

Liberation

MAY 2021

CENTRAL ORGAN OF CPI(ML)

Rs. 25

Modi Made Disaster: India Gasps for Breath



US Navy Violates India's Maritime Sovereignty

The US navy has openly stated that it has violated India's (and Maldives') maritime sovereignty, declaring in a statement "On April 7, 2021 (local time) USS John Paul Jones (DDG 53) asserted navigational rights and freedoms approximately 130 nautical miles west of the Lakshadweep Islands, inside India's exclusive economic zone, without requesting India's prior consent, consistent with international law. India requires prior consent for military exercises or maneuvers in its exclusive economic zone or continental shelf..."

In justification for these violations, it has asserted Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP), arguing that its actions are justified under international law. Such activities are however little else than bullying and an attempt to force the Indian govt into military subservience. This also points to the policy of surrendering Indian interests to Washington's diktats that the Modi government has taken by joining the so-called Quad alliance with Japan and Australia. By conducting such operations without prior consent, Washington is signaling that it expects New Delhi to be a client state rather than an equal partner in such an alliance.

The Modi government has always projected a muscular foreign policy as its major strength and has sought votes on such a basis, while it has surrendered to such bullying by the US. On one hand BJP has accused all opposition and protestors of being backed by foreign adversaries. On the other hand, by amending the FCRA, BJP has made it easier for foreign contributions to flow unchecked into the party coffers. Thus it remains open to speculation if Washington is buying influence in the BJP and chipping away at India's maritime rights.

Such violations are also a threat to India's security as well as a threat to Indian fishing vessels that operate on waters where the US seeks to expand its influence. The Indian government needs to stand up to such acts of bullying and make the US navy apologize before it can claim to have 'raised' India's global stature. □

Resist Duterte's Witch-Hunt in Philippines

The political situation in the Philippines continue to deteriorate under the fascist regime of Rodrigo Duterte. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government continues to terrorise the people through a spate of arrests and state sponsored violence. With the enactment of draconian Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, Duterte's regime has now embarked on a full scale witch-hunting (red-tagging) against labour rights and youth activists, peasant and indigenous leaders, and community organisations.

On April 15, 33-year old tricycle driver Pason, a member of urban poor group Kadamay and a member of Pasil Homeowners Association from Negros Island was assassinated. In a series of military operations between March 4-7, 2021, 9 labour and indigenous leaders and human rights activists were executed, just two days after Duterte's call to "kill" and "finish off" all "communist rebels" in the country. In February this year, the police raided and arrested 19 children studying in a school for displaced indigenous children in the Central Philippine city of Cebu on charges of being rebels. Police and authorities regularly invoke Anti-terror laws to harass and threaten leaders and members of indigenous communities in their movement for protection of their land against big corporate dam and mining companies.

Furthermore, people's initiatives amid the pandemic such as the Community Pantries, that look out for each other's needs through solidarity efforts and mutual aid have also come under attack by the regime's National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict and by the police. Despite the red tagging and threats, Community Pantries across the Philippines continue to stand strong and provide much needed support to the people who have been left to suffer and die of hunger by the Duterte government's ne-oliberal and anti-people policies.

Since Duterte came to power in 2016, tens of thousands, including women, children, and members of people's organisations have been summarily executed by government forces with absolute immunity under the pretext of 'War on drugs' and 'counter-insurgency'.

CPI(ML) expresses solidarity with the people of Philippines and their struggle against the Duterte regime's fascist repression! □



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CPI(ML) Foundation Day Call and Resolve

Serve the Suffering People and Strengthen the People’s Movement for Democracy and Justice

April 22, 2021 marks the fifty-second anniversary of the foundation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist). On this solemn occasion, we pay our respectful homage to all our martyrs and departed leaders and fondly remember comrades whom we lost in recent past. We extend our warm revolutionary greetings to all our members and well-wishers and the people of India who are fighting hard to save the country, the democratic constitutional framework of our polity and the rights of the people from the clutches of the fascist Modi regime. We express our solidarity and support for the progressive sections of Indian diaspora and the entire spectrum of anti-imperialist, anti-racist, anti-fascist movements and organisations in all parts of the world.

