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# Liberation

CENTRAL ORGAN OF CPI(ML)

# GAZA



# Villagers in Jharkhand Stand Firm Against Adani's Gondalpara Coal Mining Project

**F**ive villages in the Barkagaon block of Hazaribagh, Jharkhand - Gondalpara, Gali, Balodar, Hahe, and Phulang - have steadfastly refused to give their land to Adani Enterprises. This company was controversially allotted the Gondalpara coal block in March 2021 by the Modi government. This block was among 214 coal blocks whose previous allotments were canceled by a landmark Supreme Court order in 2014, citing irregularities. Earlier, since 2004, the block was under the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC). Despite two decades of consistent resistance from the villagers, the coal block was handed over to Adani Enterprises.

The gram sabhas of these five villages have unanimously passed statutory resolutions rejecting the proposed land acquisition. However, the administration dismissed these resolutions as mere "protests," while Adani Enterprises escalated the conflict by filing 21 criminal cases against the protesting villagers. A total of 331 men and women have been implicated in these cases simply for asserting their legal right to refuse land acquisition. The villagers have participated in all general body meetings and public hearings on the matter, consistently rejecting the proposals both in writing and verbally. They have categorically stated that they are content with their current livelihoods and will not sacrifice their only source of sustenance for the sake of coal mining.

Since April 12, 2023, the villagers have been staging a continuous sit-in protest in Gondalpara, which reached its 641st day on January 21, 2025. The protestors remain resolute, determined to protect their lands, livelihoods, and environment from the devastating effects of the project.

Under the proposed plan, Adani Enterprises would acquire 1,268.08 acres of land for coal mining. Of this, 551.59 acres belong to the farmers and villagers of Gondalpara, Gali, and Balodar, 542.75 acres are forest land, and 173.74 acres are classified as gair-majarua (public and private lands). These villages are located near or along the banks of the Badmahi (also called Badki) river, a critical water source for the region. The lands are highly fertile and irrigated, yielding multiple crops annually. The area is particularly renowned for its high-quality jaggery produced from sugarcane and its abundant rice production, with

thousands of tonnes procured every season through Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS).

The project threatens to destroy 960 acres of highly productive, irrigated farmland, which would result in an environmental catastrophe. The dense forests surrounding the area, once classified as "No-Go Zones" until 2014 due to their ecological importance, are home to rare medicinal plants and valuable timber species. These forests not only sustain the livelihoods of thousands of families who collect forest produce but also serve as a critical habitat for wildlife. Additionally, the Badmahi river, a major tributary of the Damodar River system, originates here. The river sustains dozens of villages beyond the proposed mining zone, and its destruction could severely impact the region's rainfall patterns and groundwater table, turning the fertile land into a barren wasteland.

The area also forms a crucial part of the Elephant Corridor project, which would be jeopardized by the mining operations. Villagers and environmentalists warn that no amount of monetary compensation can offset the devastating impact on human and wildlife populations, as well as the irreparable environmental damage. Alarmingly, noise pollution caused by preliminary activities for the project has already begun to disturb local wildlife.

Baleshwar Kumar Yadav and Devnath Mahto, residents of the affected villages, expressed their frustration, pointing out that the coal block was initially reserved for a public-sector enterprise. "Now, it has been handed over to Adani's private company, where only the corporation will enjoy profits, while local people will bear the brunt of the losses and devastation," they said.

In a significant move, all the landowners of the five villages submitted a written declaration at the Deputy Commissioner's office on July 19, 2024, firmly stating their refusal to sell or give up their land under any circumstances. They have demanded that the Ministry of Coal and the Prime Minister's Office immediately cancel the allotment of the Gondalpara coal block to Adani Enterprises.

The villagers' resistance is not just about land - it is a fight to protect their heritage, environment, and future generations. Their struggle exemplifies the larger battle against corporate exploitation, environmental degradation, and the erosion of local livelihoods in India. ■



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### Editor-in-chief

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Arindam Sen

### Editorial Board

V. Shankar

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Ajit Patil

Clifton D' Rozario

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Akash Bhattacharya

### Editors' e-mail:

liberation@cpiml.org

**Design:** V Arun Kumar

**Manager:** Prabhat Kumar

Phone: 704287713

Website: liberation.org.in

E-mail: manager.liberation@gmail.com

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# The Sinister RSS Narrative of India's 'True Independence'

**M**ohan Bhagwat's statement describing the state-sponsored consecration of a Ram temple in the place of the demolished Babri Masjid as the defining moment of India's 'true independence' once again reminds us that the RSS view of nationalism and independence remains absolutely antithetical to the actual history and aspiration of India's freedom movement. Given the history and ideology of the RSS, such a statement by the chief of the organisation is perhaps only to be expected. But now that the RSS enjoys an unprecedented grip on political power through the Modi government, the routine ideological stance of the RSS on the eve of the 75th anniversary of the constitutional proclamation of the foundation of the Republic of India amounts to a veritable declaration of war on the legacy of the freedom movement and the secular democratic character of the Constitution of India.

The RSS was founded in 1925 at a time when India was witnessing spirited national awakening and assertion for complete freedom from colonial subjugation. There were of course debates and differences among diverse streams of the freedom movement over forms of struggle and mobilisation and the character of the post-colonial social and political order. Bhagat Singh and his comrades, the founding generation of Indian communists, had the vision of a socialist India; the communist-led peasant movement unfurled the banner of complete abolition of landlordism; Ambedkar gave a clarion call for annihilation of caste, while Subhas Bose and Nehru advocated a planned economy. But the only ideological trend that collaborated with British colonialism and facilitated its 'divide and rule' strategy by preaching and practising communal politics was the Hindu Mahasabha and RSS combine, with the Muslim League subsequently following suit. Patriotic democratic Indians drew inspiration from anti-colonial revolts and revolutions in different parts of the world, but the ideological impetus and organisational model of the RSS came from Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany.

A real national awakening in colonial India demanded not just a firm anti-colonial urge for national liberation, it also demanded a strong humanist bond of social solidarity transcending the boundaries of religion and rejecting the anti-national obstacles bred by Brahmanism - the caste-based hierarchical system of graded inequality that excluded and marginalised the bahujan

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*After seventy-seven years of independence won through decades of heroic struggles and supreme sacrifices by countless freedom-fighters, glorious Adivasi revolts, militant peasant struggles, working class battles and popular upsurges, the RSS now tells us that real independence has only been established with the construction of another Ram temple in Ayodhya.*

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majority and the fetters of patriarchy that treated women as inferior beings to be kept away from education and public life and confined to the domestic domain as child-producing machines and household labour. The RSS not only failed the anti-colonial test of nationalism, it was also deeply wedded to this Brahmanical order. No wonder while Ambedkar's journey towards a constitutional code for modern India began with a bold and emphatic denunciation of Manusmriti, the Brahmanical-patriarchal code of social slavery, the RSS embraced the Manusmriti and rejected the Constitution drafted under the stewardship of Ambedkar as a foreign-inspired document with nothing 'Bharatiya about it'.

In spite of the trauma of Partition and its massive toll of death, destruction and displacement, the RSS-Mahasabha combine could not dampen the secular democratic egalitarian ethos of the freedom movement. Instead, the RSS got isolated and hugely discredited after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, and it had to declare its allegiance to the Constitution and the Tricolour national flag to negotiate an exit from the ban imposed by Sardar Patel in the wake of Gandhi's assassination. The first general election held in 1952 became a veritable referendum on the political-economic direction of independent India and the RSS-backed Jan Sangh and two other Hindutva-based organisations, the Hindu Mahasabha and Akhil Bharatiya Ram Rajya Parishad could win only ten seats in all in a house of 489 elected members of parliament.

Seven decades later, the 2024 Lok Sabha elections once again showed that the Indian people have started sensing the growing danger to the Constitution. Rattled by the signs of popular resistance to the Sangh-BJP project of transforming

secular democratic India into a communal fascist order, the Sangh-BJP establishment therefore seeks to devalue and discredit the freedom movement itself and create a counter narrative to redefine Indian nationalism on a Hindu supremacist basis. Amit Shah's disparaging remarks on Ambedkar and Mohan Bhagwat's discovery of India's so-called true independence should be seen as a package, a simultaneous two-pronged attack on the history of the freedom movement and the constitutional vision and foundation that emerged from it. The Supreme Court's decision in favour of construction of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya was intended as a conciliatory mechanism to resolve the Ayodhya dispute, while disallowing any similar claims made against other mosques once and for all. But the Sangh-BJP brigade now seeks to capitalise on the concession granted by the Supreme Court to reverse the 1991 Protection of Places of Religious Worship Act and redefine the very history and meaning of India's independence.

Bhagwat is aware of the growing economic crisis engulfing the lives of the common people. He therefore presents the Ram Mandir not just as a marker of India's 'true independence' but also as the solution to India's economic woes, claiming that the road to improved livelihood passes through the temple. And he seeks to buttress his thesis of economic development on the basis of spiritual revival and cultural nationalism by invoking Israel as a role model! In sheer geographical terms, there can be no comparison between a country like Israel with a population size of less than ten million and India which is now the world's most populous country with an estimated population of more than 1.4 billion. But the real absurdity lies in history - Israel's

so-called prosperity is driven by its settler colonial control over Palestine and the unhindered backing of the US. Can there be a bigger mockery of India's own historical plight as a colony and the protracted anti-colonial struggle for national liberation and the continuing current reality of imperialist domination than this shocking comparison with the world's biggest contemporary perpetrator of colonial plunder and genocidal violence?

After seventy-seven years of independence won through decades of heroic struggles and supreme sacrifices by countless freedom-fighters, glorious Adivasi revolts, militant peasant struggles, working class battles and popular upsurges, the RSS now tells us that real independence has only been established with the construction of another Ram temple in Ayodhya. On the seventy-fifth anniversary of the adoption of India's Constitution we are told by the Home Minister that invoking the name and ideals of the chief architect of the Constitution has become a 'fashion'. Even as the Supreme Court rejects the plea to drop the words secular and socialist from the Preamble of the Constitution and reiterates the welfare state objective, the government is bent upon imposing corporate takeover of agriculture, and subjugating the working class with punitive labour codes amidst a growing corporate clamour for 90-hour work weeks. Our predecessors had won freedom and given us our Constitution by rejecting the fascist ideology of the RSS. Today when the RSS has entrenched itself in state power to wage a war on the history of that freedom movement and reverse all the gains made in the course of that glorious national awakening, we the people of India must summon all our strength to foil this conspiracy. ■

# Turn 2025 into a Year of Bigger Victories over the Fascist Offensive

▲ DIPANKAR BHATTACHARYA

2024 became a year of change of the guard for several countries, even as the genocide of Palestinians by Israel continued unabated in Gaza. In our region, Sri Lanka ushered in a left-leaning regime for the first time in the island's history. A popular upheaval in Bangladesh compelled former PM Sheikh Hasina to flee the country and seek refuge in India, but the prospect of restoration of democracy remains rather uncertain in the face of the consolidation of reactionary Jamaat-aligned forces. Syria too witnessed the long-awaited fall of the highly unpopular and dictatorial Assad regime, but the country now finds itself at the receiving end of a US-backed Israeli offensive. France managed to stave off the immediate danger of a far-right victory, but the United States could not escape the trajectory of a Trump comeback.

For India, however, 2024 did not deliver the change that millions of Indians had long been awaiting. Even as the BJP lost its independent majority, it managed to retain power as a coalition. And subsequently, making a complete mockery of established standards of electoral transparency and institutional impartiality and accountability of the Election Commission, it went on to retain power in Haryana and sweep the polls in Maharashtra in a highly unequal and dubious electoral battle. The aftermath of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections has now made it abundantly clear that India cannot expect an easy electoral exit from the fascist stranglehold. Nothing short of a defiant democratic upsurge

of 'we the people of India' whose forefathers adopted the Constitution on 26 November 1949 can free the republic from the clutches of the fascists.

The experience of a decade of the Modi government has also shown us enough signs of the potential of such an upsurge. The economy remains the weakest point of the Modi government's track record and the popular mood, which had somewhat welcomed the advent of the liberalisation-privatisation-globalisation package in the early 1990s, has clearly started turning against the crony capitalist order of loot and plunder. Indiscriminate transfer of natural resources and economic infrastructure to a few chosen corporate houses has only meant massive unemployment, chronic deprivation, escalating cost of living and a veritable crisis of livelihood for millions of Indians. The stubborn defence of the Adani group by the government in the face of growing charges of corruption shows the regime's extreme dependence on corporate backing. The farmers' movement has already given us a glimpse of the potential of popular resistance against corporate takeover.

The quest for social equality and gender justice is another plank that has been periodically galvanising large sections of Indian people into determined resistance, most recently in the surge of popular outrage against the brutal rape and murder of a post-graduate trainee doctor in Kolkata's RG Kar Medical College and Hospital. The patriarchal

and misogynistic backlash under the Modi regime, from violent so-called moral policing of young women to the protection and even felicitation of rapists (particularly of Dalit and Muslim women) to the celebration of feudal-patriarchal khap panchayats as indigenous democratic institutions, has also not gone unchallenged. Amit Shah's contemptuous remarks about Ambedkar on the floor of Rajya Sabha and the popular outpouring of anger against this insult to India's most powerful anti-caste icon has also been a pointer to the deep fascist discomfort and vulnerability on the question of social justice and equality.

The most powerful weapon in the hands of the Indian people is of course the inspiring legacy of India's anti-colonial freedom movement and the Constitution emerging from the vision of the freedom movement that proclaimed India as a secular socialist sovereign democratic republic. Against the relentless fascist weaponisation of communal hate, Brahmanical supremacy, and patriarchy, the dreams of the freedom movement and the vision of modern India enshrined in the Constitution remain a most potent platform of a renewed quest for a robust democracy in an egalitarian social order. In 2025 as both communists and fascists observe the centenary of their respective movements on Indian soil, let every Indian communist rise to the occasion and turn 2025 into a year of bigger victories over the fascist disaster. ■

# Anatomy of a Murder: The Continuing Serfdom of the Yerava Community in Kodagu

▲ CLIFTON D'ROZARIO

**O**n the cold winter night of 29th December 2024, Paniyeravara Ponnanna, a young man in his very early 20s, was buried in a weed-infested, ill-maintained Hindu cemetery at Hathur village, between the towns of Gonikoppa and Virajpet in Kodagu district. Ponnanna was not a native of Hathur village. In reality, like the majority of Yeravas, a subjugated and exploited Adivasi community, he really had no home village to be taken back to. Hathur became his final resting place since it houses one of the few cemeteries where people from this tribal community can be buried.

## The murder of Paniyeravara Ponnanna

On the evening of 27th December 2024, the serene tranquillity of village Chembbellur village was broken by the bullets killing Ponnanna, fired from a double-barrelled gun by Porukonda Chinnappa, belonging to the dominant Kodava community.

Chembbellur is picturesque village in Virajpet taluk, Kodagu district, with sprawling coffee plantations owned mostly by Kodava planters, including that of Porukonda Bansi Poonaccha, where Ponnanna and his young wife, Geeta, worked as plantation labour. They lived in the “line houses” on the coffee plantation, much like thousands of other Yeravas spread over the countless plantations in Kodagu. Incidentally, Geetha’s mother and sister live and work in the nearby

Kakamad coffee estate while Ponnanna’s parents, Thimma and Summi and, live and work in another nearby coffee plantation, Moornad, along with his younger brother, Poovanna.

On that tragic day, Ponanna and Geetha, after work, decided to pluck jackfruit for dinner that night. Ponnanna was atop the jackfruit tree, when their employer’s uncle, Porukonda Chinnappa, approached them with his double barrel shotgun and dog, and hurled casteist abuses at them, saying “Hey Ponnu, you Yerava bastard, you come to my farm and pluck jackfruits; I am going to kill you” and shot him. Ponnanna screamed in pain and fell to the ground from a height of about 20 feet. Even as he was writhing with pain on the ground, Geetha tearfully questioned Chinnappa as to what he had done. Chinnappa just turned his back and walked back to his house without glancing back even once. Geetha called her employer. Together they took Ponnanna to the hospital in the employer’s car, but in vain. Ponnanna was dead.

The Virajpet police has registered Cr. No. 133/2024 for offences punishable under sections 103(1) of BNS, 2023, section 3(2) (v) of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 and sections 3 and 25 of the Arms Act, 1959.

Why did Chinnappa shoot Ponnanna dead? Was it really about a jackfruit? Ponnanna’s wife and parents said that perhaps only Chinnappa can answer this. Same was

the reply of the plantation owners, who also debunked the rumour doing the rounds that Chinnappa shot Ponnanna because he may have thought that Ponnanna was trying to steal. They said that sacks of coffee lying all around the coffee estate unwatched, were untouched. The real reason became apparent when people described Chinnappa in detail. A pensioned retired army personnel, Chinnappa was employed in the SBI bank in Virajpet as an armed guardsman, and had a history of abusive behaviour towards Yerava plantation workers in general. Not so long ago, Chinnappa had roughed up Yerava plantation workers, but was bailed out by his influential friends. Geetha herself said that previously Chinnappa had set his dogs on Ponnanna and her without any provocation. The reason for such unprovoked aggression towards Yerava workers by Chinnappa and others, was explained by Savita, a young Yerava plantation worker, who is a proud owner of a two-wheeler (the first in her entire family). She says, “We are good people as long as we slog. Some of the planters will even treat us well occasionally, but most have contempt for us. That’s the reality. Some of them are so irritated that we are buying bikes, organising ourselves and demanding for houses. They feel like any progress for us will disturb their balance. They are used to looking down on us. They look at us like we are worms.”

Devasted by the loss of Ponnanna, his family are unanimous

that this crime cannot go unpunished. Chinnappa must receive the strictest possible punishment, and the discrimination and oppression of the Yeravas must end.

### **Social reality of Yeravas**

This gruesome murder reflects the oppressed daily lives of the Yerava community, and provides a glimpse into their social reality.

