mr. Moïse, after decreeing the dismissal of Parliament, has been ruling through decrees, permanently violating Haiti's constitution. He has refused to leave power after his mandate ended on February 7, 2021, claiming that it ends on February 7 of next year, without any legal basis. This disregard of the constitution is taking place despite multiple statements by the country's main judicial bodies, such as the CSPJ (Superior Council of Judicial Power) and the Association of Haitian Lawyers. Numerous religious groups and numerous institutions that are representative of society have also spoken. At this time, there is a strike by the judiciary, which leaves the country without any public body of political power.

At the same time, this institutional crisis is framed in the insecurity that affects practically all sectors of Haitian society. An insecurity expressed through savage repressions of popular mobilizations by the PNH (Haitian National Police), which at the service of the executive power. They have attacked journalists and committed various massacres in poor neighborhoods. Throughout the country, there have been assassinations and arbitrary arrests of opponents. Most recently, a judge of the High Court was detained under the pretext of promoting an alleged plot against the security of the State and to assassinate the president leading to the illegal and arbitrary revocation of three judges of this Court. This last period has also seen the creation of hundreds of armed groups that spread terror over the entire country and that respond to power, transforming kidnapping into a fairly prosperous industry for these criminals.

The 13 years of military occupation by United Nations troops through MINUSTAH and the operations of prolongation of guardianship through MINUJUSTH and BINUH have aggravated the Haitian crisis. They supported retrograde and undemocratic sectors who, along with gangsters, committed serious crimes against the Haitian people and their fundamental rights. For this, the people of Haiti deserve a process of justice and reparations. They have paid dearly for the intervention of MINUSTAH: 30 THOUSAND DEAD from cholera transmitted by the soldiers, thousands of women raped,



who now raise orphaned children. Nothing has changed in 13 years, more social inequality, poverty, more difficulties for the people. The absence of democracy stays the same.

The poor's living conditions have worsened dramatically as a result of more than 30 years of neoliberal policies imposed by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), a severe exchange rate crisis, the freezing of the minimum wage, and inflation above 20% during the last three years.

It should be emphasized that, despite this dramatic situation, the Haitian people remain firm and are constantly mobilizing to prevent the consolidation of a dictatorship by demanding the immediate leave of office by former President Jovenel Moïse.

Taking into account the importance of this struggle and that this dictatorial regime still has the support of imperialist governments such as the United States of America, Canada, France, and international organizations such as the UN, the OAS, and the EU, the IPA calls its members to contribute their full and active solidarity to the struggle of the Haitian people, and to sign this Petition that demands the end of the dictatorship as well as respect for the sovereignty and self-determination of the Haitian people, the establishment of a transition government led by Haitians to launch a process of authentic national reconstruction.

In addition to expressing our solidarity with the Haitian people's resistance, we call for our organizations to demonstrate in front of the embassies of the imperialist countries and before the United Nations.

Only the Haitian people can decide their future. Down with Moïse and yes to a people's transition government, until a constituent is democratically elected.

(The above statement was issued by International Peoples' Assembly on February 23, 2021 and was endorsed by CPIML Liberation) □

Obituaries

Nawal El Saadawi

Veteran Egyptian socialist-feminist Nawal El Saadawi passed away at the age of 89 on 21 March, 2021. A prolific writer (author of 56 books) and doctor, Saadawi spiritedly challenged patriarchy, fundamentalism and capitalism, all of which she firmly regarded as part of one system.

When she published her pioneering book *Women and Sex* in 1972, she was dismissed from her post as a doctor and member of the Ministry of Health for the Egyptian Government. At the age of 80 she had participated in the Arab Spring, which brought down the Hosni Mubarak dictatorship.

Speaking after the revolution was hijacked by a new, fundamentalist regime, she reiterated her core beliefs:

We live in one world--a capitalist, patriarchal one. We don't have peace because we don't have justice, equality between countries, sexes, and classes.

I have fought for feminist issues, including fighting against female genital mutilation (FGM). FGM increased under President Anwar Sadat [1970-81], as did veiling. Today, 97% of Egyptian women have undergone FGM. I lost my job in the Health Ministry because of what I wrote and said about FGM and President George Bush.

My books were banned and my character assassinated as a result the political stances I took. I was called pro-U.S., although all my books link colonialism and feminism. If you work with the working class, you are called a communist by the ruling class. I was arrested for "crimes against the state" and sent to prison in 1980. When I got out, my life was in constant danger from religious fundamentalists.

The legal women's NGOs were those women's organizations that worked with Mubarak. The Egyptian Women's Union, by contrast, was banned three times, under Pres. Mubarak and Pres. Sadat before him. Now we have re-established the Egyptian Women's Union and the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, which had also been banned. When I'm in the U.S., I'm always asked about religious fundamentalism, but when I connect it to neo-colonialism, then what I say is censored. I am told to leave it out of my talks, and in a recent TV interview by Christiane Amanpour, what I said about neo-colonialism was cut out. But the two things are opposite sides of the same coin. Why is there this revival of fundamentalism in the 21st century? Because religion survives and flourishes under repression. Islam, Judaism, and Christianity are similar in treating women as inferior, in fearing outsiders, and in their racism and classism. In spite of religion's defects, however, I believe in protecting religious freedom.

Liberation honours Nawal El Saadawi's legacy is a precious resource for people's movements all over the world, and especially inspiring for us in India as we fight against capitalism, patriarchy and Hindu supremacist politics today.

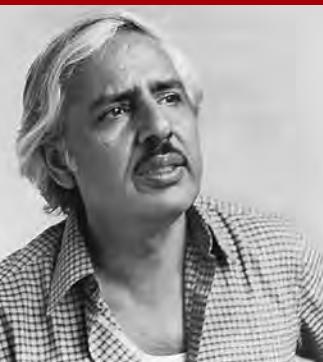
Sagar Sarhadi

Veteran writer-director Sagar Sarhadi passed away at his Mumbai residence on March 22. He was 88.

Born as Ganga Sagar Talwar, he wrote under the pen name of Sagar Sarhadi. Associated with the IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association), he began his work in theatre, introducing new talents like Farooque Shaikh and Shabana Azmi.

He is known for making the iconic and courageous film *Bazaar*, about the sale of brides to affluent men in the Gulf. He wrote and co-wrote the scripts for many films which were as popular as they were powerful and memorable, including '*Noorie*', '*Kabhi Kabhie*', '*Silsila*', '*Chandni*'.

Respectful tribute to Sagar Sarhadi's memory.



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