For the second successive year we are having to observe the foundation day of our party in the shadow of the Covid19 pandemic. In fact, even going by official figures which invariably underreport the incidence of cases and even deaths, the second wave has already assumed more serious proportions than the peak of the first wave last year. In most places, the healthcare system is reporting shortage of beds, medicine and vaccines. The government is trying to blame the people for the severity of the second wave, but the government’s own utter lack of preparedness, complacency and selective concession for massive violation of Covid protocol (like the Kumbh Mela and the road shows and mega rallies in the carelessly scheduled Bengal elections) are the reasons why India is having to pay such a heavy and prolonged price on the Covid front.

While failing to tackle the pandemic, the government has however been using the crisis aggressively as



an opportunity to promote corporate power and erode people's rights. New farm laws have been designed to hand over the reins of agriculture, especially agricultural marketing and much of agricultural production, to the Adanis and Ambanis, which has popularly come to be known as Company Raj. Labour laws introduced since the times of the freedom movement are being replaced with labour codes that will worsen the working conditions and terms of work and wages for workers and increase the powers of employers. The government's aggressive privatisation drive is systematically weakening and destroying the public sector and public property and handing over the entire national economy including the railways, airports, ports, banks and steel plants to a few corporate houses. The new education policy seeks to make education more private, expensive and digital, thereby eroding the right to education for children from deprived and disadvantaged backgrounds.

The people of India are of course boldly resisting this relentless attack on their existence and rights. After the powerful equal citizenship movement, we are now witnessing a historic farmers' movement. The working class movement

a g a i n s t

privatisation is showing signs of becoming a bigger social agenda and political campaign. Struggles of scheme workers and other extremely ill-paid and insecure women workers and informal and unorganised sector workers from Dalits and other deprived backgrounds are growing across the country. Millions of young Indians who are already fighting for education and employment are getting interested and involved in the farmers' movement and the anti-privatisation campaign. The change is beginning to get reflected in elections too and Bihar gave us a powerful glimpse of this growing potential.

The success achieved by the party in Bihar elections and the bold and consistent anti-fascist stand articulated by our party, especially in the context of West Bengal, has raised the party's profile in the Left movement and anti-fascist resistance. With bigger profile comes increased opportunity and greater responsibility. We must prepare ourselves accordingly and respond to the challenges with all our strength. It is necessary and possible to bring about a convergence of struggles of various sections as a unified and powerful people's resistance that will defeat the fascist offensive of the Modi-Shah-Yogi regime and the Sangh brigade. Comrades responded energetically to the challenge of elections last year in Bihar and now in the ongoing round in Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Assam and West Bengal. We must also prepare well for the coming rounds of elections in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. We stood with the suffering people during the first wave of the Covid19 pandemic, we must do the same to meet the challenges of the ongoing second wave.

On the 52nd anniversary of the party's foundation, let us renew our resolve and summon all our strength and energy to rise to the occasion.

Long live CPI(ML).

Long live revolution.

Central Committee, CPI(ML)-Liberation



Modi Shrugs Off Responsibility As India Gasps For Breath

Last year in the month of March, when many leaders of India's opposition were pointing out the Modi government's lack of planning and preparedness to deal with the coronavirus, the Union Health Minister accused of them 'petty politics' and 'spreading fear'. He confidently and loudly declared that the government is fully prepared to deal with any situation. While the Minister was fuming against India's political opposition, the Health Ministry was at the same time choosing to ignore warning from its own scientists from the ICMR who had already published research papers warning against a strict lockdown and a top-down approach to dealing with the pandemic. Not surprisingly, the government ignored the warnings. This arrogant, callous, ignorant and pompous response of the Union Health Minister along with a healthy dose of spin doctoring and data fudging, has been the go-to method of the Modi government to deal with the Covid pandemic that has engulfed the globe for over a year now.

Exactly one year since the national lockdown was announced, India is in the middle of a deadly second wave with no beds in hospitals, ambulances queuing up outside



hospitals, patients dying at the gates of hospitals, tests taking nearly a week to return a result and overflowing crematoriums. Many have lost family, friends and loved ones and when questions have been put to the government about its lack of preparedness, cabinet minister Piyush Goyal tells us that people are demanding too much oxygen! The Minister is essentially saying that we are all supposed to breathe carbon dioxide to reduce our oxygen consumption. Along with blaming people and their struggles to live for the pandemic, the Modi

government has been trying to pass on blame for the havoc caused by the second wave to the state governments. This needs to be called out at all levels. After taking all the crucial decisions unilaterally – such as the decision to impose a lockdown, to dictate testing policy and vaccine production and distribution – Narendra Modi now wants the States to bear the brunt of the second wave.