Kodagu is home to many tribal communities with diverse ethnic origins, besides the Yerava, including Kudiya, Jenu Kuruba, Kadu Kuruba, Betta Kuruba and Soliga communities. Inarguably the most vulnerable Adivasi, and most backward community in the district, Yeravas are denied dignity and deprived of basic rights, including education, health services, employment and social security. Owing to the subordinated position accorded to Yeravas in the social ladder, they face daily insults and indignations. By all accounts there are some “good” planters, but the fact remains that the dominant sections of Kodagu, as a whole, tolerates and perpetuates these oppressive social relations that strips Yeravas of their dignity. The persistence of the feudal social relations is in no uncertain terms attributable to a collective silence, even denial, of the social reality of Yeravas.

Primarily agricultural labourers, most spend their entire lives working on the coffee plantations where they are housed in ‘line houses’. The only mobility they enjoy is from one plantation to another exchanging one ‘line house’ for another. A most basic for a human being, a native to call your own, is alien for most Yeravas, who are born and die in the ‘line houses’ in the coffee plantations. Constitutional promises remain a mirage; government schemes are of no avail to them.

In the plantations, their documents such as ration cards, Aadhar cards, voter identity cards, etc. are taken into the custody of the planters, getting which back is almost impossible even when they decide to move to another plantation. This also restricts access the PDS system or other government schemes.

With illusory access to formal banking systems, Yeravas borrow from their employers in times of need. In some instances, they are completely at the mercy of unscrupulous planters who unilaterally increase the interest rates. It is also debatable whether this is really a debt in the true sense of the word, because of the wage theft arising out of low wages coupled usurious interest rates. The bottom line though is that majority of the Yerava plantation workers are trapped in a vicious debt bondage, where the clearing of the so-called debt is almost an impossibility. Yerava plantation workers, trapped in such debt slavery, when desirous of moving to another plantation for work, are dependent on the prospective employer buying off this debt from the previous planter.

It is unsurprising to find chits of paper on Yeravas carrying the name of the plantation owner and their contact details along with the so-called debt that is allegedly due to them, to be handed over to their prospective employers, who in turn would directly negotiate with the previous employer, clear the debt and take the Yerava plantation workers into employment on their coffee estates. Ofcourse, the Yerava plantation workers have no idea of the nature of these conversations or the amounts exchanging hands; all they will be informed is that the debt stands transferred to the new employer and they have to work till it is repaid or taken over by a subsequent employer.

Many Yeravas have interesting anecdotes about their own names. Geetha for instance was named Nivedita at birth but entered as Geetha in the school records by the owner of the plantation that her parents then worked on. She is presently called Sita by the plantation owners, since Geetha is also the name of one of the plantation owner’s family members. Kaddhi, a young Yerava, was named as such by the plantation owner at birth, as was Bulka. Ponnanna was never called by his name, even by the man who murdered him; they preferred to call him Ponnu since Ponnanna is a name that Kodavas use.

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*Kodagu district is renowned for its coffee plantations, forest wealth, scenic and breath-taking beauty that makes it a prime tourist destination. This picturesque postcard, however, cannot anymore hide the brutal reality of the predominantly tribal workers in the coffee plantations, in particular the Yeravas.*

When speaking of the life of Yeravas, one facet that instantly comes up in all conversation is the rampant alcoholism in the community, as being the cause of their present condition. It is said that almost the entire community, including children have taken to the vice of alcohol abuse. Alcoholism is surely a problem that needs to be addressed. However, the dismal situation of Yeravas is not a product of this alcoholism, but systemic dispossession and oppression that has reduced them to this state.

An oft heard retort is that the Yeravas are not compelled to work

on the plantations, and remain so of their own choice. This betrays a blindness to the social disabilities suffered by Yeravas and a superficial understanding of what constitutes choice. Firstly, this form of labour is one where socially and economically powerful sections of the community are exploiting the poor and weaker sections, and is known as forced labour which is prohibited under Article 23 of the Constitution. As to what constitutes 'force', it cannot be denied that such force may arise in several ways and not only through physical force; it can also be the compulsion arising from hunger and poverty, want and destitution. Clearly Yeravas cannot be said to acting as free agents with a choice between alternatives, but under the compulsion of social and economic circumstances.

It is believed that, until a few centuries ago, the Yeravas were a thriving, agriculture and forest-based tribe, in Wayanad and Kodagu districts of Kerala and Karnataka, respectively. However, feudal social relations reduced Yeravas to the status of a subordinated community, without near-total denial of any material assets or rights. After Kodagu was annexed to the British Empire in 1834, the British introduced coffee plantations, which transformed the traditional agrarian society, particularly its social relations, with the Yeravas and other slaves attached to the Kodava landlords becoming plantation workers. Published literature from the colonial times confirm the status of Yeravas as hereditary praedial slaves. The "Yeravas of Kodagu" (1987), an ethnographic study conducted by Shri B.K. Das, Director of Census Operations, states that past tradition of "agrestic serfdom" of the Yeravas stands out as an important identification mark. To quote:

However, there is a qualitative

difference between the settlements of Yeravas and those of the other land-owning' communities of the region. The landlords and the tenants live on the lands they own or possess whereas the Yeravas live on the lands of the landlords and planters for whom they generally work. Their association with agrestic serfdom indicates that they, as well as their immediate forefathers have all along been living in such a manner only. Because of their economic plight they did not enjoy enough freedom to exercise any sort of choice in planning out their settlements. They have no tradition of having ever lived as an independent community in a compact and sizeable group at any one place or set of places at any time, especially in the recent past. Thus, much significance cannot be attached to questions such as their traditional or prescribed pattern and spatial arrangement of their dwellings within their settlement. It is also known that quite a few of them have for generations been living on forest lands and working as labourers in forestry occupations. Here too, their freedom is limited in that each family or group has to build the hut on the land, assigned by the Departmental Officials.

Thus, Yeravas have suffered through myriad forms of slavery to the present serfdom, which under bad masters, even today, assumes the form of primitive slavery. Clearly, the intervening circumstances of Independence and the adoption of the Constitution has left a minimal imprint on the lives and futures of the community.

## Conclusion

Kodagu district is renowned for its coffee plantations, forest wealth, scenic and breath-taking beauty that makes it a prime tourist destination. This picturesque postcard, however,

cannot anymore hide the brutal reality of the predominantly tribal workers in the coffee plantations, in particular the Yeravas. Much like the spread of coffee as a global commodity cannot hide the history of slave trade and sheer exploitation of Black and indigenous people or the present-day manifestations of slavery and serfdom that persist in coffee plantations across the globe.

Ponnanna's brutal murder merely confirms the brutal feudal reality in Kodagu. It is not just that majestic jackfruit tree in that sprawling coffee plantation in that scenic village, that is the scene of the crime. Everyday subordination and oppression of plantation workers occurs across the district. The rule of law is thrown to the wind. The special status that the Constitution accords to Adivasis is made redundant. Might is right, takes the place of democracy.

The Yeravas and other plantation workers need to assert their right for a life of freedom and dignity. An organised resistance is the sure way towards liberation from their systematic oppression and dehumanisation. Even though the deeply entrenched feudal caste system would not easily yield to pleas for equality and justice, it is necessary for the Kodavas and other dominant community plantation owners to seriously introspect about altering this status quo in the interests of their own humanity. Writing about race, James Baldwin, reminds us that, "Our dehumanisation of the Negro then is indivisible from our dehumanisation of ourselves: the loss of our own identity is the price we pay for our annulment of his". On the other hand, the State, aware of the subordinated social position of Yeravas causing their economic and social backwardness, needs to step in and protect, and ensure enjoyment of, their rights. ■

# The Fatima Sheikh 'Mystery': What is at Stake?

▲ AKASH BHATTACHARYA

## A Convenient & Misleading Claim

**G**overnment media advisor Dilip Mandal sparked a controversy recently by claiming that Fatima Sheikh, a Muslim woman who is considered to have been a close colleague and friend of 19th-century women's education pioneer Savitribai Phule, was not a historical figure but a "fabricated character" that he had created.

Mandal went on to claim that interest in Fatima Sheikh had vanished in 2022 after he "abandoned" her story. "It is my mistake that, during a particular phase, I created this name out of nothing – essentially from thin air," he wrote. "I did that knowingly."

In 2019, Mandal had written an article in The Print that had been headlined, "Why Indian history has forgotten Fatima Sheikh but remembers Savitribai Phule." After the controversy erupted, the publication retracted the article and said it is investigating the matter.

It all seems to be a matter of convenience for Mandal: invoking Fatima Sheikh as a symbol of Dalit-Muslim unity on one day and discarding the claim and denying the historical existence of Fatima Sheikh on another – notably after having been designated a government media advisor.

Mandal's claim is patently false, as several rebuttals correctly point out. But why did Mandal make such a strange remark? What is at stake in his opportunistic stance? Before we get to that, let us give ourselves an overview of the major rebuttals.

## Of Course She Exists!

Tabassum Barnagarwala and Divya Aslesha, in an article in Scroll on 12 January rightly pointed out that though historical evidence is scant, there is enough proof that a person named Fatima existed and worked alongside the Phules. Fatima Sheikh is even mentioned in government publications. For instance, in a biography of Phule published by The Maharashtra Bureau for Literature and Culture in 1998, there is a description of the methods Savitribai Phule and Sheikh used to teach children from underprivileged communities at a time when learning was the exclusive domain of Brahmins.

Shradda Kumbhojkar, a professor of history at Savitribai Phule Pune University, said that "Fatima" is mentioned in a letter Savitribai Phule wrote to Jotirao Phule in 1856. The letter was reproduced in a volume by the Maharashtra State Bureau for Literature and Culture, she said.

"While Savitribai is writing to Jotirao from her maternal village, she expresses reassurance that 'Fatima must be shouldering the hardships in my absence, but she is not a person who would complain,'" said Kumbhojkar.

Similarly, Oxford historian Rosalind O'Hanlon, who has extensively researched caste in 19th-century Maharashtra and the life of Jotirao Phule, writes that Fatima Sheikh is an "elusive figure" since no material she may have written has survived. In an article published in January 2022, O'Hanlon refers to a black-and-white photograph of Savitribai and Fatima sitting side by

side that she dates back to the 1850s based on its appearance and print.

O'Hanlon writes that Fatima was the sister of Mian Usman Sheikh, a close friend of Jotirao and a resident of Ganjipeth in Pune. O'Hanlon also points to a third, older female figure behind the two, "dressed in a traditional white khimar hijab", suggesting that woman might be a member of the Sheikh family.

The photograph may have been taken when the Phules, ostracised for their efforts to educate Dalit and girls from marginal castes, lived with the Sheikh family, O'Hanlon writes.

In an email message to Scroll, which Barnagarwala and Aslesha reproduced in their article, O'Hanlon said that the photograph of Savitribai and Fatima Sheikh may well have been thoughtfully posed to suggest the idea that a unity of educational purpose was more important than religious divisions.

## Islamophobia, Division and More

There is an obvious reason why a pro-government "activist" would want to downplay the role of Fatima Sheikh, and in fact try to erase her from history altogether. The Hindu majoritarian forces have done their level best to either render Muslims in Indian history invisible or to malign them. There are also persistent efforts to portray Muslims as "backward" and Muslim women as a group that needs the "protection" of the state against Muslim men. Denying the pioneering role of a female Muslim reformer – the precursor of the Muslim women who led the anti-CAA

protests in 2019-20 – certainly falls within the Hindu nationalist tactical landscape.

Dilip Mandal is an influential as well as controversial Bahujan activist. Depending on his proximity to the government he seems to conveniently subscribe to two radically contrasting templates: the democratic template of Dalit-Muslim unity against Brahminical Hindutva fascism, and the Hindu nationalist template of division between Dalits and Muslims and attempts at the appropriation of Dalit Bahujan traditions within the Hindutva fold.

In fact, there is a lot more at stake in the Fatima Sheikh story. Increasingly, the partnership between Savitribai Phule and Fatima Sheikh in pioneering the education of Bahujan, working class and Muslim women, has been looked upon as a foundational moment in the decolonization of knowledge.

Secular nationalist narratives tend to look upon the upper-caste led “national education” efforts against British colonial education as the key moment in breaking the colonial hegemony. Hindu nationalist narratives lament the loss of caste and gender differentiated traditional education as the moment of onset of the colonial paradigm – a paradigm which, according to this narrative, remains in place.

Increasingly, new democratic narratives are transcending both secular nationalist triumphalism and Hindu nationalist nostalgia, and understanding the coloniality of power as a continuum – a complex but clearly discernible history of Brahminical traditionalism morphing into colonial and post-colonial casteism in the state and institutions. Within this narrative, the Phules and Fatima Sheikh in tandem emerge as pioneers of a pluralist and counter-hegemonic education challenging both traditional as well as colonial (and capitalist) power structures and value systems; their work constituting a foundational moment for a new democratic India beyond colonial remnants, Brahminism and capitalism. This is an imagination that Hindu nationalists and their friends wish to nip in the bud. ■

## Draft Agricultural Marketing Policy: Modi Govt's Continuing War Against Farmers

**T**he Draft National Policy Framework on New Agricultural Marketing, unveiled by the Modi regime on November 25, 2024, is another blueprint for disaster cloaked in the language of modernization and reform. Behind the technical jargon and lofty promises lies a calculated attempt to reintroduce the essence of the now-scrapped pro-corporate three farm laws through the backdoor.

The repeal of the three farm laws in 2021 was a historic victory for the farmers' movement, achieved through a year-long struggle, in which more than 700 farmers were martyred. These laws—the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020; the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020; and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020—were designed to enslave farmers under the corporates. The Modi regime, unable to deliver these farm laws to the corporates has taken a policy route to please them. The whole policy has been introduced as if nothing happened in 2021.

Purushottam Sharma, National Secretary of All India of Kisan Mahasabha (AIKM) said, “through this policy, the Modi government is pushing India's agriculture into “market-driven production” rather than connecting it to the food security of its 140-crore population. This means that agriculture will cater more to market demands than the food requirements of the people.”

The framework emphasizes liberalized agricultural markets and promotes contract farming, private markets, and e-trading platforms. These measures mirror the core goals of the scrapped farm laws as shown in Table-1.

### Private Players and Corporate Farming

The draft policy's endorsement of contract farming (part of the “Agri-value chain”) and increase of private markets (both physical and e-markets) outside of APMC, with the focus on “ease of doing business”. While the government portrays it as a mechanism to ensure assured prices and market access, the ground reality is starkly different. Contract farming agreements are heavily skewed in favour of corporate entities, leaving farmers vulnerable to exploitation. Disputes over contract terms, delayed payments, and unilateral cancellations by corporations are well-documented issues that the draft policy conveniently ignores.

Contract farming has been sold as a lifeline to farmers, but it is a noose around their necks. Companies like PepsiCo have used contract farming to exploit small farmers, providing inadequate seeds, costly pesticides, and terms that leave them in

**Table 1 : Backdoor Entry- Three Farm Laws and Draft Agri-Marketing Policy**

Aspect	Three Farm Laws	Draft Policy Framework
<b>Deregulation of APMC Markets</b>	Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020, Section 3: Allowed trading outside APMC mandis, bypassing state-regulated markets.	Promotes private markets and direct buying outside APMC mandis, reducing their role in agricultural trade.
<b>Promotion of Private Markets</b>	Section 5 of the Trade and Commerce Act: Allowed private players to set up markets outside APMC jurisdiction.	Encourages the creation of private markets and digital platforms for agricultural trade.
<b>Contract Farming</b>	Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020, Section 7: Enabled contract farming with provisions favouring corporations in case of disputes.	Pushes contract farming as part of the "Agri-value chain," with no robust safeguards for farmers.
<b>Dispute Resolution</b>	Section 13 of the Price Assurance Act: Excluded civil courts, creating biased dispute resolution mechanisms favouring corporations.	Advocates arbitration-based grievance redressal, bypassing judicial processes for small farmers.
<b>Deregulation of Commodities</b>	Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020: Removed restrictions on stocking and trading of essential commodities.	Focuses on private storage infrastructure, effectively deregulating the storage of key commodities.
<b>Absence of MSP Guarantee</b>	Farm laws did not mandate Minimum Support Price (MSP) for crops, leading to protests demanding a legal guarantee.	No mention of MSP in the draft framework, despite being a key demand of farmers.
<b>E-Trading Platforms</b>	Section 8 of the Trade and Commerce Act: Enabled electronic trading platforms for agricultural produce.	Promotes e-trading and digital marketplaces as alternatives to physical markets.
<b>Focus on Agri-Business Value Chain</b>	Laws promoted integration into global agribusiness supply chains.	Strong focus on integrating farmers into "value chains" with corporate players leading the process.

perpetual debt. Once corporations control the market, they drive down prices and leave farmers with nothing. These experiences are not isolated incidents; they are the natural outcome of corporate control over agriculture.

The provisions of repealed Contract Farming Act and farmer producer organisations (FPO) as an instrument of integration of farmers with the national market,

electronic and otherwise, are hailed as a measure of risk mitigation. This is a well-known fact that it is only the rich farmers and their corporate sponsors who can organise profitable FPOs. A large number of small and marginal peasants and sharecroppers, who are already facing massive crisis and debt have no means to compete with corporate players in the market. They are bound to get

more dependent and subjugated by the big capital which will further aggravate their crisis.

By promoting the "Agri-value chain" logic, the government is essentially turning farmers into cogs in a corporate-driven system. The value chain prioritizes efficiency and profits for agribusinesses while ignoring the environmental and social costs borne by farmers. Small farmers, lacking economies of scale, will find it impossible to compete, leading to a wave of landlessness and rural migration.

The APMC system, though not without its flaws, has provided farmers with a regulated marketplace and ensured some degree of price stability. The very reason for the problems concerning APMC is due to state neglect in favour of private players. The draft framework's push for "competition" is a euphemism for dismantling this system. By promoting private markets and bypassing the APMC mandis, the government looks to reduce its own accountability while exposing farmers to the volatility of unregulated markets.