National Lockdown: Wasted

On 20 April 2021, PM Modi in another anodyne address to the nation said lockdown should be the last measure for countering the spread of the virus. But the same man said exactly the opposite a year ago! On 23 March 2020, he announced a national lockdown by giving a warning of just four hours. It was a decision taken without consulting any of the states. It was

Worst-Hit Country

Officially, by mid-April, India became the country with the world's second highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases, second only to the United States. However, it is widely held by experts that India is in fact the worst hit – the real horror of the situation is being suppressed by official numbers, by keeping testing low, and underreporting Covid-19 deaths.

the hardest lockdown imposed by any country, and left millions of workers hungry and without any means to survive. The lockdown, as it soon became evident, was a colossal waste. The only tangible outcome from it was the suffering and destitution of millions.

An investigation by journalists Nitin Sethi and Kumar Sambhav had revealed that Modi was told by scientists at the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) in April last year that the lockdown would help in preventing infections only to the tune of 20-25%. In a study conducted by the ICMR it emerged that the best use of the lockdown would be to prepare for an eventual surge of cases – which is exactly what we are witnessing today. What is clear now is that the Modi government, which unilaterally imposed the lockdown, totally failed to build up medical facilities, testing capacities, ICU beds and oxygen facilities. An announcement was made with much fanfare in October about the construction of Oxygen plants in 150 districts across India. An investigation by the news website Scroll has found that it took 8 months to just float tenders. Out of a planned 162 such plants, only 33 have been built. Such criminal lethargy has cost hundreds of lives in the second wave, where people are literally dying at hospital gates looking for oxygen. In UP, a journalist Vinay Srivastava literally live tweeted his death, as he failed to get admitted in a hospital and get an oxygen cylinder. The whole country is today paying for the carelessness of the Modi government to prepare for the second wave. While the spin doctors in the media might tell us that ‘all are equally’ responsible, this is just a ruse to hide the failures of the Modi government. Let us not forget that the Prime Minister

Delhi HC Slams Modi Government Over Handling of Covid-19 Crisis

The Delhi HC repeatedly ordered the Modi Government to divert all industrial oxygen towards hospitals, in view of the acute oxygen shortage in hospitals in Delhi and all over India. “Why is the Centre not waking up to the gravity of the situation? We are shocked and dismayed hospitals running out of oxygen but steel plants are running,” said the HC bench, adding “The steel and petrochemical industries are oxygen guzzlers and diverting oxygen from there can meet hospitals’ requirements. This is the height of greed. Is there no sense of humanity left or not?”

The HC also held the Central Government responsible for “criminal wastage of vaccines.” Referring to instances of hoarding of antiviral medicines, the HC said that if the Government failed to ensure supply of such medicines to hospitals on the basis of needs, it would have “blood on its hands.”

basically created a slush fund and called it PM CARES. There is no transparency about how all the funds collected have been utilized. Modi, who centralized all decision-making within the CMO, cannot now get away by saying that it is the responsibility of the states. The buck stops with him and his government.

Modi’s Hubris, the Biggest Killer

On 24 April 2020, V K Paul, a member of the Covid task force of the government of India in a press conference released a bizarre graph predicting India would flatten the infection curve by 16 May 2020. This was baffling to many who simply could not figure out the science behind this outrageous claim. In the early days of the epidemic, this attitude proved to instructive, as it was a telling symbol of the government’s priorities. The Modi government’s first priority has always been to declare victory and making ridiculous claims of Modi being the hero of India’s fight against Covid.

The government was of course helped in its triumphalist narratives by many in the media who lost

no chance to declare victory with Modi as the General and snigger at scientists, doctors and public health activists who warned against declaring victory too early.

On 7 March 2021, India’s Health Minister Harshvardhan declared ‘We are in the endgame of the Covid-19 pandemic in India. While we know that he has been proved spectacularly wrong, he cannot claim that the second wave ambushed the government. By September last year, scientists across the world had started detecting variant strains of the virus in different parts of the world. Variant strains can be identified through a method of genome sequencing; but again the Modi government was completely lax in its approach in carrying this out. It was only in January, when the spread of the UK strain was revealed, did we scale up gene sequencing in India. In February of this year, Dr. Randeep Guleria, AIIMS Director and member of the Covid Task force of the government of India, himself admitted in a discussion at the Jaipur Lit Fest that herd immunity is no guarantee against newer strains and till the population gets vaccinated there will always be danger of another

Chest-Thumping

On 21 February 2021, the National Office Bearers meeting of the ruling BJP in Delhi passed a resolution which spoke of the pandemic in the past tense, and declared: *“it can be said with pride that India defeated Covid under the able, sensitive, committed and visionary leadership of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi. The party unequivocally hails its leadership for introducing India to the world as a proud and victorious nation in the fight against Covid.”*

BJP’s and Modi’s chest-thumping of a few weeks ago seems to mock the Indians gasping for breath today.

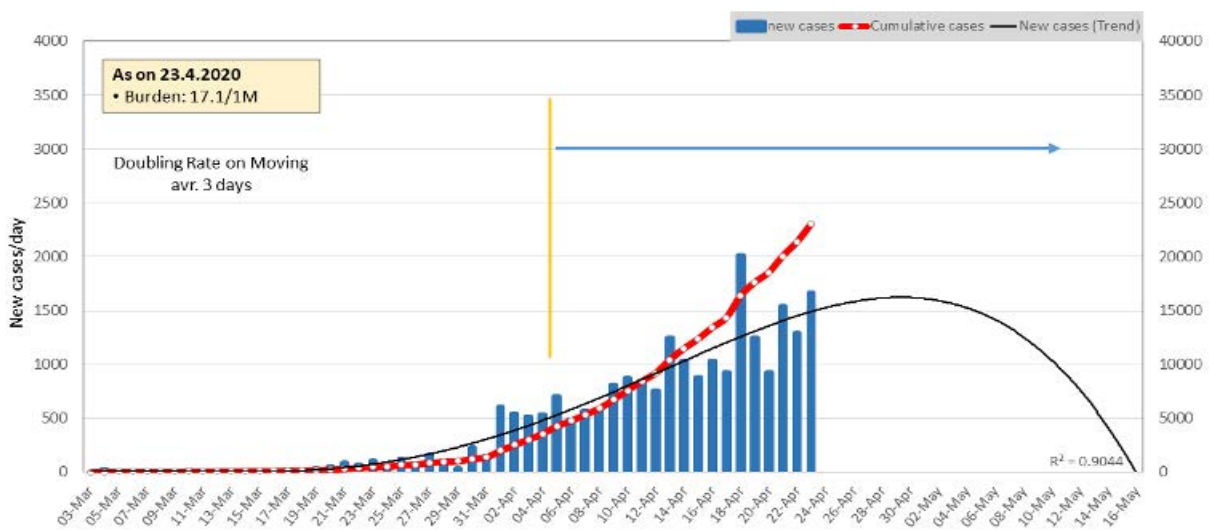
wave. But instead of listening to its own experts, the government and its spokespersons were happy to gloat about the unique immunity of Indians against the virus, even though the science was saying exactly the opposite.

Despite knowing the possibility of the outbreak of another round of infections, the Modi government and the BJP plunged the state of West Bengal into an eight-phase election (there is no point taking the name of the EC separately here because it has become an extension of the ruling party for

all practical purposes). It allowed the Kumbh Mela to go on, a place where literally millions congregated for nearly a week and became a veritable super spreader. Modi cannot escape responsibility for this by appealing to end the Kumbh when the main Shahi Snans have been completed. There are now reports galore from different parts of the country about pilgrims returning from Haridwar testing positive in huge numbers. Let us also not forget the thousands of maskless spectators that were allowed to see cricket matches in the ‘Narendra Modi Stadium’ in Ahmedabad.

Ministers of the government are today blaming ordinary people of lack of mask discipline and failing to follow distancing norms. This is being cited as the reason for the second wave. But is it really true? It is the Modi government which has been claiming since the end of last year that the virus has been defeated. Modi, at the World Economic Forum, claimed that India had defeated Covid. The messaging from the Prime Minister, the Health Minister, other ministers and MPs from the BJP over that last four months has been: we have defeated corona. In the face of such messaging, amplified by the IT Cell and spokespersons in the Media, it is not surprising that the perception among the general populace was that the virus was a thing of the past and with the vaccination program people would be safe. Blaming people for demanding too much oxygen or for not following precautions is totally irresponsible. It was Modi and the central government which has been announcing victory over the virus.