Private players, armed with capital and influence, will inevitably monopolize these markets, driving down prices and marginalizing small farmers. The elimination of APMC mandis in states like Bihar in 2006 has already shown the dangers of unregulated markets, where farmers are forced to sell their produce at exploitative rates to middlemen and corporate buyers. According to a 2019 study by the NITI Aayog, farmers in Bihar receive 20-30% lower prices for crops like maize and paddy compared to states with functional APMC systems. This policy framework

threatens to replicate that failure on a national scale.

Moreover, the weakening of APMC mandis will undermine rural economies. These mandis not only provide farmers with market access but also serve as hubs of economic activity, supporting local businesses, transportation, and labourers. The dismantling of these institutions will have ripple effects, deepening rural distress and unemployment.

The government touts "freedom to choose the market" as a liberation for farmers, but this is a cruel deception. The agricultural produce of nearly 6% of farmers is procured by the government at MSP, while 94% of farmers are abandoned to the tyranny of the open market. Here, they are exploited by private entities who dictate prices, impose arbitrary quality checks, and deny farmers any recourse to justice. Government-regulated mandis, though limited in number, offer a semblance of fairness through auctions and collective bargaining. The open market, in contrast, is nothing but a feeding ground for corporate profiteers, where the farmer has no voice, no protection, and no power. The framework's emphasis on e-trading platforms and digital marketplaces is being marketed as a step towards modernization. However, this so-called innovation does not address the ground realities of rural India. Limited internet connectivity, lack of digital literacy, and inadequate infrastructure make e-trading an inaccessible option for the vast majority of farmers.

Even in regions with better digital penetration, e-trading platforms have been criticized for their lack of transparency and accountability. Small farmers often find themselves at a disadvantage,

unable to compete with larger players who have access to better resources and market intelligence. Moreover, e-trading platforms are likely to be dominated by large corporations and middlemen, replicating the same exploitative structures that exist in physical markets.

### **Missing MSP**

One glaring omission in the draft policy is any commitment to MSP. The demand for a legal guarantee of MSP was at the heart of the farmers' movement, and its exclusion from the policy framework underscores the government's insincerity.

The current Minimum Support Price regime is more of a mirage than a guarantee for most farmers. While MSP is declared for 23 crops, the government procures only a select few, leaving farmers of other crops to sell at devastatingly low rates. The government's failure to enforce MSP across all crops and regions is a deliberate abdication of its responsibility. This is particularly dangerous in a country where over half the population depends on agriculture for their livelihood. The volatility of market prices, coupled with the absence of a safety net, will push more farmers into debt and despair.

Farmers don't need "freedom" from mandis; they need freedom from exploitation. They are demanding mandatory procurement at MSP—not as a favour, but as their right. Anything less is a betrayal of their labour and their lives.

### **Privatisation of Storage**

The framework's emphasis on privatizing storage infrastructure marks a decisive shift away from food security for people. By promoting private warehouses

and cold storage facilities, the government is paving the way for corporations to control the flow of food grains in the market. This move not only undermines the FCI but also exposes the food supply chain to speculative hoarding and artificial price inflation.

Recent measures, such as reducing procurement levels, limiting storage capacities, and curbing financial allocations, indicate a deliberate attempt to weaken the institution. For instance, FCI's procurement of wheat in 2023 dropped to 25.2 million metric tonnes compared to 43.3 million metric tonnes in 2021, reflecting a significant decline. Storage capacities have also stagnated, with the FCI's covered storage capacity standing at around 36 million metric tonnes, insufficient to meet growing procurement needs, but the government has failed to improve the capacity or infrastructure.

"The implementation of this policy will be a step towards increasing the centralisation of power and solidifying corporate-fascist governance under the Modi administration. Farmers, traders, agricultural workers, and all those concerned about India's democracy and constitution must unite to prevent this framework from becoming policy," said Purushottam Sharma highlighting that India's agriculture stays in the hands of those who toil on its soil.

This draft National Policy Framework is aware that country's "Farmers and agriculture struggle with 2Ms (Monsoon and Market)", but refuses to take measures accordingly as demanded by farmers' organisations. ■

# Reclaim the Rights of Workers!

## The Journey of AICCTU

**A**ICCTU began its journey in 1989 in the backdrop of serious challenges before the working class movement thrown by the adoption of neo-liberal reforms by the Indian government and consequent onslaughts on the working class. AICCTU proposed “Democratisation of Trade Unions” and “Politicisation of Workers” to prepare the working class to fight against the onslaughts of the ruling class. The ruling class was transitioning the country into a neo liberal market economy while the AICCTU resolved to fight against it by taking the trade union movement out of the our walls of the factory. The battle cry of AICCTU since its founding conference has travelled through various phases in the interregnum period confronting enactment of Labour Codes, brutal privatisation of industries and informalisation of workforce and now has turned into a call for “Reclaiming the Rights of Workers” in its 11th conference now. Taking the challenge head on, AICCTU, in the last 35 years, has taken the challenges head on and has built resistance movements independently and also in solidarity with all other central trade unions in the country.

The brutal exploitation and repression of the working class has reached its peak now under the Modi led BJP regime in the last 11 years. The working class in India today is facing the worst ever attack on their lives, livelihood and rights with record unemployment and price-rise coupled with massive retrenchment, wage cuts, falling

wages, withering social security, all-out contractualization, closures, lock-outs, skyrocketing poverty, all pervading hunger and widening inequality.

In the name of 'Viksit Bharat ' (Developed India), Modi has gone into a selling spree. The whole country is being sold out to his corporate friends like Adanis and Ambanis which is leading only to the concentration of wealth in a few hands and to the destruction of jobs and livelihood. Essential services are increasingly becoming inaccessible to the toiling masses and the poor. Industrial relations are being turned into Master – Slave relations with the proposed anti-worker Labour Codes. All rights of workers are being snatched away in the name of 'ease of doing business'. The four labour codes epitomise the destruction of workers' rights by scrapping all existing labour laws. Three criminal codes, in addition to UAPA, combined with labour codes are bound to prove disastrous to the lives of the working class in the country. Police Raj is now reinforced with the Bulldozer Raj which is brutally bulldozing the lives and livelihood of the poor and the downtrodden. The workers' voice and its trade unions are being demonised as main hurdles before the Modi's model of development and are thus being criminalised. Samsung India workers struggle in Chennai was demonised by the BJP leaders. Workers were accused of creating obstacles for the capital and of facilitating flight of capital by forming trade unions. Workers' right to living wages, meaningful social security and dignified life are being

snatched away while trade unions are accused of anti-development. A complete stranglehold of the capital over workers and the country is established under the eleven years rule of the Modi government. The government is also run like a corporate company demolishing all democratic values and ethos.

Taking advantage of the scenario of miseries, attacks and devastation, the Modi government and the BJP-RSS combine is hell bent on accentuating communal polarization. Their latest hateful and venomous slogan is “Banto Ge to Kato Ge (We are Dead if Divided)”, in order to elevate politics of hate to greater heights and also to divert the peoples' attention from basic issues and to divide the peoples' struggling unity.

Braving these attacks and foiling the divisive designs of BJP-RSS and Modi government, the working people and the poor are fighting back on streets as well as in elections. They have dealt a major blow to the dictatorial Modi regime in the Lok Sabha elections 2024 by halting BJP below a simple majority (down by 63 seats compared to 2019 elections) in the Parliament. The historic, year-long, militant movement of farmers forced the adamant Modi government to withdraw three black farm laws. The streets are reverberating with powerful movements of various sections of workers including scheme, sanitation, contract and industrial workers along with sustained movement of government employees for OPS and against NPS. However, the Modi government continues to defy the peoples' election mandate and also the message from the streets. Modi is arrogantly pushing his anti-worker, pro-corporate agenda, including Labour Codes

and privatisation without any halt. The Modi government's arrogant defiance of people's struggles and mandate is bound to invite an all-out battle of the working class and toiling masses to deliver a decisive blow to the dictatorial Modi Regime.

AICCTU is holding its 11th all-India Conference, in such a challenging situation, to strengthen the resolve and to prepare the working class movement to achieve newer heights. AICCTU calls upon the working class to reclaim all our rights and to emerge as a bulwark of the democracy and the constitution which are the hallmarks of our country. We appeal to you all to support and contribute in every possible way to make the AICCTU's 11th all-India conference a great success. ■

AICCTU is holding its 11th all-India Conference on 24-26 February 2025 at Delhi. The open session on 24 Feb will be held at Talkatora Stadium while the delegates' session is to be held at Pyarelal Bhavan on 25-26 February 2025. Comrade Dipankar, the General Secretary of the CPIML Liberation will inaugurate the conference in the open session. The leaders of the joint platform of central trade unions of the country have also consented to participate. The representatives of World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) and other international trade union leaders are also expected join.



## AICCTU's Call - 2025 Gear Up Against the Modi Government's Attack on the Working Class!

2025 is earmarked for an all comprehensive attack on the working class by the Modi government. Implementation of Labour Codes, indiscriminate privatisation of public and government sectors and to employ three new criminal acts to suppress the labour revolt arising out of the implementation of Labour Codes. This is Modi's strategy.

2025 will also be marked by united movement of the workers and farmers against the Labour Codes and backdoor method of bringing back three anti-farmers, pro-corporate farm laws. The latest instance is the retrograde step of Agriculture Marketing Policy announced by the government. Farmers are gearing up to march with tractors and other vehicles on 26 January against the government. Central Trade Unions, including AICCTU, are also gearing up for an all India strike in case of Modi defying the will of the working class. If Mansukh will complete notifying state rules for implementing Labour Codes by 31 March, the working class, joining hands with the farmers, will prepare by 31 March to halt the wheels of the country subsequently.

Despite the fact that Nirmala Sitharaman, the Finance Minister invited central trade unions, including AICCTU, for a pre-budget consultation, the indications are that none of the pro-worker demands made by the CTUs will be met. In such a case, CTUs have also given a call for an all India protest, including burning of copies of the budget 2025-2026 on 5 Feb. 2025.

Modi 3.0 BJP government has renewed its onslaught on the workers' rights. Even before all state governments formulating mandatory rules the Modi government is setting the agenda for implementation of Labour Codes. Backdoor methods are also being explored to implement the same. One such attempt in Beedi sector is already initiated. The labour minister is hopeful that publication of accompanied rules will be completed by all state by 31 March 2025. The corporates in the country right from Infosys Narayana Murthy to L&T Subrahmanyam are lobbying for a 70 hour to 90 hour work week. The chair persons and top management officials may not have anything else to do at home. But, workers are suffering without sufficient sleep after hours-long transport and attending family responsibilities to discharge their next day's manual work for the corporates. Workers are forced to work for 12 hours illegally. The corporates, in their greed for profit, conceal the fact that working longer hours not ensure increased productivity, but in fact reduces productivity. Data confirms that shorter working days and better pay improves productivity and even profits, and several countries are in fact moving towards a 6 hour work day.

The year-end review by the Ministry of Labour and Employment boasts much about enrolment of more than 30 crore workers in e-shram portal without any appropriate welfare schemes associated

with it. Rather it is only trying to integrate some old schemes into e-sharam portal without any new schemes. ESI coverage is still not extended to informal sector workers but for opening some dispensaries and hospitals. Even if extended to unorganised workers, it is conceived as an insurance scheme of contributory in nature, for which workers have to pay from their packets. The identification of employer / principal employer is completely diluted or denied, job and wage security is snatched away but the government is only talking about social security for Gig and platform workers. Even the acts passed by non-BJP ruled states too did not go beyond extending some meagre social security related matters.

The convention of holding Indian Labour Conference (ILC) every year has become a thing of the past, for the last ten years since Modi assumed power at the centre. None of the decisions of ILC that was held in the pre-Modi BJP – NDA period, involving all stake holders like the industrialists, trade unions and the union government, is also not given a heed.

More than a crore of workers are carrying the schemes of the union government to the doorsteps of the people in health, education and various other sectors. They are called as MDM workers, ASHA, Anganwadi workers and in hundreds of various other names. But none of them are not even recognised as workers, leave alone awarding them the right of workers and minimum wages. This is a brutal and ruthless exploitation of the government itself. Modi is not even uttering single word on improving their working conditions and wages but for shedding crocodile tears. As a part of Swachh Bharat Abhiyan Modi did nothing to improve the conditions of sanitation workers

but for a gimmick of washing some selected workers feet.

Modi claims that 3.89 crores of vacancies are mobilised through National Career Service Portal. Already more than 20 lakhs of jobs are snatched away in railway sector alone. None of the government vacancies are filled while agniveer type fixed term model is being promoted in every sector denying dignified employment opportunities for the country's youth. BPSC scam and subsequent protests are still on. When non-filling of vacancies is the policy of the government, mobilising vacancies thro NCS portal is of no use. In fact, the country need at least 2 crore jobs every year. But, the Modi government is only condoning a loss of a crore of jobs every year. The Modi government is neither providing employment to all nor is providing any unemployment relief to the youth, rather, is only offering Employment Linked Incentive (ELI) to the corporates who are unwilling to share the fruits of huge tax cut, etc., with their own workforce. On the contrary, wage cut, wage freeze, drastic reduction in wages, de-feminisation of workforce, cut in NREGA allocation in order to drive rural people to cities in search of employment, etc., are the order of the day.

The movement for restoration OPS, minimum Rs 10,000 + VDA under EPS 95, declaring a minimum wage of Rs 35000, eliminating the concepts of floor wages and fixed term employment, scrapping the proposal of employees' strength threshold of 300 for permission from the government for lay-off, closure which can make labour laws inapplicable for more than 85 percent of industries, ESI – PF coverage for unorganised workers, etc., are emerging as the foremost demands of the working class today.

The working class is determined and is gearing up to confront the Modi and the BJP government on the issue of implementation of anti-Labour Codes.

The workers movement is on the upswing now. The erupting protests against the ruthless anti-labour, pro-corporate measures of the Modi government and other pro-corporate governments are already becoming visible. The latest example is the Samsung workers struggle at Chennai where majority workers union is denied the right of registration and also recognition. With the growing platform and gig economy, digital strikes are also emerging as new forms of struggle. Workers are up in arms.

The BJP leaders are rushing to the media shedding tears fearing the flight of capital and for the welfare of the corporates and multinationals. They do not care for the plight of workers. They only preach workers to sacrifice their lives and livelihood for the sake of Modi and his corporate friends. Maruti workers, particularly the unorganised, non-permanent workers are reorganising themselves to confront the Maruti management. The young women workers struggle against Foxconn for better wages and better working conditions is still brewing. Workers and farmers of UP and Chandigarh are valiantly fighting against the smart meters and blood sucking electricity tariff. The farmers leader Dalewal is on a hunger strike demanding justice. Various camps of farmers organisations are joining hands to wage a determined battle against the Modi led BJP government against commercialisation and corporatisation of agriculture. It is definite that 2025 will be the year of united struggles of farmers and workers against the corporates and its stooge Modi led BJP government. ■

## With Ceasefire In Gaza, Israel Trains Its Genocidal Guns On Occupied West Bank

**A**fter more than 471 days of waging a brutal war of extermination on the besieged population of Gaza, the Netanyahu-led Israeli regime has been forced into a ceasefire. The agreement, announced on January 15, 2025, and implemented on January 19, brought a halt to the relentless bombardment that left the region in ruins.

The human cost of Israel's war on Gaza is staggering. Before the ceasefire came into effect, officially over 47,000 Palestinians were killed, most of them women, children, and the elderly. This death toll, based only on deaths reported in hospitals, doesn't capture the full extent of the devastation, as thousands of bodies remain buried under the rubble due to civil defence teams being unable to retrieve them. Hundreds of bodies and body parts strewn across the Gaza Strip bear witness to the relentless bombings and summary executions carried out by Israeli forces. According to a recent study published in *Lancet* medical journal, the Gaza death toll is 41 percent higher than official figures.

Entire families were erased from civil records, neighbourhoods reduced to dust, and essential infrastructure obliterated. Hospitals, schools, mosques, and shelters for displaced civilians—all were deliberately targeted in a campaign that sought not merely to break the spirit of Gaza's people, but to erase their very existence.

Even in the face of

unimaginable devastation, the people of Gaza have shown extraordinary resilience. Images of children smiling and playing among the ruins, and survivors clearing debris while chanting "We will rebuild Gaza more beautiful," are testaments to their unyielding determination to resist Israel's genocidal crimes. The people of Gaza continue to hold on to their dream of freedom and justice, proving that even in the face of annihilation, their spirit cannot be extinguished.

### Netanyahu now Aiming Guns on West Bank

While the ceasefire has provided temporary relief for Gaza, it has not paused Israel's broader genocidal ambitions. In the shadow of the Gaza ceasefire, Israel's genocidal machine has turned its full force on the occupied West Bank.

On January 21, the Israeli military launched a large-scale invasion of Jenin with airstrikes, the destruction of homes and roads, and a siege of the town. People walking on the roads are being executed by Israeli snipers with absolute impunity. In the past few weeks only, more than 13 Palestinians, including children were killed.

In addition to the attack on Jenin, Israeli settler violence against Palestinian communities in the West Bank has reached unprecedented levels. Palestinian villages like Burin, Huwara, and Masafer Yatta have been subjected to pogrom-like violence. Settlers,

emboldened by the backing of the Israeli state, have burned homes, uprooted ancient olive groves, and lynched Palestinian civilians with impunity. Israeli forces have also launched widespread checkpoints across the occupied West Bank, harassing and intimidating Palestinians as a form of collective reprisal against the population for celebrating and expressing joy during the January 19 release of prisoners illegally detained and kidnapped by Israel. The goal is clear: to depopulate Palestinian areas and pave the way for further annexation.

As Israel's genocidal war intensifies in the West Bank, another aspect that is worrying and will have tremendous repercussions is the conspicuous silence of Mahmoud Abbas-led Palestinian Authority (PA). Security coordination between PA forces and the Israeli military is still intact, even as Palestinians are being slaughtered. In December 2024, the forces of Abbas had also launched a large-scale siege and assault on Jenin camp.

### End Complicity, Strengthen Solidarity

Israel's actions in both Gaza and the West Bank are made possible by the steady support and complicity from imperialist powers, particularly the United States, which provides billions of dollars in military aid annually.



European governments, while occasionally offering mild condemnations, continue to arm Israel and shield it from accountability. In India, Modi government's silence in the face of Israeli genocide in Gaza is not only a diplomatic failure but a betrayal of historical principles rooted in our country's freedom struggle. It is crucial that the people of India reclaim their historical legacy of solidarity with Palestine.

While the world momentarily holds its breath, the reality is still that the forces of Israeli settler-colonialism, led by the reactionary Netanyahu regime, will do everything in their power to destabilize this ceasefire and prevent any genuine peace or justice for the Palestinian people. The ceasefire must not be seen as an end, but as a step toward the larger goal of Palestinian liberation.

Israel's genocidal ambitions may shift from one front to another, but the spirit of Palestine endures. We must stand unwaveringly with the Palestinian people in Gaza and West Bank, amplifying their voices and demanding an end to the occupation, apartheid, and genocide. The struggle for Palestine is not just the struggle of the Palestinian people—it is a struggle for the oppressed and marginalized everywhere. ■

## Beautiful Gaza: Resilience and Resistance

*The following is an abridged version of the message sent by Foreign Affairs Department of Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) on January 5, 2025. DFLP is a Palestinian Marxist-Leninist organization and is part of Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO).*

**B**eautiful Gaza, an integral part of the land of Palestine, spanning 365 square kilometers, still dreams of living freely under the sun. With the end of one year and the beginning of another, it has been painted with the blood that flowed like rivers among the rubble of its destroyed buildings and in the shelters of its displaced people. Surrounding it and within its homes is the pervasive smell of gunpowder: shelters that have witnessed hundreds of massacres, hospitals whose walls testify to the killing and arrest of those within them before being destroyed and burned, populated homes and UNRWA headquarters, places of worship that have not been spared from destruction. Everything in the Gaza Strip testifies that the year 2024 was the bloodiest on a global scale, due to the atrocities committed by the Israeli fascist army, whose soldiers boast of targeting hundreds of thousands of children and women of the Palestinian people in their secure homes and places of displacement. This image will remain etched in the annals of time for future generations.

The feelings and expressions of the peoples of the earth in bidding farewell to the past year and welcoming a new one differed. However, for the people of Palestine, 2024 was no different from previous years except for more killing, destruction, hunger, thirst, displacement, and suffering that enveloped the Gaza Strip in particular and various cities and villages of Palestine, which turned a new year and welcome another year under occupation. Despite death spreading everywhere, 2024 was a year of resilience and heroism in challenging the Zionist arrogance supported by the United States and some colonial Western countries, a year of will and determination to stay in the land, a year of resistance in which its men heroically defended their land and people. The land of Palestine witnessed more than one battle and epic that shattered what remained of the dignity and deterrence of the Israeli army, whether in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, which continue to confront the occupation, or in Lebanon, which recorded pages of glory and heroism in resisting and withstanding the Zionist forces.

No local or international institution or body has so far managed to encompass all aspects of the suffering and consequences left by the genocide war that Israel continues to commit in the Gaza Strip in particular and in all of Palestinian land in general.

The World Health Organization in a report noted that the Israeli occupation committed about 11,000 massacres in the Gaza Strip during the year 2024. The number of martyrs exceeded 50,000, most of them children and women, with 77 government schools and 65 schools belonging to the Relief Agency and 51 university buildings destroyed, in addition to the destruction of dozens of health centers. The number of injured exceeded 100,000, with more than 11,000 missing amidst massive destruction and famine that killed dozens of children, an event unprecedented in the world. In the West Bank, the past year was one of the worst

years that the Palestinian people have experienced, due to raids on cities and Palestinian camps by the occupation army, and an increase in terrorist operations by settlers against Palestinians, with data indicating the martyrdom of more than 835, including 171 children, and more than 6,000 injured, in addition to the displacement of hundreds from their lands.

The "Department of foreign Affairs of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine" presents these facts to the parties of the world and all political, social, trade union, media, and cultural frameworks. These facts do not fully reflect the reality, but it considers that what the Palestinian people have been subjected to in their land of Palestine (in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem) would not have occurred with such fascism were it not for American and then Western support, and the silence of

the international community with all its political, legal, and humanitarian systems, ignoring its duties towards the human rights of the Palestinian on his homeland, and its failure to enforce the resolutions of legitimacy on the occupying state to put an end to its massacres and aggression.

As we welcome a new year, we can only salute our heroic prisoners in Zionist detention, and we call on the free people of the world to give this issue the attention and follow-up it deserves, after information has revealed the humanitarian atrocities that prisoners are subjected to, whose numbers during the past year reached unprecedented numbers (more than 10,000 prisoners) including hundreds of children, the sick, and the elderly.

In the new year, as we renew our thanks and appreciation to all countries, parties, organizations,

institutions, and individuals who supported our cause as a cause of a people struggling for their freedom, we praise the legendary steadfastness of our people and their valiant resistance in the sector, which has become on the global stage a symbol of national dignity for all peoples and free people of the world, and a symbol of humanity in its resistance and resilience in the face of the Zionist war machine. Reaffirming our right to shape the future of our children and generations without foreign intervention, and also our right to confront the Zionist occupier, whose occupation of our land is sufficient reason for our people of all its categories to continue the resistance until the occupier leaves our land and enables the Palestinian people to exercise their national rights over their land freely, away from all forms of occupation, colonization, and dependency. ■

## Trump 2.0 and Modi 3.0: Pulls and Pressures

▲ DIPANKAR BHATTACHARYA

Over the last three decades Indian foreign policy has increasingly converged with American priorities in what is commonly characterised as Indo-US strategic partnership. The collapse of the Soviet Union had signalled the end of the Nehruvian era of non-alignment and heralded a new phase of alliance between India and the United States of America. New Delhi's adoption of the policies of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation cemented Indo-US ties in the economic realm while Washington's engagement in the

Islamophobic 'War on Terror' and its newly identified strategic goal of containment of China increased India's relevance as a regional as well as global ally in US foreign policy calculations. The Indo-US nuclear deal added a more pronounced military dimension and in recent years India's growing proximity with Israel has reinforced and accelerated the country's ever-increasing integration with the US-led global order.

The ascent of Narendra Modi to power in India in 2014 and the rise of Donald Trump in the US also injected an added ideological impetus into the politico-economic dynamics

powering the Indo-US partnership. Trump and Modi had more in common than their respective predecessors and the euphoria of Modi-Trump bonhomie started spilling over into spheres of domestic politics beyond the usual borderline of international diplomacy. Spectacles like Howdy Modi and Namaste Trump became the order of the day and the Indian Prime Minister even went to the extent of canvassing for a Trump victory in the 2020 US presidential elections. That was however not to be and Modi had to deal with the Biden Presidency for the next four years. And we now know from American records that the most expensive gift received by the Biden family came from none other than Modi in the form of a \$20,000 diamond!

Politics has now again come a full circle in the US and Trump has returned

to power with his far-right agenda and aggressive pronouncements of US expansionism. His provocative statements concerning immediate US neighbours like Canada, Mexico and Greenland; tariff threats and deportation plans; and rejection of global health, environment and climate concerns have already signalled a new phase of heightened imperialist aggression. India may be a 'strategic partner' of the US and Modi may consider Trump 'his friend', but there are several key areas of growing tension in Indo-US bilateral ties where a beleaguered Modi government will have to cope with a belligerent Trump presidency. Both Modi and Trump have built their political careers on ultra-nationalist planks and howsoever much the US may need India as a strategic ally, when interests clash US ultra-nationalism will definitely insist on its pound of flesh. From India's continuing trade surplus with the US to the preponderance of Indians among foreign applicants in the American skilled jobs market, the Trump government is bound to demand major concessions from the Modi government on every point of conflict.

In recent years, India's trade relations have turned quite asymmetrical vis-a-vis the US and China. To take the most recent figures, in 2024 India had a \$35.3 billion trade surplus with the US while running a \$85.1 billion trade deficit with China. The Trump team is already accusing India of imposing 'excessive tariffs' on US goods and threatening reciprocal tariffs on Indian exports to the US. More than trade tariffs, the Trump narrative of MAGA (Make America Great Again) revolves around virulent anti-migrant rhetoric. If on earlier occasions the anti-immigrant campaign was directed almost exclusively against Mexicans and Muslims, this time

round the preponderance of skilled Indians among America's H-1B visa holders has also become a major issue.

The H-1B visa programme was created by the US Congress in 1990 to enable American employers to hire foreign nationals in skilled occupations. The number of fresh H-1B visas issued annually has been capped at 85,000 since 2004, but including visa extensions the total number went up to 4,74,000 in 2022 and 3,86,000 in 2023. Indians account for more than 70 per cent of these visas with Chinese workers occupying a distant second position with about 12 per cent. While these skilled foreign professionals are usually paid less than their American counterparts and are hence beneficial to the employers, there is a growing sense of frustration among American workers over real or perceived loss of jobs and depression of wages in various professions. Regardless of the pro-Trump stance of the large pro-BJP section among the US Indian diaspora, existing and aspiring Indian workers in the US will have to face an increasingly adverse environment in the US in the coming days.

Deportation of undocumented Indian immigrants is also assuming larger proportions. Some 18,000 Indians have already been identified for deportation and the government of India has been accused of being 'uncooperative' in the deportation process. In his first term, Trump had deported 1.5 million people and in his second term he has promised a mass deportation campaign with an annual target of one million people. Obscure wartime deportation laws like the Alien Enemies Act of 1798 are being invoked to plan a massive cruel deportation campaign without any due process of judicial recourse. And the action of the state will undoubtedly be complemented and

compounded by a racist xenophobic environment that had been a hallmark of the first term of Trump presidency and remains a core plank of the far-right Republican agenda under Trump.

The future of the Adani case in an American court is also set to grow as another major point of friction between the Trump administration and the Modi government. The criminal and civil proceedings against Gautam Adani and his associates concerning the \$250 million bribery scam in India and the violations of relevant US anti-corruption laws have been clubbed together and brought under US District Judge Nicholas Garaufis, thereby indicating that there are no signs of any let-up in the judicial process. Several contracts awarded to the Adani group in different countries are either being cancelled or reviewed. With international ratings down and funds in the global market drying up, the Adani group has already had to exit from the Wilmar group, offloading its entire 44% stake exceeding US\$2 billion. Trump of course has the power to grant him a presidential pardon, but such a favour to Modi can obviously only come with an enormous price.

Beyond the Trump-Modi bonhomie or lack of it or the future of the Adani group, the people of India surely will have to be watchful about the moves of the second Trump presidency. Real issues concerning the economic sovereignty of India and security and dignity of Indians in any part of the world can never be overlooked. And of course, beyond India's immediate and direct interests, resisting US imperialism has always been essential to building global peace, justice and planetary survival, and this can only become more urgent under a Trump dispensation. ■

## The 75th Anniversary of the Indian Republic and the Challenge of Saving Universal Franchise

The dramatic shift in the Haryana and Maharashtra election results between the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections held just six months apart has raised a whole set of urgent questions about the transparency and credibility of the election process. The questions have since assumed more compelling proportions in view of the government's response and disturbing revelations about the process of electoral roll finalisation in Delhi where elections are to take place on the 5th of February. Investigative studies about the Lok Sabha elections in certain constituencies of Uttar Pradesh by credible alternative media portals Newslandry and Scroll have also reinforced the growing complaints about the utter lack of transparency and institutional accountability in the electoral process in Modi's India. More than the Electronic Voting Machines, questions now revolve around the election machinery and mechanisms at work.

The questions that arose from Maharashtra were primarily twofold - the inexplicable surge in the electoral roll since the Lok Sabha elections and the incredible jump in the final voter turnout data compared to the provisional figures put out at the time of close of polling. And even after this, there was a pervasive mismatch between the final 'votes polled' and 'votes counted' figures. The Election Commission of India chose to ignore all these questions, occasionally offering some unconvincing procedural excuses. When the Punjab and Haryana High Court directed the Election Commission to furnish relevant documents and video and

CCTV footage about a specific booth of Haryana to petitioner and Advocate Mehmood Pracha, the very next day the Modi government changed the 1961 conduct of election rules to restrict the scope of public inspection of poll-related documents. CEC Rajiv Kumar mocked the demand for public verification by saying it will take a person 3,600 years to go through the recordings from 10.5 lakh polling stations!

Reports from UP have for quite some time been alerting us about the kind of targeted anti-Muslim voter suppression happening in the state, both in the preparation of the electoral roll and on polling day, to keep Muslims away from exercising their electoral rights. Now we have detailed investigative reports from the state to give us an idea of the systematic deletion of names of voters assumed to be voting against the BJP in polling booths with a sizable presence of Muslims and other social groups like Yadavs and Jatavs. The other side of the coin is the inclusion of names of presumably fake voters with dubious and sketchy address details. The scale of such deletion and inclusion of names appears to have been significant enough to ensure narrow BJP victories at least in two Lok Sabha constituencies in UP in 2024 - Farrukhabad and Meerut.

Ahead of the Delhi elections we now have an alarming picture with the Chief Electoral Officer R Alice Vaz herself calling the rush for inclusion of new names unprecedented and stressing the need for greater scrutiny. As many as 5.1 lakh applications for inclusion of new names were received over a period of just twenty days following the publication of the draft

electoral roll. The Aam Aadmi Party has put forward detailed complaints exposing the manner in which unverified objections have been filed to demand deletion of names of voters on a massive scale. In New Delhi Assembly constituency, from where Arvind Kejriwal represents AAP in the Delhi Assembly, more than ten percent new voters are being sought to be added while in a constituency like Shahdara from where AAP had secured a narrow victory in 2020 Assembly elections, thousands of voters are being subjected to wholesale deletion.

The right to vote is the cornerstone of any functional democracy. Unlike many countries where people have had to continue to wage protracted battles to secure universal adult franchise long after the adoption of a Constitution (as was the case for black voters in the United States), in India universal adult franchise has been enshrined in the Constitution right from its adoption seventy-five years ago in the culmination of the anticolonial struggle. In areas marked by strong feudal power, the oppressed castes and classes have of course had to fight hard to exercise their voting right in real life. But the spectre of disenfranchisement now facing the Muslim community and other sections of society likely to vote against the BJP-NDA camp threatens to make a complete mockery of India's electoral system. Today as the constitutional Republic of India turns seventy-five, the secular-democratic character of the republic and the fundamental democratic right of every citizen to exercise her franchise - let alone other avenues of expressing dissent - are both facing an existential threat. The fight for free and fair elections today is all about freeing Indian democracy from the clutches of this creeping fascist danger. ■

# Delhi Elections 2025: Search for a Peoples' Alternative to Hindutva

▲ AKASH BHATTACHARYA

As Delhi gears up for the February 5 elections, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) faces its toughest challenge yet against Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and a hopeful Congress. With corruption charges looming and anti-incumbency sentiments rising, the stakes are high for the parties. AAP is banking on welfare schemes – old and new – and its “developmental” record in the upcoming elections while facing BJP.

Congress has promised its own set of welfare schemes, not too different from the AAP's promises: 300 free units of electricity for all residents; LPG cylinders at Rs 500 each for economically weaker sections; free ration kits every month for every family, including rice, sugar, cooking oil, grains, and tea; Rs 2,500 monthly allowance for women under the Pyari Didi Yojana; health insurance of Rs 25 lakh for all Delhi residents; Rs 8,500 monthly stipend for educated but unemployed youth and placement in local industries for jobs.

The BJP has been out of power in the national capital for over 27 years. The BJP's vote share in Delhi in 2013 polls was 33.1 per cent, 32.2 percent in 2015 and 38.5 per cent in 2020. The number of assembly seats, however, went down drastically – from 32 in 2015 to 8 in 2020. The party won all seven Lok Sabha seats in the national capital in the last three parliamentary elections but with a reduced margin in all the seats.

The subtext of the BJP campaign is largely communal. The template of hatred and division set during the 2020 elections against the backdrop of the historical anti-CAA movement has been further bolstered

through propaganda against Muslim shrines, invoking the bogey of illegal Bangladeshis, and persistent localized attempts at communal polarization.

In the face of the danger posed to the people of Delhi by the resurgent BJP it is lamentable that none of the parties seem keen to address core issues of the people at a structural level. These include issues such as the decline in the rationing system, back breaking inflation, unemployment especially among the youth, failure to implement the minimum wages, deteriorating law and order in Delhi, and rising crimes against women etc.

These issues have been raised in the joint manifesto issued by the Left parties: CPI(M), CPI, CPI(ML), RSP, Forward Bloc, and CGPI. CPI(ML) is contesting two seats as part of the joint Left panel. Comrade Anil Kumar Singh is contesting from Narela while Comrade Amarjeet Prasad is contesting from Kondli. In addition to the Left parties, a range of citizens' groups (National Alliance of Climate and Ecological Justice, Shehri Adhikar Manch), climate groups (Save Dwarka Forest, People for the Aravallis) and informal sector unions (Gig Workers Association, Delhi Gharelu Kamgar Sanghatan) have issued a charter raising these issues.

## Joint Left manifesto

It is from a clear understanding that the ruling parties have failed to fulfil the interests of the citizens of Delhi, the Left parties aim to bring real issues such as the decline in the rationing system, back breaking inflation, unemployment especially among the youth, failure to implement the minimum wages, deteriorating law

and order in Delhi, and rising crimes against women etc, to the forefront of this election. The Left parties aim to implement pro-people policies such as better public hospitals, quality free education, social welfare pensions for unorganized sector workers above 60 years of age, and housing for SC/ST and other marginalized groups.