New, Cumulative Cases, Doubling Rate: COVID 19 - India



Graph Shown by VK Paul in April 2020

Turning around now and blaming people when the Prime Minister and the Home Minister attend election rallies and roadshows without masks is pure hubris and arrogance.

Vaccine Mess

Narendra Modi never loses any chance to claim that India is the vaccine maker of the world and that we can produce enough vaccines not just for our population but also for other countries who do not have similar infrastructure to produce vaccines. Such claims today ring hollow and feel a million miles away as India is grappling with an acute vaccine shortage which is not going to go away anytime soon whichever way the government spins it.

By October last year, it was clear that by the end of the year the world is going to have a number of vaccines at its disposal. The normal thing for any government to do would have been to invest in expanding production facilities and making advance commitments to purchase vaccines. But not the Modi government which was busy in a continuous PR exercise about its handling of the Coronavirus. It was only in January that the government gave a purchase order of 45 million doses, that too just five days before the start of the vaccination program on 17th January 2021 and for another 100 million in March 2021; whereas even to vaccinate the whole population above the age of 45 it would require 800 million doses. The Serum Institute which produces Covishield has a production capacity of 65-70 million doses per month and Bharat Biotech can produce around 5 million doses of Covaxin. The numbers point towards only one thing, India is staring down an acute shortage of vaccines. Added to this is a fund crunch for vaccine

Many Warned Of Second Wave

Epidemiologists all over the world have been warning of a second wave of Covid-19, and also warning of mutations that may be even more virulent than the original strain. In the first wave, India showed a relatively low death rate, which some sought to explain in terms of higher immunity of Indians. But many experts had warned that new strains might hit India harder.

Not just experts, Opposition politicians too had warned the government against complacency. Exactly a year ago, in April 2020 for instance, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi had warned that the "Lockdown is a pause button, it won't defeat Covid." Left parties, including the CPI(M), have been demanding an effective increase in public health infrastructure to cope with a fresh pandemic wave, as well as ensuring a safety net in the form of economic support and food rations for migrant workers and rural poor. The Government did none of this.

manufacturers. In November, the government announced a Rs. 900 crore project for covid vaccines but the actual manufacturers of the vaccines, the Serum Institute and Bharat Biotech have yet to receive anything from this project.

The time before the second wave hit us was the ideal period to maximize vaccinations. This did not happen because of two reasons. Firstly, the opacity surrounding the clinical trials of Covaxin prompted a wave of vaccine hesitancy and secondly the eligibility criteria was too narrow. As a result many who were less than 45 years of age and were willing could not get the vaccine. As the second wave hit us, there was a surge of demand and unsurprisingly, we are faced with an acute shortage of vaccines

with shortages being reported from Maharashtra, Odisha, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and many other states. As a result even the so called 'Teeka Utsav' was a damp squib with average vaccination numbers actually falling during that period. In the week the so called Utsav was held, the per day average of vaccinations actually fell from 3.6 million to 2.7 million per day. Going by the current pace of vaccinations and supply crunch it will be at least till October that the population above 45 years will be fully vaccinated with two doses administered. As we write this, only about 1.5% of India's population has been administered two doses and around 8% have got at least one jab. Modi will keep spinning a tale that we are the fastest to vaccinate 100 crore of

Remember Dr Kafeel Khan?

Dr Kafeel Khan was hounded for years by the Yogi Government in UP for coming to the aid of babies and patients in a Gorakhpur Government hospital where patients were dying for lack of oxygen. For raising the issue of corruption and callousness creating a chronic oxygen shortage in Indian hospitals, he was jailed, his family attacked.

Today, the whole country is going through what the Gorakhpur hospital did in 2017. Had the government heeded him instead of hounding him, Indians might be in a better situation today.

the population compared to other countries, but he will not tell us that in terms of percentage of population – after all that is what matters in any mass vaccination program – we are not even in the top 60 in the globe.