As elections approach, the RSS is attempting to divide society on religious lines, diverting attention from the failures and corruption of the Modi government and other BJP-led states. The Left parties are committed to expose these failures and corruption before the public. In June 2023, through an ordinance the BJP scuttled the powers of the elected Delhi government in favour of a handful of bureaucrats led by the Lieutenant Governor disregarding the right to govern the Delhites. This has severely impacted welfare schemes, increasing the hardships of Delhi's residents.

It is also time to hold the AAP government accountable for its decade old tenure. It is essential to scrutinize Arvind Kejriwal's promises, assess what has been achieved, and understand where he has fallen short. In this context, the Left parties have resolved to take their alternative policies through the Delhi Assembly elections. The working people, living in slums, rehabilitation colonies, and unauthorized settlements with minimal facilities, are struggling for survival.

## Democratization of Administration

- Grant full statehood to Delhi with full protection for linguistic and ethnic rights of people from all states.
- Decentralized and expanded municipal services as against the present single MCD.
- The present bureaucratic NDMC will be replaced with an elected body.
- Transfer powers to urban local bodies.

## Employment

- Legislate for an Urban Employment

Guarantee scheme and would provide unemployment allowance.

- Special drive to fill all government vacancies.
- Extend social security schemes for workers.

### Social Security

- Ensure a minimum income for every unemployed individual.
- Expand social security for informal sector workers. The present Social welfare pensions (@ 2500 per month) which reaches only 8.28 lakh families (senior citizens (old age pension), widows, women in distress) will be ramped up to cover all unorganised sector workers above 60 years and include household work of women. This will be increased to Rs 10,000.

### Public Distribution System

- Would immediately restore the original ration card numbers of 35 lakhs which was reduced by half due to various exclusion criteria of the Central government in 2014. Universalize the ration distribution system.
- Introduce portable ration cards for migrant workers.
- Would expand the basket of items (sugar, daals, salt, spices, edible oil etc) available at ration shops. Add essential items to the ration list.
- Take strict action to curb black marketing.

### Workers and Employees

- Implement and enforce a monthly minimum wage of **Rs. 26,000**.
- Provide labour law protections to all workers. The four labor codes will not be implemented.
- Industrial safety will be ensured throughout Delhi NCR.
- Extend social security to unorganized sector workers.
- End contractualization in all forms.

### Land, Housing and Basic Amenities

- Social and rental housing for economically weaker sections. Hostels will be constructed.
- Rehabilitate and regularize slums. Regularise all unauthorised habitations or in-situ rehabilitation and provide all

basic amenities.

- Implement a rehabilitation plan for all JJ clusters by providing basic amenities (water and electricity) to start with and leading to pucca houses/flats either constructed at the same locality or adjacent having cheap transport facilities.
- Ensure basic amenities for all habitations.

### Water Supply

- Ensure piped supply of potable standard water to all households. Curb the water mafia and privatization.
- Adopt decentralized water management.
- Connect all households to the sewerage system.
- Use modern and scientific methods for solid waste management.
- Clean and improve water quality of Yamuna.

### Transport and Pollution Control

- Expand public transport, reduce metro-fares, and promote electric vehicles. A cap will be imposed on private vehicles.
- Develop new policies to regulate private vehicle numbers.
- Create safe infrastructure for cyclists and pedestrians.

### Education Reforms

- Strengthening Government Schools: Prioritize infrastructure, recruitment, and training of teachers. Remedial classes will be conducted for weak children.
- Halt the merger of schools and launch campaigns to reduce dropouts.
- Control Private Schools: Implement fee regulatory mechanisms in both schools / colleges and increase accountability.
- Ensure strict compliance with the Right to Education Act in private schools.
- Guarantee free and quality education for all, from primary to higher education.
- Introduce special education schemes for disadvantaged communities and children with special needs.
- Introduce more arts, science and technical education institutions and regulate fees for self-financing courses in government sector.
- Ensure reservation for SC/ST.

### Health Services Expansion

- Strengthen Mohalla Clinics with technical and financial support.
- Build a three-tier public health system.
- Increase the number of government hospitals and bed capacity.
- Regulate private hospitals with strict oversight and price control. Cap on private hospital fees, drug costs, tests, 'doctors/surgeons' charges and strictly enforce 20% beds for EWS patients.

### Secularism and Diversity

- Foster the syncretic culture of Delhi, build communal harmony, amity.
- Expand education, health, and civic amenities for minorities.
- Preserve communal harmony and cultural diversity.
- Abolish CAA/NPR/NRC.
- Take strict action against those spreading communal hatred and check activities of communal organisations.

### Scheduled Castes/Tribes/OBCs

- Enforce reservation in all institutions and ensure job reservations in the private sector.
- Provide financial support for traditional occupations.
- Conduct a caste census.
- Ensure funds allocated for SC/STs in the budget are spent on their welfare. Will ensure plan funds commensurate with population for SC/ST and will avoid all 'notional' expenditure.
- Will abolish manual scavenging and sewer cleaning.

### Women

- Increase employment opportunities for women and ensure equal pay.
- Control crimes against women.
- Provide crèche and toilet facilities at workplaces.
- Ensure implementation of Visakha / Verma committee guidelines in all institutions / workplaces.

### Crime

- Bring the police under the state government. Break nexus between police and politicians.
- Offer better salaries to police personnel.
- Speed up the judicial process. ■

# Govt's Suppression of the BPSC Agitation and the Angry Student-Youth Outburst

▲ KUMAR PARVEZ

The reports of widespread rigging and corruption in the Integrated Combined Competitive Examination (CCE) examination of Bihar Public Service Commission (BPSC) have generated huge anger across the state. Following the examination held on 13 December 2024, the fairness of the examination was questioned due to paper leak, late receipt of question papers, and technical problems at many examination centres. BPSC candidates started a movement against this, which threw a challenge to the politics and administration of Bihar.

The movement demands that the entire BPSC examination be cancelled and the examination be conducted again, because only the examination of Patna centre was cancelled, while complaints of irregularities were received at other centres as well. The agitators said that these irregularities and allegations of paper leak raised serious questions on the fairness of the examination and if the government did not take concrete steps on this, then it will not only be an injustice but will also be a disaster for the future of the youth of Bihar.

## Growing Public Support

The BPSC candidates raised their voice by sitting at the Dharna Sthal in Gardanibagh, Patna. This movement was supported by AISA

(All India Students Association) and RYA (Revolutionary Youth Association). The agitators said that they will continue the struggle until the entire examination is cancelled and the examination is conducted again. A statewide protest movement was announced under the leadership of AISA-RYA on 27-28 December 2024. During this, a delegation of Paliganj MLA Sandeep Saurabh, AISA State Secretary Sabir Kumar and State President Preeti Kumari visited the village of Paliganj student Sonu Kumar, who had committed suicide due to the arbitrariness of BPSC. Saluting the martyrdom of Sonu Kumar, a demand was made to give compensation to the family.

On 29 December, a tribute meeting was organized in his memory across the state. The movement gained more intensity when on 29 December, despite the bitter cold, the protesters in Patna were once again brutally lathi-charged, water cannons used and many students arrested and sent to jail. On getting information about the incident, MLA Gopal Ravidas went to PMCH and met the injured students. He also met the arrested students and expressed his support.

## Road Blockade in Protest

AISA-RYA called for a statewide road blockade after 29 December. This movement then spread to various parts of Bihar. Students

and youth blocked major crossings, railway lines and roads in Patna, Darbhanga, Ara, Samastipur, Siwan, Muzaffarpur and other districts. In Patna, a students' march started from GPO Golambar, which reached Dak Bungalow Square and the square was blocked for two hours. Chakka jam and road demonstrations were also held in Siwan and Samastipur. In Darbhanga, the protesters blocked the railway lines and protested and raised anti-government slogans.

“

*The entire incident of BPSC exam is not just about the paper leak, rather it is exposing the organised and institutionalized corruption in the education and examination system of Bihar.*

The protesters throughout the state showed mutual solidarity and demanded a fair investigation of the BPSC paper leak case, action against the guilty officials and re-examination. The effect of the state-wide Chakka Jam was seen in Ara, Darbhanga, Samastipur, Siwan, Muzaffarpur. In Patna, AISA state secretary Sabir Kumar, President Preeti Kumari, RYA's Vinay Kumar, Janvi Rai, Jyoti Kumari, Karim, Hussain, Puneet Pathak, Aryan Kumar, Sanu, Amarjeet and others led the protest. In Patna University campus, AISA leaders Neeraj Yadav, Animesh Chandan, Kumar Divyam and other students' union activists blocked the Ashoka Rajpath for hours and raised slogans against the atrocities of the Nitish government.

The Sampark Kranti Express was stopped in Darbhanga. The traffic was blocked. The protesters came down on the railway track and

raised anti-government slogans and demanded that the exam be held again. In Ara, hundreds of youths under the leadership of Agiaon MLA Shivprakash Ranjan stopped the Patna-Buxar passenger train, due to which train operations on the Patna-Ara rail section were blocked for some time. Later, while marching through the city, the private bus stand was also blocked.

In Arwal, the protesters blocked the Patna-Aurangabad road near Bhagat Singh Chowk, due to which the movement of big vehicles stopped. In Samastipur, students and youth associated with AISA-RYA and other organizations blocked the Samastipur Overbridge intersection. There was a jam at many places in Siwan city since morning. The Laheriyasarai to Baheri state highway was blocked at Mirzapur Koyahi Chowk. In Muzaffarpur, a march was taken out in the city under the leadership of RYA national President Aftab Alam. The effect of the Chakka Jam was also seen in districts like Chapra, Supaul, Begusarai, Buxar, Madhepura, Gopalganj etc.

### **Raj Bhavan March of MLAs and Repression by Administration**

The movement soon turned out to be a massive mass movement. On 31 December 2024, MLAs of CPI-ML, CPI, CPM and Congress unitedly marched to the Raj Bhavan. CPI-ML MLA party leader Mehboob Alam, Paliganj MLA Sandeep Saurabh, RYA state Secretary Shivprakash Ranjan and MLAs from other opposition parties participated in the march. These MLAs demanded cancellation of the result of the exam, impartial investigation of the paper leak and proper compensation to the family of deceased student Sonu Kumar.

The administration put up

barricades several times to stop this march, but the protesters crossed broke through the barricades. However, the administration tried to stop them before they reached the Raj Bhavan. After the hard work and struggle of the protestors, the Governor's office was forced to respond. A proposal for talks came from the Governor and a delegation of MLAs met the Governor. They submitted a memorandum of their four-point demands:

1. The BPSC exam should be cancelled and the exam should be held again in the entire state.
2. Actions should be taken against the officers who brutally suppressed the agitating candidates and the cases registered against the protesting candidates should be withdrawn.
3. The family of the deceased candidate Sonu Kumar should be given proper compensation.
4. The paper leak case should be investigated impartially and a strict law should be made to punish the exam mafia.

The MLAs said that conducting a re-examination for only 12,000 candidates of Babu Sabhagar examination centre will create inequality vis-a-vis other candidates and hence re-examination should be conducted for all candidates. Deciding the result of an exam on the basis of – for all practical purposes – two different question papers is clearly inconsistent and unjust. What steps will the government take to ensure equal treatment to all students? Is the government going to adopt the controversial “normalization” process for this, which will spell the death knell for transparency and fairness of the examination? The MLAs posed these questions during the meeting with the Governor.

According to the

“normalization” rules, when the average marks of the candidates in one shift are low and the number of attempts is also low, then that shift will be considered difficult by the commission. On the other hand, if more marks are obtained in the second shift and there are more attempts, then this shift will be considered easy. Now after normalization, the marks of difficult shifts are increased according to the marks of easy shifts.

### **The Agitation Continues in the New Year**

The agitators decided to continue the agitation in the new year. AISA-RYA called a meeting of other student-youth organizations and jointly took out torch processions in all the districts on January 1, 2025. On January 2, a civil society protest was held in Patna under the banner of AIPF. On January 3, a siege of the Chief Minister was announced in Patna, in which thousands of student-youths participated. The protesters took out a march from Kargil Chowk to Ramgulam Chowk, and the administration put up barricades several times to stop it. However, the students succeeded in breaking these barricades and reached Dak Bungalow Square, where they completely blocked the square. RYA national President Aftab Alam and AISA leaders declared to continue the agitation.

The protesters have announced a protest day on 25 January. CPI-ML leader Mehboob Alam said that this struggle is not only against the BPSC paper leak, but for the restoration of justice and democracy in the whole of Bihar. He said, “This government is trying to cover up cases like corruption and paper leak.” He also said that the

**Poem****Bells Rang Out  
the JP Circle**

They rang out their tomorrows  
With the sirens of an ambulance  
With the bells lurching afore  
From an anti-riot vehicle  
With water-canons fixed to it . .

It was midnight  
And, I was crossing  
The JP Circle at the Gandhi  
Maidan  
As the Church bells nearby  
Were ringing out the old year  
The farewell . . .

The Maurya Hotel adorned  
herself  
With sparkling tiny bulbs  
Like some Kiara Advani  
sporting  
Golden jewellery  
Sold herself on a giant city  
hoarding  
While the city crowds  
Gleefully sold their spines  
Wearing the lately misused

Christmas caps  
On Patna streets. . .  
  
It was midnight  
And, I was wandering  
Around the JP Circle  
Where the other day  
They sat in along the same  
streets  
With hopes for justice. . .

And, the fulfillment came  
As sticks bruised their skins  
Blood woozed out of their  
Gaping skulls  
Shrieked for help. . .

While they kept ringing out their  
tomorrows  
With the sirens of an  
ambulance. . .

Water: Water washed out  
Their future  
The buoyant force from the  
canons  
Washed their placards, their  
slogans,  
Their voices, their demands. . .  
Then came the municipal

civilities  
With their magic cleaning  
services. . .  
It was water again  
That washed away their torn  
clothes,  
Sleepers that they failed to  
keep  
At the hour of hullabaloo,  
Broken spectacles,  
As they cleaned the JP Circle. .

The JP Circle was cleaned.

They cleaned their merits  
along,  
Their dreams, their rights -  
In a nutshell:  
Justice was cleaned. . .

Now, as I looked at it  
The JP Circle looked  
resplendently cleansed  
Of everything that had ever  
Stained it with dirt. . .

Like unuttered words  
Like unexpected goodbyes  
Like unrealised loves  
Like insurmountable memories

Like half-lost visions  
Like lives ended suddenly  
Without alarms  
Like 'Allah' and 'SitaRam'  
Forced to be forsaken  
From a Bhajan  
Liked by the Father of the  
Nation. . .

Like particles of dust  
Blown in the mid-air  
With the wintry winds. . .

I followed them upward  
And, saw the Biscomaun Tower  
Turning into a glowing  
Lighthouse  
The sparkling beams  
Radiated the night sky  
As everything that was  
discarded  
And rejected and dismissed  
And as all those sailors lost  
Their directions permanently  
Were finally settling  
Along the darkness  
In and around the JP Statue.

- Ojachito, Patna  
31.12.2024 ■

students and youth of Bihar would not tolerate this dictatorial rule and the time had come to change it.

The protesters criticized Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and his administration for suppressing the voice of the students and deprived them of justice. Many MLAs of CPI-ML, CPI, CPM and Congress were consistently there in support of the protesters. CPI-ML MLA party leader Mehboob Alam, Paliganj MLA Sandeep Saurabh, Agiaon MLA and RYA state secretary Shivprakash Ranjan and Dumraon MLA Ajit Kushwaha along with Satyadev Ram, Gopal Ravidas, CPI's Suryakant Paswan, Congress MLA Shakeel Ahmed and CPM MLA

Satyendra Yadav came in support of the movement. The marches were led by MLA Shivprakash Ranjan, RYA national President Aftab Alam, AISA state President Preeti Kumari, Secretary Sabir Kumar, state Joint Secretary Kumar Divyam, Neeraj Yadav, RYA state Joint Secretary Vinay Kumar and other leaders.

Despite these protests, the Bihar government and BPSC showed complete insensitivity and on 4 January conducted a re-examination only at the Babu Sabhagar centre. None of the demands of the protesting candidates were heard. Despite this, the MLAs of the Mahagathbandhan submitted a memorandum to the Governor of

Bihar demanding a high-level inquiry into the irregularities in the BPSC exam.

**The Larger Significance  
of the Movement**

The agitation of the BPSC candidates has emerged as a crucial event at a crucial moment in Bihar. Despite the repression and insensitivity from the government, the struggle of the agitators continues and this is turning into a big movement. Wherever Nitish Kumar is going during his Pragati Yatra, he is having to face opposition from the candidates and students and youths in solidarity with them. AISA leaders are being put under

house arrest even before the arrival of the Chief Minister. In Samastipur, the students and youth were kept in the police station for several hours.

The entire incident of BPSC exam is not just about the paper leak, rather it is exposing the organised and institutionalized corruption in the education and examination system of Bihar. Such malpractices are continuing with the connivance of the state government and administration.

Similar irregularities and allegations of corruption have been coming to the fore in every examination in the state for the last few years. This indicates that there are serious irregularities in the examination and recruitment process, which is a joke on the future of the students and youth of the state. In the last 20 years of BJP-JDU alliance rule, a mafia has flourished in the field of education and employment under the protection of the government. The aim of this mafia is to bend the selection process according to its wishes and for the benefits of a few people. If no concrete action is taken on the above issues, then AISA and RYA will organize marches across the state.

During the assembly session in the month of March, AISA and RYA will organize a grand gathering of students and youth from all over the state. If the government does not do justice to the students and youth, then it has no right to remain in power. This movement has made it clear that the students and youth of Bihar will not back down at any cost in their fight for justice and this struggle will continue until they get complete justice. ■

## Pensioners Organize for their Rights

▲ ATUL DIGHE

**N**early 80 lakhs of retired EPS pensioners are being cheated and exploited by the policies of Modi government. They are not only suffering from deprivation of necessary life support, but also of self-respect promised by the Constitution of India. They are organising themselves to fight against their cheating and exploitation by Modi Government.