After much criticism from opposition leaders and Chief Ministers, the government of India has opened up vaccination for 18 years and above. It has allowed States to buy directly from manufacturers from 1 May. But the devil lies in the details. All those who are 18 years and above have to pay for the vaccine at a private hospital and the States have to pay a higher price than the central government to buy these vaccines. Those who are 45 and above will continue getting it for free from the Central government. A total of 50% of the vaccines manufactured will be used for selling it privately and to the states. By doing this, Modi will simply

deflect the blame for slack pace of vaccinations and shortages on to the States, when the mess has been all his creation caused due to inept planning and arrogance. Further a two-tier vaccination structure will lead to greater exclusion. India is the only country in the world to have allowed private players to directly sell vaccines. Media commentators have termed it a great move; but in effect Modi has give the State governments a long rope to hang with! With vaccine manufacturing nowhere near the required amount, the chaos that will follow will be neatly deflected and Modi will be shrugging his shoulders from 1 May onwards!

Deliberate Suppression of Covid-19 Cases and Deaths

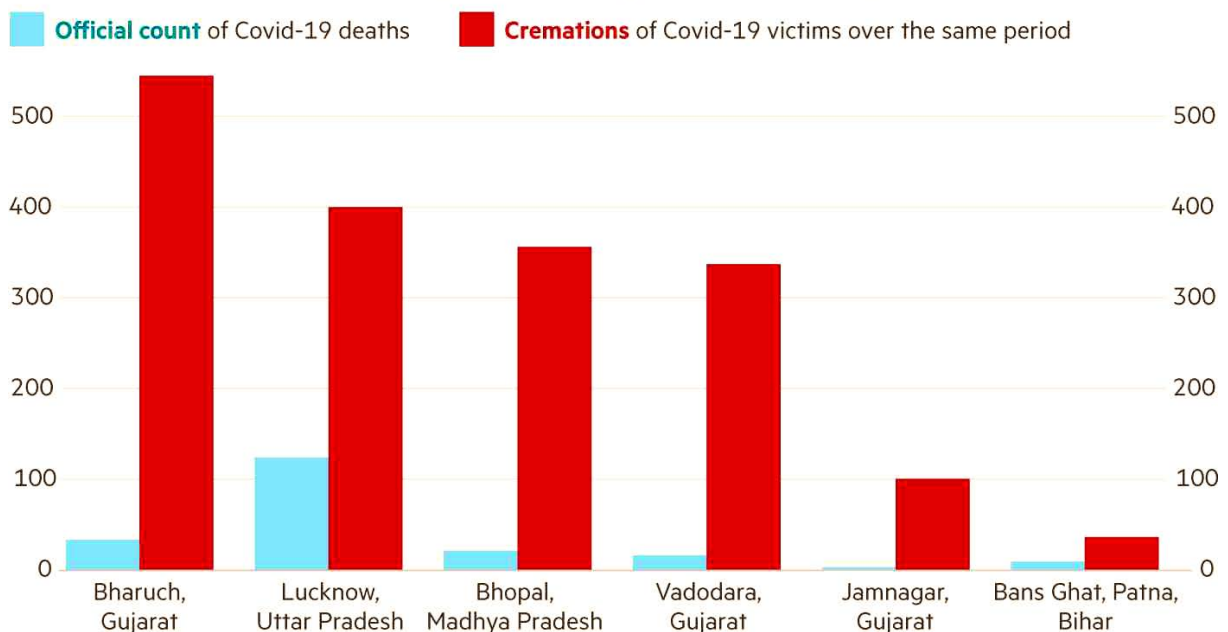
Reuters reported that “Non-stop cremations cast doubt on

India's counting of COVID dead”. Crematorium staff from various states are reporting that they are being instructed to register deaths as caused by ‘bimari’ - illness - and not specifically Covid-19. (See below the graph for the contrast between reported Covid-19 deaths and Covid-19 site cremations. Remember this does not include burials of those who died).

Even before the pandemic, as few as 21% of deaths in India were recorded by a medical professional along with a cause of death, according to the World Health Organization. During the pandemic, this problem is being made worse by the pressure by governments to deny the scale of the crisis.

Likewise there are reports from Delhi and UP that there are informal orders to discontinue testing. One Delhi resident reported his

In districts across India, official counts of Covid deaths are several times lower than the numbers of people being cremated at special Covid sites



Sources: Murad Banji / @muradbanaji; Times of India; Scroll.in; Divya Bhaskar; Khabar Gujarat; India TV News; NDTV; DownToEarth; © FT

experience of registering for the test online and showing up three days in the row to be turned away on one pretext or the other. On the last day, the testing centre official told him informally that the Delhi Police – which falls under the Central Government) had instructed him to shut down tests!

Clearly, the Modi regime appears to be following the formula that Trump had suggested – if you do not test, you can show low Covid-19 numbers!

Chronic Communal Hate

The Modi regime, its pet media houses, and the BJP-RSS responded to Covid-19 right from the start by communalising the issue, scapegoating the Tablighi Jamaat gathering and demanding that participants in the TJ's Nizamuddin gathering be "shot dead."

Contrast this with the way these same forces treat the Kumbh Mela attended by several lakhs and various huge gatherings celebrating "Holi" where thousands throw water and cowdung at each other. Several BJP leaders including a Chief Minister of Uttarakhand announced that Hindus were immune from Covid-19. Had any Muslim leader been so brazen, the media would have instigated violence against them. But in the case of these super-spreader events blessed and promoted by unscientific rubbish by Hindu-supremacist leaders, the media remained silent. Modi called for the Kumbh Mela to be observed symbolically only in its last phase when the largest gatherings had already taken place, thousands had tested positive, and the returning hordes spread the virus deep into rural and semi-urban North India.

The virus of communal hate is so bad that in Vadodara, Gujarat, BJP leaders objected to Muslim

volunteers helping to cremate Hindus. Embarrassed by this, the Mayor and an MLA from the BJP condemned this stand and thanked the Muslim community for being at the forefront of volunteer efforts.

Why Was The Kumbh Mela Advanced By A Year?

Shuddhabrata Sengupta, writing for The Wire, noted: "Kumbh Melas are held every 12 years. The last Haridwar Kumbh Mela was held in 2010. The actual due date for the 'current' Kumbh at Haridwar was 2022, not 2021. So how did it get advanced by one whole lethal year at a time India's second Covid wave was expected? And when epidemiological studies indicate that second waves of infection are always worse than the first." The answer was that the Governments of Uttarakhand and the Centre appeased some astrological pundits!

Sengupta notes that there is a well-documented history of the Kumbh Melas being linked to epidemics and pandemics. Chinmay Tumber's recent book, *The Age of Pandemics: How They Shaped India and the World*, includes a specific discussion of pandemics and successive Kumbh Melas. Also useful is David Arnold's article 1986, 'Cholera and Colonialism in British India' and Kama Maclean's 2008 book, *Pilgrimage and Power: The Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, 1765-1954*. The history of the Kumbh Mela and disease has been well documented over the years. The World Health Organisation has a monograph about cholera that has a section on the Kumbh. There is even an article in the Indian Medical Gazette from 1895 on the 'Natural History of Haridwar Cholera Outbreaks', and a more recent paper, 'A comprehensive review of the Kumbh Mela: Identifying risks

for spread of infectious diseases', published in *Clinical Microbiology and Infection* in 2015.

Fully aware of the risks of holding the Kumbh Mela in the midst of a Covid-19 second wave, the Governments of India and Uttarakhand played with lives to stage a religious spectacle and appease the powerful lobby of "Sants and Mahants". Not only did they fail to cancel the event, they actually advanced it by a year. The Kumbh Mela is one of the biggest factors in the viral spread of the deadly virus that is claiming lives in India. But no media channel will run hashtags blaming the #KumbhLobby or #SaffronLobby, or even question the Government on why the event was advanced.