### A Scheme Thrusted on Workers

In the era of neo-liberal economic policy, EPS 95 was formed in year 1995 as a scheme under Employees Provident Fund and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 1952. This is a central act and covers 186 industries, public cooperative or private, dealing in production and services. These are enlisted in Schedule-I of the act. The coverage of establishments in these 186 industries is mandatory under the act. Any company that wants exemption must provide a scheme that provides benefits on par or better than those provided under EPS 95.

The working class was demanding pension as third retirement benefit. The government tried a scheme that was not acceptable to the workers. The scheme proposed was self-contributory, with a defined contribution, and a defined benefit. The worker was asked to forego 8.33% of management contribution to his provident fund as contribution to the pension corpus. The government also was to contribute 1.16%. The wages considered for this contribution was either entire wages or with a statutory ceiling. The ceiling was Rs 2500 at the beginning and that was subsequently raised from time to time and now stands at Rs 15000.

The stand of Trade Unions towards this scheme was not united. Some like INTUC did not oppose. Some like AITUC said it is not satisfactory but can be altered ones it comes into force. Some like AICCTU, opposed it totally. This divided stand helped the government to introduce the scheme by issuing an ordinance on 16 November 1995.

### Start of the Pensioners' Movement

It was only in 2005 that a large number of persons started retiring with EPS pension. That is when several of them realized the disadvantages of the scheme and felt cheated. The pension earned could be anywhere between Re 1 to 1000. They started organising themselves in various states separately. The AICCTU activists took the lead in connecting with these groups of activists after 2008. The organisations formed in various states came together in 2012 to form a coordination committee and organised its first National Convention at New Delhi to come up with an agreed charter of demand.

They demanded a minimum pension of Rs 6500 (subsequently revised to 9000) with DA, ration, free health facility and travel concessions

The initial activity was limited to taking out marches to PF regional offices, to MPs and ministers. They also held a dharna at Delhi to press for demands. They also presented themselves before various Government committees. In 2010 the "Expert Committee" accepted the concept of minimum pension. The Rajya Sabha Standing Committee on labour, also known as Koshiyari committee in 2013, proposed a minimum pension of Rs. 3000, accepted the DA-related demands, and underlined

the government's responsibility to raise fund for providing pension.

## Modi Govt' Betrayal

The "AchheDinModigovernment" that came to power in 2014, made such changes to the scheme in September 2014 that were against the interests of pensioners through resolution e 609. They included a pro rata method of pension calculation, with the last 60 months' average salary as pensionable salary, a one-year window period for opting for higher option etc. All this was silently done behind the veil of a positive media perception regarding a minimum pension Rs 1000. This Rs 1000 was also subject to various deductions. But nearly 5 lakh widows got Rs. 1000 minimum pension. This was paraded as triumph, while the overall losses suffered by pensioners was disregarded.

## Battles Legal and Political

The Kerala Committee of AICCEPFPA challenged the changes under resolution e 609 in High Court and got the changes scrapped. The Provident Fund authorities moved the Supreme Court but was defeated. The pensioners groups also moved various High Courts to get higher option pension etc. All this legal activism was dampened by Modi Government

itself moving the Supreme court. The Supreme Court upheld the changes made by Modi Government.

AICCEPFPA presented itself before the Lok Sabha Standing Committee on Labour Textile and Skill Development. It presented the study that exposed the Modi government's policy of cheating and looting. It showed that the ratio of pension disbursed to interest earned was never more than 38%. This clearly was looting the pensioners of pension that could provide better-quality life. The amendments to the scheme by "Acche Din Modi Government" further eroded this to 25%. This was cheating. It was possible to pay minimum pension Rs 6000 when the government only paid Rs. 1486 average. Nobody got more than Rs. 4200. This expose further fuelled the anger and strength of pensioners.

Rampant employment of Contractual labour and abolished policy of inspections have led to systemic problems of claim settlements. This is helping EPFO to collect money with no responsibility of claim settlement at retirement.

2024 Elections and Beyond

In late 2022, the Supreme Court made the decision of upholding the changes made by the Modi Government in 2014. The Kakinada meet of AICCEPFPA gave a call for

defeat of Modi government and co-operation with all toiling masses. This was ratified at the 3rd national Convention at Shegaon, Maharashtra. The pensioners conducted agitations and propaganda nearly every month till the Lok Sabha election of 2024 worked for INDIA Coalition during the elections.

AICCEPFPA met at Hyderabad on 8th of January 25 to chart out a post-election strategy. It resolved to spread the movement further. It resolved to conduct aggressive agitation like Tala Thoko, Rasta Roko, Rail Roko. It also resolved to co-ordinate with movements of toiling masses, workers, farmers etc. It resolved to fight the cheating and looting policies of Modi Government, to work for a respectable life as promised by the Constitution of India.

The pensioners are demanding:

- 1) Minimum pension Rs. 9000 per month with DA to compensate price rise.
- 2) Essential commodities on ration, concession in travel and free medical treatment.
- 3) No to further privatization of funds and 100% counter guarantee to privatised funds.
- 4) Adequate staff for running the scheme.
- 5) Systemic correction for 100% claim settlement. ■

## Crime Nexus and Political Manoeuvrings in Maharashtra

▲ AJIT PATIL

**M**aharashtrapolitics under the double engine 'Sarkar' (government), a Marathi word used many a times to denote a feudal title for political satraps as well, has been engulfed by the storm

caused by the unholy alliance of corporates, communalist, casteist, rural feudal remnants and patriarchal forces in a venomous cocktail with the gangster mafia combine. The state has been playing the role of a bartender mixing the ingredients.

The dance of death is unfolding in many parts of the state.

Two districts of Marathwada, Beed and Parbhani are seething with anger over two incidents of murder – one by the gangster mafia and the other by police in custody. In an encounter murder by the police of an accused in a sexual assault case involving minor girls in a school run by RSS affiliated persons in Badlapur, Thane district has been confirmed by a judicial magistrate

accusing four police personnel of murder.

Marathwada politics in the recent past has been dominated by Late Gopinath Munde and Pramod Mahajan, an OBC and a Brahmin, tied by ideology as well as landed property and corporate interests. The nextgen of the Mundes is in the saddle now with his one daughter being an ex-MP and another currently an MLA and a Minister now. Her cousin Dhananjay Munde, now a minister under NCP-Ajit was promoted in the earlier career by Sharad Pawar. He is the one who is now in the eye of the storm. Sharad Pawar is on record about how he rescued his then protégé from many accusations when Dhananjay Munde made personal attacks after leaving Sharad Pawar's party.

Beed, a semi-arid Marathwada district is dominantly populated by Vanjara (OBC) and Maratha castes followed by a significant Dalit population. The district has the highest number of licensed revolvers, and an even higher number of unlicensed weapons. 141 bodies were recovered unidentified in the last one year alone, with many cases of disappearances. In the village Massajog, Avada Green Energy (AVG) is executing a wind turbine project. Before the assembly elections some gangsters belonging to the mafia led by Walmik Karad demanded protection money of Rs.2 crores from the company. The company had apparently paid Rs.50 lakhs. Walmik Karad, son of a sugar cane cutter hailing from Vanjara community was employed by Gopinath Munde as a trusted person to escort the daughters to school. He is now very close to Dhananjay Munde and handles all his work in the constituency including management of the elections. His gang consisting mainly of Vanjara

Mukadams barged into the office of the company and inflicted damages. Santosh Deshmukh, the young sarpanch of the village intervened to stop the gang from damaging the office. The sarpanch is from BJP and had been the election agent for Pankaja Munde. Santosh Deshmukh was abducted on the road and was driven around in the car. 3 persons mercilessly beat him with pipes and other weapons for about 3 hours. This cruel assault was recorded and shown live to the mafia head. His dead body was thrown out of the car after murder.

The company's manager had approached the police for filing a FIR but the police declined. Reportedly after the intervention of the PMO and the home minister the police filed the FIR. Walmik Karad is one of the accused. He absconded and travelled all over the state and MP but the police could not trace him.

A BJP MLA, Suresh Dhas revealed the entire episode on the floor of the house during the winter season. He has been continuing to expose the murkier and murkier details of the gangster empire run by Walmik Karad with blessings from Dhananjay Munde. Mr Suresh Dhas has joined BJP after being in NCP for a long time. He led a huge demonstration on the Beed collectorate with the participation of all other MLAs from the district. Jarange Patil had also joined him. There has been a clamour for the resignation of Dhananjay Munde and not assigning him as the guardian minister. Guardian minister is an extra constitutional position for controlling all transactions in the district and thus controlling it politically. An absconding Walmik Karad could not be traced by the police for almost 23 days. He surrendered to the police in Pune travelling in a SUV. There have been

reports of behind the scene political dealings in the matter. Ajit Pawar and his NCP have refused to ask for the resignation of Dhananjay Munde in the matter unless he is proven guilty. There are reports that Ajit Pawar has been put under a lot of pressure by the BJP, the home minister Amit Shah and the Maharashtra Chief minister and home minister Fadnavis. Under relentless pressure from Maharashtra's opposition parties and the people, Fadnavis had to bow down to the demand of applying MOCCA against all the accused in the murder case including Walmik Karad.

Walmik Karad was the kingpin of the gangster mafia operations of illegal sand mining, transportation of dry fly ash to cement factories under contract, transportation of coal to the power plant from the railway station, unauthorised and illegal sale and transportation of wet ash to small scale industries and brick manufacturers through a fleet of hundreds. He also controlled the appointments and transfers of bureaucrats and the police in the district. The police were used to arrest people at his wish. One of the erstwhile collectors is on record that he sat in his office with a loaded revolver during his tenure. Suresh Dhas described the entire operation as a power of attorney given by the minister Dhananjay Munde, who was earlier the guardian minister, to Walmik Karad. It is ironic to note that Walmik Karad was also close to Suresh Dhas earlier but both of them fell apart after Dhananjay Munde and Karad tried to expand their operations into Suresh Dhas's constituency. It's a war for territory as well. Karad is reportedly having properties running into hundreds of crores in both agriculture and real estate in Beed, Solapur, Pune and abroad. Dhananjay Munde's wife

and Karad are partners in a logistical company involved in transportation of dry fly ash, where Dhananjay Munde was also a director earlier.

But this is nothing new. Gopinath Munde, nurtured by BJP for their social engineering with the active support of Pramod Mahajan, a darling of the corporates, mainly the Ambanis, has systematically built the entire empire. Gopinath Munde has been responsible for the expansion of BJP amongst the OBCs in Maharashtra. Both of them unfortunately had to face tragic, unexplained and unnatural deaths. Pankaja Munde, her sister and their cousin Dhananjay Munde continued to dominate this political economic empire in the district. Pankaja Munde was allegedly involved in corrupt practices in the supply of eatables to the schools. She is also reportedly owning breweries with uninterrupted water supply even during droughts in a water starved Marathwada.

With newer revelations Dhananjay Munde is under increasing pressure to resign. Both Karad and Dhananjay Munde can be troublesome to the Mahayuti and especially to NCP Ajit Pawar if they choose to spill the beans. The internal contradictions in the Mahayuti, BJP's efforts to reduce the influence of both Ajit Pawar and Shinde in the long term has resulted into numerous delays in formation of the government, allotment of the portfolios and assigning of the guardian ministers, in spite of a brute majority manufactured by alleged manipulation of the election process with active connivance of the Election Commission.

Just before this incident in Beed, the adjoining district of Parbhani, having a significant population of Matang and other dalits witnessed an instigated violence by the hindutva forces. The Dalits

came out on the streets in protest after a statue of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was damaged by the hindutva forces. The police next day unleashed a combing operation to arrest the Dalit youths who had participated in the demonstrations. Police brutally assaulted the youth by entering the houses. There have been reports of assault on private parts of women as well. A Dalit youth studying in the 3rd year of law was subjected to severe torture and he died in the custody. The post-mortem report has very clearly brought out the internal hemorrhage due to several severe injuries on the back. Another Dalit leader who had a role to play in calming down the youth and persuading them not to become violent was labelled as the accused number one. He died of severe cardiac arrest. The chief minister and the home minister Fadnavis backed up the police on the floor of the house. When the government approached the family of the student with a cheque of Rs. 10 lakhs as compensation, the family refused to accept the cheque and instead demanded justice. So far no action whatsoever has been taken on the police officials responsible for the custodial murder.

The Dalit organizations in Parbhani district have started a long March for justice to Mumbai. Dalit and left organizations in Mumbai have come forward to organise support for the March when it arrives in Mumbai. The double standards in dealing with the injustices inflicted on the dalits are starkly evident in this BJP rule.

The situation is more or less the same in almost all the districts. Only the persona dramatis change!

While the Marathwada storms have not subsided a new storm is brewing in the parliamentary constituency of Eknath Shinde's

son. In a school run by owners affiliated to organizations in the RSS stable, 2 girls below the age of 4 were subjected to sexual assault by the accused Akshay Shinde a contractual housekeeping helper. He was arrested. There have been huge demonstrations in Badlapur including in the railway station against the school. The parents who protested were arrested and paraded with hands tied by rope by the police. The CCTV cameras required to be provided as per school regulations were not working. The police have not yet taken any action on the owners of the school.

Akshay Shinde was imprisoned in Taloja jail. A four year old case was opened up and the police took custody of Akshay Shinde to take him to the court. And then the police came out with news that Shinde tried to seize a revolver from the police and run away. The police fired in self defence with the bullet piercing his head. Almost all political parties welcomed this encounter killing as instant justice meted out to Shinde for his heinous crime. But there were several voices raised against the encounter killing and the parents of Akshay Shinde approached the court for justice which ordered for a magisterial report. The report was submitted to the court in a sealed envelope. The report has demolished the police theory and has recommended a trial of four police personnel accompanying Shinde. A fair trial was denied and the due process of law was not followed. The encounter killing had a backdrop of the assembly elections. With the killing of Akshay Shinde the possibilities of finding out the Truth in the matter has also been killed. But the owners of the school are free and the Mahayuti candidate has won the assembly election in Badlapur. 

## People's Literature Festival held in JNU

The AISA JNU organized the 2nd People's Literature Festival (January 18–19, 2025) to celebrate the art of resistance across the globe, dedicating it to the steadfast resilience of the Palestinian people amidst the ongoing genocide by the state of Israel.

The festival began with a session titled "The Ongoing Genocidal War in Palestine: The Resistance for Liberation", featuring a distinguished panel of academicians: Achin Vanaik (retired professor, Delhi University), Amir Ali (faculty member, JNU) and Soumyabrata Chowdhary (retired professor, JNU). The speakers examined the courageous struggle of Palestinians for freedom in the face of overwhelming adversity.

The second session revolved around a discussion of the book "This Too is India", edited by the acclaimed Geeta Hariharan. Panelists Geeta Hariharan, Ayesha Kidwai (former professor, JNU), and Brahma Prakash (faculty member, JNU) delved into the themes of diversity and dissent that underpin the work. They highlighted how marginalized and minority communities in India express defiance through literature, citing examples like Gurram Joshua's Dalit epic Gabbilam (The Bat), a poignant response to Kalidasa's Meghadutam. In this work, the bat carries its dissent to celestial beings, offering a powerful critique of societal inequities.

The third session showcased the documentary "Zameer" by the renowned feminist author and activist Uma Chakravarti. The film chronicles the harrowing experiences of Adivasi, Dalit, and Muslim women wrongfully imprisoned as political prisoners. The fourth session featured poetry readings by seven prominent contemporary Hindi poets. The first day concluded with a cultural program featuring powerful performances by Kumar Himanshu, Yusra Naqvi, and Wafa Akbar (students of JNU). They performed revolutionary songs by Habib Jalib, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Mehdi Hassan, and others, honouring the sacrifices and struggles of those who continue to resist oppression and injustice.

The second day of the People's Literature Festival began with the session titled "Hindi in the 21st Century and Intersectional Discourse."

**(Continued on Page 36)**

## Johar Jharkhand Campaign

*Manoj Bhakt*

**T**he Johar Jharkhand Sankalp Abhiyan has been launched to further strengthen and broaden the political mobilization against the communal fascist attack in the state. This campaign is highlighting the issues of unemployment, migration and corporate loot prevailing in Jharkhand. It is an initiative to strengthen mass resistance against the privatization of mineral wealth and the public sector in the state.

This campaign will conclude with the party state conference on 22-24 April. In the course of this campaign, we shall celebrate Bhagat Singh's martyrdom day on 23 March, and Ambedkar Jayanti and the 25th anniversary of Comrade Gurudas Chatterjee's martyrdom on 14 April. In the meantime, we shall also mobilize for the national conference of the All-India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICTU) on 24-26 February.

Comrade Mahendra Singh's martyrdom day, on 16 January 2025, marked the first stop of the Johar Jharkhand Sankalp Abhiyan. CPIML Politburo member and former MLA Vinod Singh, while addressing the martyrdom day meeting at Bagodar on January 16 said that the Modi government is neither concerned about the workers nor does it realize the pain and suffering of the migrant workers of Jharkhand. The corporate world has got "achhe din" whereas for the poor it's been a time of trouble. Vinod Singh is leading several padayatras of the Johar Jharkhand Sankalp Abhiyan in the Giridih district.

### Comrade Mahendra Singh Martyrdom Day

Addressing a huge public gathering on the 20th anniversary of Comrade Mahendra Singh's martyrdom, Comrade Dipankar Bhattacharya, the CPI(ML) General Secretary, congratulated the people of Jharkhand for inflicting a crushing defeat on the BJP in the state elections, but warned the people that with the BJP in power at the central level, the threat to Jharkhand remains real.

"Johar to Jharkhand, Salute to the land of Comrade Mahendra Singh, but now the BJP is in power in the entire country and Baba Saheb Ambedkar had warned us that if power goes into the wrong hands, they can misuse the Constitution. Today power has gone into the wrong hands and they are misusing the Constitution. Therefore, we will have to fight the battle of justice and democracy with more strength and in a more comprehensive manner." He spoke.

Commenting on the last assembly elections, he observed that in an effort to win the elections in Jharkhand, the BJP tried to divide Jharkhand along communal lines. The Chief Ministers of Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and many central ministers were used for propaganda, but all the conspiracies failed, he remarked.

He invoked Comrade Mahendra Singh's legacy to elaborate on the anti-fascist strategies that the people of Jharkhand now require. "Comrade Mahendra Singh's relationship with the public was not just a relationship of taking and giving votes. It was a relationship of being

together with them in their happiness and sorrow. It was a relationship of partnership in shared struggles. Your huge presence today is living proof of that relationship.”

“Comrades Vinod Mishra and Mahendra Singh used to say that the big problems of society are resolved by struggles on the streets. We struggle inside the Assembly as well, while our struggle continues on public issues outside the Assembly as well. It does not matter if we lose an election or two, like we lost the Bagodar seat this time. We have two MLAs in the Jharkhand Assembly – and these are comrades who brought the legacy of AK Roy into the party. With the merger with the Marxist Coordination Committee (MCC), our party has grown and our responsibility has also increased. We will move forward together waving the flag of CPIML by fighting for the people of Jharkhand.

## **Johar Jharkhand Sankalp Abhiyan**

As part of this campaign, protests were organized across the state against the derogatory remarks made by Amit Shah against Ambedkar in the Rajya Sabha. In the padyatras, the leaders of CPIML exposed the malafide intentions of the BJP and the Sangh Parivar. Meanwhile, on 24 December 2024, hundreds of girl students took out a protest march on GT Road under the banner of AISA against the rape of a minor girl in Bagodar. On 30 December, a big mobilization happened in the villages against corruption, and the people resolved to start a movement on public issues.

On the same day, a demonstration was held at Palamu district headquarters against harassment of Dalits and women. Such incidents are increasing continuously in Palamu. On 31

December – the Memorial Day of Comrade Fetal Singh – hundreds of tribals and CPIML workers gathered at the Ranka turn in Garhwa and resolved to intensify the struggle to protect the water, forest and land of Jharkhand.

In the first week of January, a public rally was held in Birni (Giridih), following which several padyatras were organized in the villages against increasing crime rates and protection of criminals by the police, and against false cases against CPIML workers. Huge mobilizations were organized against the police in the villages on 7 January, and in Birni on 10 January. Through padyatras in Ramgarh, Hazaribagh and Latehar districts, a call for unity was given to save water, forest and land from corporate loot. Politburo member and former MLA Comrade Anand Mahato called to intensify the struggle against capitalist forces through his continuous programmes.

In the Koylanchal, agitations were held in Dhanbad and Bokaro against the behaviour of the companies towards workers. In the Gopinathpur Colliery of Dhanbad, the outsourcing company tried to terrorize the workers and villagers with the help of BJP goons, but the agitation continued under the leadership of CPIML MLA Arup Chatterjee and finally the management had to bow down. On January 9, the workers started a work boycott in the switchyard of Bokaro Thermal against the abuse of workers by the contractors and the arbitrariness in determining the category of workers. Later, the workers, under the leadership of AICCTU state president Comrade Vikas Singh, forced the contractors to express regret and negotiate with the workers.

Recalling the experiences of working with Com Mahendra Singh as an MLA, CPIML MLA Arup Chatterjee

said that Comrade Mahendra Singh was the most powerful voice in the House and on the streets for the working classes of the state. Even today, only CPIML raises its voice on the problems of Sahia, Jal Sahiya, Rasoiya, Para-Teachers and other contractual workers. CPIML stands with the struggles of the working class and will carry forward the legacy of Comrade AK Roy, Comrade Mahendra Singh and Comrade Gurudas Chatterjee. The Johar Jharkhand Sankalp Abhiyan entered the second phase from January 17.

## **Convention of Railway Employees**

Congratulating the railway employees on their victory in the trade-union elections, on the plank of demanding recognition of the Indian Railway Employees' Federation (IREF) at a convention of railway employees on January 17 in Dhanbad, Comrade Dipankar Bhattacharya said, “The construction of the Ram Mandir has neither brought about freedom, nor will it solve the issue of livelihood. Mohan Bhagwat is not only maligning our freedom struggle but he is also deviating from the real issue of livelihood. The Modi government is privatizing the railways.”

“The railway employees can tell how privatization is taking away their livelihood. This is not just a question of railways. Through the privatization of all public sectors and resources, the Modi government has taken away employment from the youth. It has taken away the livelihood of the people. Therefore, the struggle against privatization is a struggle for livelihood for the people's rights. For the youth, it is a struggle for employment and for the workers, it is a struggle for their jobs and pension. We can win this battle only by fighting with complete unity.” Com. Dipankar said. ■

## CPIML MP Raja Ram Singh Calls for Enforcement of 8-hour Work Day, Condemns Corporate CEOs Advocating Overwork

**C**PI(ML) Lok Sabha MP from Karakat (Bihar) Comrade Raja Ram Singh, a Standing Committee Member on Labour, Textile, and Skill Development, has written to Labour Minister Dr. Mansukh Mandaviya, condemning recent statements by corporate leaders advocating excessively long working hours. Raja Ram Singh highlighted remarks by L&T Chairman SN Subrahmanyam, who reportedly lamented being unable to enforce Sunday work, and Infosys co-founder Narayana Murthy, who suggested a 70-hour work week to boost productivity.

Raja Ram Singh, in the letter dated January 10 said that, the 8 hour work day is a product of great struggle, one for which lives were sacrificed. India's legalised 8 hour working day came with the 1946 Amendment to the Factories Act of 1934 – a result of the Bill introduced by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar as Labour Member in the Viceroy's Executive Council. Section 51 of the Factories Act mandates that “no adult worker shall be required or allowed to work in a factory for more than forty-eight hours in any week.” and Section 51 mandates that “no adult worker shall be required or allowed to work in a

factory for more than nine hours in any day”. His letter draws attention to the health risks and reduced productivity caused by overwork, citing studies linking long shifts to stress, cognitive issues, and other ailments.

The CPI(ML) MP He called for immediate government intervention to ensure the strict enforcement of labour laws, stressing that companies must not compel workers to exceed the legally mandated 48-hour workweek. He also urged penalties for violations and emphasised the need to protect workers' rights amid rising corporate pressure.

This demand for action comes as India's workforce continues to endure some of the longest working hours globally that reflects the growing exploitation of labour under the guise of productivity. ■

## Resist the UGC Draft Guidelines 2025!

The following statement on the recent UGC Draft Guidelines 2025 was issued by All India Students' Association (AISA) on January 13, 2025:

**I**n a world where higher education is increasingly being seen as a commodity, the University Grants Commission's (UGC) Draft Guidelines 2025 emerge as the quintessential blueprint for transforming Indian universities into corporate training grounds. Under the guise of reform and in alignment with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, these regulations promise to revolutionize academia, but in reality, they seem intent on dismantling the very foundations of academic rigor, social justice, and inclusivity. These guidelines in their pursuit of 'flexibility' and 'innovation,' ignore the realities

of marginalized communities and threaten to turn education into a marketplace.

In a bold move that redefines academic achievement, the UGC Draft Guidelines introduce the concept of 'notable contributions' as the new gold standard for faculty recruitment and promotion. Gone are the days when teaching, research, and academic service were the pillars of an academic career. Now, to be considered for a faculty position, one must fulfill at least four out of nine specified 'notable contributions.' These include: Innovative Teaching Contributions, Research or Teaching Lab Development, Community

Engagement and Service etc. While these criteria may sound progressive on paper, they are steeped in privilege. They favor those with resources, networks, and institutional backing, making it nearly impossible for candidates from marginalized communities to compete. For those who have spent years honing their craft in underfunded institutions, these arbitrary metrics are nothing short of a barrier to entry. Its clear now: the UGC has redefined academic excellence to ensure that recruitments remain an uphill battle for entry-level candidates from marginalized communities by exacerbating existing inequalities.

In another stroke of genius, the UGC has decided to do away with the 10% cap on contractual appointments, effectively opening the floodgates to the casualization of teaching positions. The result? A future where faculty members

are hired on temporary contracts constantly worried about their next paycheck, and devoid of job security. This move is framed as a way to introduce ‘flexibility’ into the system, but in reality, it’s about creating a class of teachers who are too insecure to challenge exploitative practices.

The lack of tenure means that faculty members will no longer have the freedom to voice dissent or challenge institutional policies. After all, who can speak truth to power when they’re afraid of losing their job? The UGC Draft Guidelines are thus not only a direct attack on academic freedom but also a way to weaken any resistance to neoliberal policies that prioritize profit over pedagogy.

And if you think that’s the worst of it, think again. The introduction of the Professor of Practice (PoP) position allows universities to hire professionals from non-academic fields to teach. This provision spells doom not only in terms of growing intervention of private businesses and corporates in the academia and within the existing university governance model, but also in terms of the divisive strategy of creating yet another layer of faculty members who cannot be easily organized in trade unions or on wider concerns of the teaching fraternity due to the propensity for such appointments to be doled out more as a favor than on the basis of proven academic credential.

One of the most alarming aspects of the UGC Draft Guidelines is the centralization of power in the hands of the government. The guidelines propose changes to the appointment of Vice-Chancellors (VCs), giving Chancellors or Visitors—often the state Governor—the authority to form three-member selection committees to appoint

*The erosion of state autonomy in higher education governance is not just a technicality—it’s a direct attack on the ability of regional governments to tailor education policies to the specific needs of their communities.*

VCs, sidelining state governments in the process. This move not only reduces the autonomy of state governments but also threatens to undermine the diversity and inclusivity that are central to India’s higher education system.

States like Tamil Nadu, which have historically implemented progressive policies to promote social justice in education, will now find it increasingly difficult to protect their higher education systems from central interference. The erosion of state autonomy in higher education governance is not just a technicality—it’s a direct attack on the ability of regional governments to tailor education policies to the specific needs of their communities. This is not just a case of bureaucratic overreach; it’s a deliberate move to centralize control and stifle the kind of regional innovation that has often been the hallmark of India’s educational diversity.

The UGC Draft Guidelines should be viewed within the larger context of the NEP 2020, which is nothing short of a blueprint for the corporatization of education and further marginalization of those who already exist at a disadvantaged position in society. The guidelines through a push for the privatization of higher education and an open invitation to the corporate players to take over academia are turning students into mere consumers. The

backdoor push for NEP’s contentious four-year undergraduate program by legitimizing it as a qualification for faculty recruitment along with the Professor of Practice clause are perfect examples of this shift, as it gatekeeps marginalized students unable to access such graduate programs on one hand while on the other it allows non-academic professionals to step into the classroom, bypassing the need for actual academic credentials.

This is not just a problem for students and teachers; it’s a threat to the very idea of education itself. By turning education into a marketable commodity, the UGC is making it clear that the needs of the corporate world will always come first. The result? A generation of students who are trained to be workers, not thinkers, and a generation of teachers who are reduced to temporary contract workers with no job security or academic freedom.

The UGC Draft Regulations 2025 are not just a set of guidelines—they are a direct attack on the values of social justice, inclusivity, and academic freedom that have long been the cornerstone of India’s higher education system. By prioritizing corporate interests, political control, and arbitrary metrics over academic rigor and social justice, the UGC is paving the way for an education system that serves the few, not the many.

It is time for all stakeholders—students, educators, policymakers, and civil society—to come together and oppose these regressive policies. We must demand a return to an education system that prioritizes academic freedom, inclusivity, and social justice over market-driven objectives. The future of India’s higher education system depends on it. ■

# Atma Deep Bhabo: The Epic Journey of a Radical Pathbreaker

▲ ARINDAM SEN

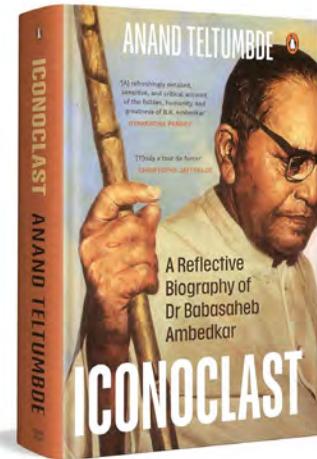
“Babasaheb Ambedkar for me is not just a person, but he also personifies the movement that shaped the life of over 200 million people. His story therefore is simultaneously the saga of that struggle too. More importantly, he is not part of the bygone past but is a live force, perhaps more powerful than during his lifetime, that is still impacting the future of millions, not only of the living ones but also of those who are yet to be born. My objective therefore is to tell his story in a manner that would facilitate people to understand the forces that shaped their lives and enable them to assume agency to rethink their present.”

This is from the Preface to the book under review. When a biography is written with a lofty goal like this, it becomes a veritable tool of ideological struggle -- a struggle to rediscover and popularise the real radical Ambedkar from behind the smoke screen of *bhakts*, and also from the official conspiracy of misrepresenting and misappropriating him only as a wise statesman who wrote the Constitution of India. The *Iconoclast* seeks to challenge and repudiate this imagery, best captured in the iconic statue of Ambedkar holding the Constitution, with the index finger on his other, stretched hand pointing to the (old) Parliament. In sharp contrast with this now ubiquitous stolid statue, the book cover sports a representational image of an old, rugged warhorse moving ahead with a big *danda* in his hand

and determination writ large on his face, reflecting Ambedkar's life-long struggle for social justice and equality.

Turn over the cover, go to the Preface. There you will find the author explaining why he chose this eloquent and very suggestive title and why it is critical not to forget that Ambedkar was, first and foremost, the most influential iconoclast of modern India:

“Babasaheb Ambedkar is depicted by many adjectives and metaphors with the surprising exception of what he defined himself, as an ‘iconoclast’, the breaker of icons. ... He spoke of ‘dynamiting’ the Hindu Dharmashastras, ‘destroying’ the religion of rules and discarding the Hindu Gods, ... also the big stalwarts of his time including the greats like John Maynard Keynes, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Bertrand Russel...It is in his iconoclastic zeal that he discarded his own opinions and judgements akin to demolishing himself without batting an eyelid that stunned others as astounding inconsistencies. It is an irony that he himself became one of the greatest icons in history. I chose the title that represents the essence of Ambedkar's life and his rationalist zeal, which is what his followers need to imbibe. His *iconization* is not just a matter of intrinsic devotion of the grateful people; *it is being competitively promoted by politicians of all hues to deradicalize Ambedkar and depoliticize Dalits. It has become a major fulcrum for electoral politics in the country. It is*



*‘Iconoclast: A Reflective Biography of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar’*  
Anand Teltumbde, India Viking,  
November 2024

*vital that he is presented as his true persona, an Iconoclast.”*

We have added the emphasis above to underscore one of the author's chief concerns in writing this exceptional biography. Anand continues, without a break:

“The method of meeting such an objective through a biography, I thought, lies not just in presenting the life story dispassionately but also in supplementing it with my reflections. ... My reflections are in the form of comments, question marks, and discussions on the points I thought were consequential to the lives of Dalits as well as others.”

Judiciously using such forms of reflections or interventions, Anand opens up a very substantial dialogue with his readers, activists and social scientists, a conversation on how to correctly interpret Ambedkar's key ideas and creatively work for realisation of his vision. This can be effectively done, he asserts, not in contention but in cooperation with other left and

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Ambedkar saw *Atma Deep Bhabo* or ‘be a torch unto yourself’, taken from the Buddha, as a guiding principle in his life and this was his parting advice to his followers on the occasion of Buddha Dharma Diksha on 14 October, 1956 at Nagpur.

democratic forces. In many places in the book, and in other writings, he pleads for militant unity of Dalit and Left organisations and regrets the lack of that. While narrating the great industrial strike in Bombay (1938), in which both the CPI and the ILP (Independent Labour Party) were actively engaged, he observes,

“The strike paved the way for the coming together of the two streams (Dalit and communist) of working-class movements but none would use it. While communists would be wary of sharing Ambedkar’s anti-Congress stance, as it decided to work with Congress as an anti-imperialist peoples’ front, ... and Ambedkar would keep blurting out his resentment against the attitude of the communists. For instance, just a year back in a district conference of the Depressed Classes at Masur in early September 1937, he had declared that he was a confirmed enemy of the communists who exploited labourers for their political end.”

The excessive harshness of the above statement was perhaps uncalled for, but Anand did not hesitate to report this to his readers. His unbiased attitude shows up here, as in other places.

But before proceeding further, it would be better to share with our readers some quick facts about *Iconoclast*. It includes, in addition to a very thought-provoking preface, a long list of notes and references, a very detailed index, and a gallery of photographs covering Ambedkar’s entire life. As expected, the get-up is very good. But Penguin fails, at least in the PDF version which this reviewer got hold of, to do justice to its reputation as a publishing house when it comes to proofing. There are many typos, and at least in one instance the same photograph is displayed twice, with two separate titles. It is worth remembering that the book was in the final stages of editing when he was incarcerated under UAPA in connection with the

Bhima Koregaon Case. He could resume the interrupted work only when he was released on bail, after suffering a Covid attack in jail, in November 2022 and completed it in 2024.

In this highly impressive work, Anand smoothly criss-crosses past and present, biography and political discourse, theory and practice – all in the wide backdrop of India’s fight to free whatever democracy we still have from the tightening grip of Fascist Hindutva. It is this expansive panorama, duly matched by the sharp, deep analysis and strongwilled straightforwardness characteristic of Anand, that makes the book a real page-turner.

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***“The motivation behind writing this book... is to urge the new generation of Dalits not to become sectarian devotees of Ambedkar, but rather to see him as an integral part of their liberation struggle and to learn from his legacy.”*** -- Preface

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While highlighting Ambedkar’s great ideals, initiatives and achievements in the face of tremendous upper caste resistance throughout life, severe financial constraints up to mid life and in the last ten years, devastating health conditions resulting largely from excessive labour (according to his first English-language biographer Dhananjay Keer, during the last few weeks Ambedkar actually worked himself to death) Anand does not shy away from pointing out a number of what he considers serious misconceptions or unacceptable statements. For instance, he holds Ambedkar’s “Communist Phobia” of the last few years partly responsible for the extreme anti-communist sectarianism in Dalit movement today.

But do not such critical comments help the Ambedkar bashers? Not at all. They have their own paid intellectuals,

who routinely supply all materials that could be used for propaganda purposes. Constructive criticism -- actually self criticism in Anand’s case, given that he is one of the most resourceful and articulate organic intellectuals of Dalits in India -- actually help the movement rectify mistakes, attract broader forces and reenergise itself. We in the CPI(ML) can vouch for this cardinal fact on the basis of our own experience.

Anand presents Ambedkar, mainly in *Iconoclast* and also in other works, in a way that bears close resemblance with Ambedkar’s method of presenting the life and teachings of the Buddha, and he says this himself. Once Ambedkar settled for mass conversion to Buddhism as a way of escaping the curse of caste, he took upon himself the Herculean task of radically reformulating Buddhism and crafting a new, third version or “third way” of that religion -- *Nayayana*, after the old ones, the *Mahayana* and *Hinayana*. In this reinterpretation or reformulation of Buddhism, he picked up the core ideas and principles of the Buddhist tradition, highlighted the most humane, rational and relevant ones and discarded the unacceptable tenets and rituals which he believed had accumulated over the post-Buddha millennia, thus adapting the new version as an aid to social reform and as a moral foundation of society in the modern era.

Largely in a similar spirit, *Anand separates and upholds what is essential, rational and relevant today in Ambedkar’s oeuvre, and keeps aside what seems to be superfluous, dated or inaccurate, as part of history*. This is an extremely important work, which will help the people of India, Dalits and other followers in particular, to know the essential Ambedkar -- the tireless explorer in politics, the iconoclast who also had a vision of radical reconstruction of India’s society and

polity in the highest ideals of Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. This may also help clear many doubts about Ambedkar in Left circles and make it easier for Left and Dalit/ Dalit Bahujan organisations to bury the hatchet and carry forward the legacy of the short-lived camaraderie between us in the 1930s against our common enemies, Brahmanism and Capitalism.

In this very substantial work, the author has done a great job at highlighting and elucidating the core ideas of Ambedkar's political philosophy in their specific historical setting and simultaneously also in terms of the present Indian conditions. On issues where Ambedkar's position changed subtly or drastically over time, he has diligently referenced and linked up the shifts and pointed out the plausible reasons behind these helping the reader get a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Most important, as an interpreter and communicator of Ambedkar's socio political views, he has not allowed his reverence for Babasaheb come in the way of an impartial judgement and dispassionate, truthful portrayal of the esteemed leader. On a good many points, he joins issues with Ambedkar, at times in very strong words.

For example, Anand forcefully contradicts Ambedkar's rejection of a proposal to include the words socialist and secular in Article 1 of the constitution, and another proposal of a Proportional Representation System (PRS) for elections to legislatures. In both cases he repudiates Ambedkar's arguments in detail, point by point. Opposing Ambedkar's assertion that with the provision of the Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy the socialist principles were already embodied in our Constitution, he asks, "Did the fundamental rights with leaks and directive principles without teeth make up for Socialism?" Anand's own answer is, "neither the

Constitution was secular nor socialist; the fundamental rights and directive principles, which actually were good-sounding provisions but without any force were just subterfuges to delude people into believing that the Constitution had all that they desired." Given that the FRs and DPs are not legally enforceable, Anand seems to be standing on stronger legal grounds vis-à-vis Ambedkar. His position was further corroborated when, weeks after *Iconoclast* was published, the SC rejected a batch of petitions seeking deletion of the words "secular" and "socialist" especially because the words were included in the Preamble, which forms part of the basic structure of the constitution.

We might go on like this, but let us conclude with two brief observations.

We in the CPI (ML) are alive to the fact that Ambedkar today is a much stronger influence in our country and in some other countries than when he walked the earth. We are happy that the *Iconoclast*, which many believe is Anand's best production so far, affirms this.

*Iconoclast* appears on the scene exactly when it is most needed. It comes in the wake of a welcome surge in serious Ambedkar studies in India and abroad, which forms part of a growing ideological resistance against the neoliberal-far right aggression on democracy. In our country this attack is spearheaded by a Hindu Raj, about which the visionary in Ambedkar forewarned us right at the moment of birth of the Democratic Republic of India. The urgent need of the hour is to strengthen this resistance in the arenas of mass movement and, no less important, on the ideological front, the two being closely interconnected. We earnestly believe that *Iconoclast* will make a crucial contribution here and help bridge the gulf between what Anand calls "the two streams (Dalit and Communist) of the working class movements". ■

## People's Literature Festival

(From Page 30)...

Ashtosh Kumar (faculty member at Delhi University) and Ramayan Ram (Ambedkarite thinker) captivated the audience with their insights into the significance of intersectional thinking in both literature and everyday life. They delved into the intricacies of Dalit literature and Dalit feminism, emphasizing that Dalit literature is inherently a literature of resistance, deeply rooted in its movemental history. The speakers highlighted how this genre serves as a powerful voice against oppression and a testament to the struggles and aspirations of marginalized communities.

The second session was titled "Changing Contours of Indian Media: (Main) Stream and Beyond" and featured panelists Abhinandan Sekhri (co-founder of NewsLaundry), Saurabh Shukla (The Red Mike), and Asmita Nandy (documentary filmmaker and journalist). The third session, titled "Devalued Labour and Dehumanised Existence: Roots of Women's Oppression," featured Professor Sucharita Sen (faculty member, JNU) and trade union activist and former JNUSU President and AICCTU leader Sucheta De, who critically examined the systemic invisibilization of women's labour. Professor Sen highlighted how capitalism thrives on unpaid female labour, using data to show how women's contributions have been erased for centuries. Comrade Sucheta De exposed the harsh realities of unorganised sector workers, including ASHA and Anganwadi workers, Jal Sahiyas, and contractual labourers, emphasizing how their indispensable contributions are dismissed by labelling them as volunteers, depriving them of basic labour rights.

The fourth session of the second day was dedicated to the protests and struggles of people both in India and around the world. The final session of the festival was an enchanting evening of Lok Geet (folk songs) performed by Comrade Raju and Comrade Mahender of Yuva Neeti from Bhojpur, accompanied by Souvik, a PhD scholar of JNU, on the tabla. Their songs, including "Ae Sajni Re, Piya Gaile Kalkatwa" by Bhikhari Thakur and "Hamni Deshwa ke Naya Rachwaiya Hain Ja" resonated with the audience, narrating the daily struggles of laborers and marginalized communities.

The 2nd People's Literature Festival stood as a powerful testament to the resilience of art and literature in fostering resistance and solidarity. ■

# Sisterhood, Turbulent Times And The City

▲ SOMENATH GUHA

**T**hese are complicated times, in a city like Mumbai one has to continuously struggle just to remain afloat. Over and above these, dhandha, dalali, politics of the meanest kind inevitably intrudes into everyone's lives. In Payal Kapadia's film 'All we Imagine as Light', Parvati is one of the three main characters whose husband used to work in a textile mill. Gradually the mills closed down, workers no longer come from Ratnagiri to work in the city. The city metamorphoses from a city of the organised working class, militant trade unions to one of malls and multiplexes. Parvati's husband dies and the local Dada pesters her to vacate the plot on which she is living. But Parvati won't budge, she has been living there for 22 years, she says, all the neighbours know her. But she has no *kagaj*, without it she has no existence, she may just vanish and no one will know. She looks through the window of a ramshackle cafe and wonders at the sky-kissing towers zooming up, the speed with which these promoters are going up they may soon reach the gods, she wonders.

'All we Imagine...' has been awarded the Grand Prix award at the much esteemed Cannes film festival. Earlier Chetan Anand's 'Nicha Nagar', based on Maxim Gorky's 'The Lower Depths' had won the award in 1946; Satyajit Ray's groundbreaking 'Pather Panchali' won the 'Best Human Document' award in 1956; Mrinal Sen's 'Kharij' won the jury award in 1983. The last time the Indian contingent had something to cheer about was in 1994 when Shaji Karun's

'Swayom' was selected for the Palme D'Or prize. No wonder three decades after when Payal was awarded she wished that no Indian would have to wait another 30 years to win a prize at the prestigious festival.

Politics and the Personal is nothing new in Payal's films. Politics is not merely meetings and rallies though there are snatches of it in her films, like the protest meeting against eviction in this particular film. But it is more evident when it suddenly emerges as a factor in the life of the protagonists. Anu's affair with Shiaz is tense as it's 'love jihad', Hindu girl in love with a Muslim boy. Anu says her family would never agree to their marriage, on the other hand when Shiaz invites Anu to their Chawl, he tells her to wear a burqa, 'or else they will be screwed', he warns. Shiaz is afraid, Always feel that I am putting you in trouble, he confesses. They move away from the city to a hamlet where searching for a secluded place they suddenly come across a graffiti 'Azadi'.

Politics is more pronounced in Payal's earlier film 'A Night of Knowing Nothing', which had won the prize for the best documentary film at Cannes. This film shows the protest movement against the installation of Gajendra Chouhan (who acted as Yudhishtir in 'Mahabharat') as the chairman of FTII (Film and Television Institute of India). Payal herself was thick into the movement for which she boycotted classes for four months and her stipend was also withheld. While the protests raged in the campus a student writes a love letter in which there is less love and more politics, the way students are being penalised

for striking, muslim youth being handcuffed and taken to a police jeep, the realities around her, the dreams, fantasias which become surreal.

The story in the film revolves around Parvati and two other women, Prabha and Anu, who work as nurse. We have seen that the latter is tangled in an uncertain relation while the husband of the former is away in Germany, 'the last time she phoned was one year ago'. Through all the vagaries of life the three women cling to each other, they find solace in each other, amidst a pitiless city which revels with its criss-crossing local trains, pouring rain, towering skyscrapers and the inevitable Ganapati Bappa. In the process the city itself becomes a character and lest we forget after the thumping victory of the Mahayuti its sprawling slums are now under Adani's hammer. Is Parvati's eviction the curtain-raiser for thousands losing their home and hearth in the days to come?

Payal's empathy for life is evident both within and outside her film. While receiving her award in her acceptance speech she thanked the workers without whose efforts and dedication the festival couldn't have been a success. Incidentally the workers organised under the banner 'The poverty behind the scenes' were agitating on two demands - to increase their wages commiserate with the increase in working hours, and to recognise them as entertainment wage-earners. Strangely the film didn't get any takers on the OTT platform. The show-timings at the malls were also odd. ■

# Professor (Comrade) Amiya Kumar Bagchi, 1936-2024

▲ SHUBHAM SHARMA

**A**miya Kumar Bagchi, the great Marxist economist passed away on 28th November 2024. He was 88 years old. He was born in Murshidabad in a middle-class household. A bright student since his school days he studied at the Presidency College, Calcutta followed by a doctoral degree in Economics from the University of Cambridge, UK. At the master's level, he stood first in the university. At Cambridge, he studied under the giants of the economics discipline such as Joan Robinson and Maurice Dobb. Before going to Cambridge, Bagchi was interested in game theory and quantitative economics. Whilst at Cambridge, his interests changed to economic history and Marxian economics. This was a time when the *longue durée* sociological study of economics was a prestigious pursuit. Dobb himself had written *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* which remains one of the most outstanding Marxist analyses of English and European economic history.

Amiya Bagchi's doctoral thesis, which was later published as *Private Investment in Colonial India, 1900-1939*, was a sectoral analysis of the Indian economy under colonial rule. The book included a chapter-wise study of cotton, jute, iron and steel, cement, sugar and paper industries in India. Bagchi showed that the industrial development of India least occupied the attention of the imperial bureaucrats ruling India. Only some sectors were marked by growth which was the result of the British encouragement of foreign trade in keeping up the reputation of the Government of India in the London money market. He also showed that

despite the budget surpluses emanating from the stability of the rupee under the gold exchange standard, the British government seldom invested in the development of India or reduced the tax burden on Indians. The tax system continued to be regressive, with land revenues constituting more than a third of the total revenues.

Bagchi's study also showed that up till 1914, the British practised a policy of complete free trade in India. After 1923, the government adopted a policy of tariff protection towards different Indian industries. This period also made the Indian industries taste blood. Buoyed by the charm of profits, within a decade the Indian bourgeoisie started merging their brooks with the Indian National Movement.

In the essays collected in *Colonialism and Indian Economy* published by the Oxford University Press, Prof. Bagchi further unmasked the role of British imperialism in de-industrializing India. In the chapter *De-industrialization in Gangetic Bihar, 1809-1901*, he showed that from 1809 to 1901 the percentage of the population engaged in the local cotton industry fell from 60% to 15.2%. Through district records, he showed that the Manchester (locally called Markin) cotton invasion had outpriced the country cloth as a piece of country cloth cost Rs. 1-4 whereas a piece of Markin cost less than half of the price. The impact of de-industrialization did not fit in the traditional (and comfortable) shift of labour from one sector to another. Since sole dependency on agriculture was made difficult due to British policies, the out-of-job weaver seasonally shifted to agriculture and returned to his

single handloom at home to produce coarse cloth for the poorer people. Bagchi concluded, "the survival of the handloom industry was more an index of the poverty of agriculture to which the policies pursued by the British government pushed the weavers and of the generally low level of ordinary Indians than of any innate strength of the handloom industry under the conditions of capitalist colonialism." The process of de-industrialization also had a domino effect on other industries such as tent-making, making of the ornaments of lac, bidriware, glasswork, making of toothpowder, manufacture of *sindur*, and blanket weaving.

Another important contribution of Prof. Bagchi was the article *Some International Foundations of Capitalist Growth and Underdevelopment* published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* in 1972. Among many important claims in the article, Prof. Bagchi showed that the assumption mainstream economists had about investment profitability in new industrial countries of North America in the 19th century was flawed as it did not take into account the exploitation of China, India, Indonesia and Latin American republics. It was not the competitive mechanism of trade (as mainstream economists would have it) but various forms of monopoly, pre-capitalist modes of exploitation, political control, violence and plunder that served as the instruments of unrequited surplus extraction. Every student of economics should read this paper before the spell of mainstream economics is cast on him/her.

Overall, Prof. Bagchi authored 9 books and edited 9 volumes. He regularly contributed to stellar Indian journals such as the *Economic and Political Weekly* and *Social Scientist*.

In his death, Marxism has lost a knight. In his death, Indian academia has lost a gem. His shoes are too big to fill. Adieu Comrade! ■

## **Ravi Kiran Jain**

Ex-president and one of the founder members of People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), senior advocate in Allahabad High Court and a fearless human rights defender Ravi Kiran Jain passed away on the night of 28-29 December at a hospital in Allahabad. He was among those few prominent voices in the country who fearlessly opposed state repression on activists, workers, peasants, minorities and other vulnerable sections. He had challenged many draconian laws in the court. He fought many cases of human rights violations in the court and provided relief for the victims.

He challenged attempts to undermine or distort the basic constitutional premises by the Congress regime since the 1970s, and later by the Modi-Shah BJP government, inside the courts as well as outside by putting forth his logical, constitutional and humane viewpoints. A relentless fighter for secularism, environmental justice, he was an open critique of the pro-corporate neo-liberal economic policies and used to lend his active support to every movement for the rights of the people. ■

## **Comrade SN @ S Natarajan!**

Hailing from a downtrodden community in Tirunelveli district, when working in B&C (Binny and Carnatic) Mills in Chennai, attracted by Naxalbari uprising and Charu Mazumdar, Comrade S Natarajan joined CPIML Liberation through workers struggles.

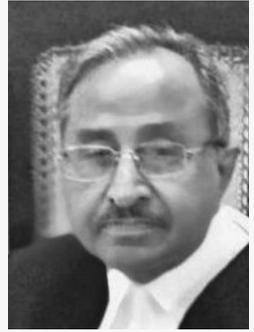
Comrade SN has worked with the popular trade union leaders including Anthony Pillai, R Kuchelar and WR Varadharajan (CITU) in the first trade union of the entire country, the Madras Labour Union (MLU) in Chennai. He had also been in the front of various struggles of workers as the general secretary of the union of thousands of workers. SN had been the state president of India People's Front (IPF) that was formed against the autocratic rule of Indira Gandhi. He led a long march of IPF from Kanyakumari to Chennai and the Gherao of Raj Bhavan to raise the voice of the Sri Lankan Tamils.

In his later years, he was associated with the struggles for restoring the rights of dalits on Panchami land and was also acting as the president of a forum named after a dalit stalwart, Thaathaa Rettaimalai Seenivasan. He was closer to dalit organisations and the ideology of dalit liberation at the later years of his life. We share the grief of his family, friends and comrades arising out of his sudden loss. The party expresses its deep condolences. Red Salute Comrade SN! ■

## **Comrade Advocate Satyaprakash Tripathi**

Comrade Satyaprakash Tripathi, a senior member of the CPI(ML) and an advocate at the Patna High Court, passed away on the night of January 14, 2025, at the age of 74. He had been unwell for a long time. Comrade Satyaprakash had represented our party in the Justice Amir Das Commission, which was set up to investigate the political connections of the Ranveer Sena.

Comrade Satyaprakash's passing is an irreparable loss to the party and the progressive movement. The party offers heartfelt tributes to him and expresses deep condolences to his bereaved family. He will forever remain immortal in the hearts of all who fight for justice and liberation. ■



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[liberation@cpiml.org](mailto:liberation@cpiml.org)

[www.liberation.org.in](http://www.liberation.org.in)

PH.: 91-11-42785864