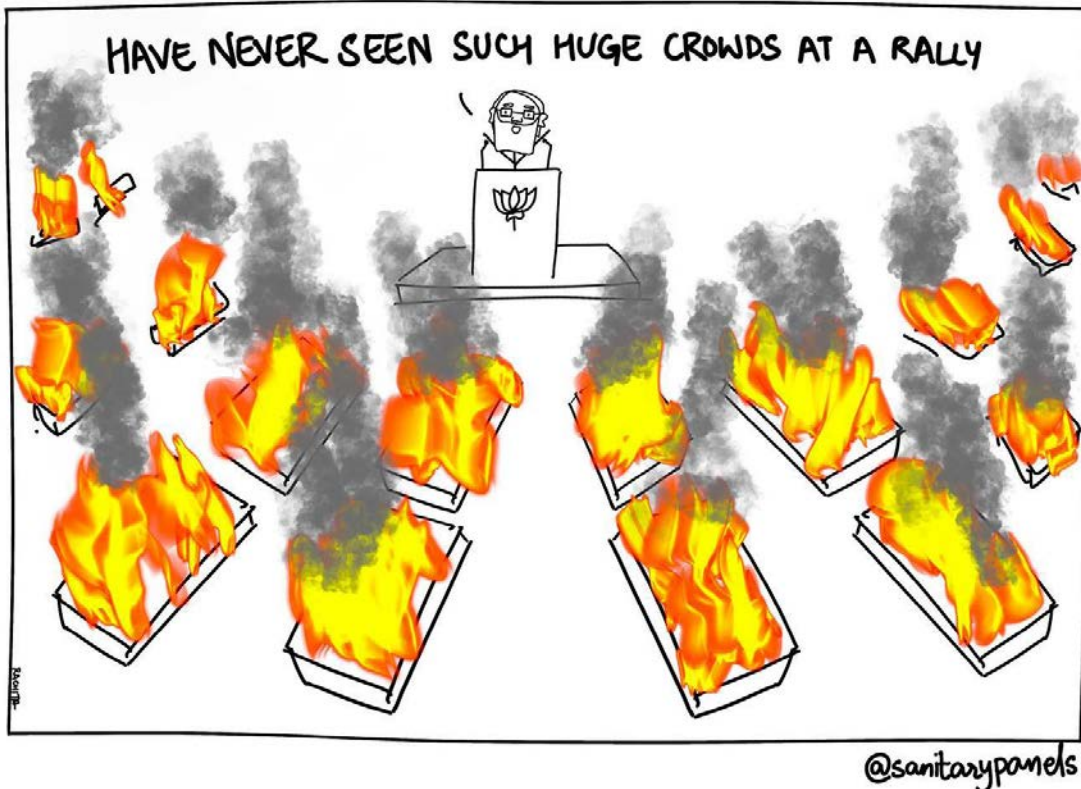
Why Are Hindu Supremacist Outfits Getting Foreign Funding In The Name of Covid-19?

Five organisations with ties to Hindu supremacist and religious groups have received COVID-19 relief funding amounting to \$833,000, according to data released by the United States' Small Business Administration (SBA), a federal agency that helps small business owners and entrepreneurs.

RSS-related outfits have been receiving similar funding in the name of earthquake relief and on other pretexts, for decades now.

In 2014, South Asian Citizen Web (SACW) released a report analysing official tax records between 2001-2014, and showing how US-based charity groups sent millions of dollars to RSS-affiliated organisations. Between 2001-2012, both Ekal Vidyalaya Foundation and VHPA sent \$27m and \$3.9m respectively, according to the SACW report.

The RSS is fond of accusing its



critics – feminist, anti-caste and anti-Islamophobia groups and human rights groups in particular – of being “foreign-funded.” In fact it is the RSS that gets millions of dollars of funding in the name of charity which it uses to further its Hindu supremacist politics.

The Buck Stops With The PM

The hubris and arrogance of the government has led to thousands of lives being lost. The Govt knew that the second wave was coming, and did not do anything. Rather it was busy in a huge PR exercise to paint a picture of Modi vanquishing the virus. There is an industry today which is trying to tell us that all citizens must do their part in tackling the situation. The citizens of this country do not need any telling; they are already stretched to the limits in helping each other. But do citizens have access to resources that the government has? When the failure

of the government is there for all to see, it cannot deflect any blame away from itself. The whole pliant media network built up a narrative that India beat corona exclusively due to the leadership of Modi. Now when the country is in the midst of

a devastating second wave, the blame for this too must lie with him. All of us are after all paying with lives of dear ones to satiate the megalomaniac moods of one man, he cannot escape blame. □

Fighting CoVID-19, Fighting a Pandemic of Cruel and Irresponsible Misinformation

Fighting COVID has meant fighting several battles at the same time. We are fighting for hospital beds, oxygen cylinders, ventilators, injections and vaccines. We are also fighting against distress migration, job losses and growing and crippling economic insecurity, hunger and poverty. But there is another battle too that needs

to be waged. The battle against widespread misinformation – cruel, cynical and deeply irresponsible and damaging misinformation campaigns targeting public health measures.

What does this misinformation campaign look like? For one, it is a sustained vilification of

precautionary advice put out by public health officials. Super spreader events are being called ‘celebrations’, being ‘asymptomatic’ is being termed as just a nasty word to describe what is actually a perfectly healthy person. The list goes on. As per a meme doing the rounds on Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp, holidays should not be vilified as ‘non-essential’ travel; meeting family and friends should not be termed ‘non-essential’ contact and quarantine is nothing but house arrest. We are being told that the scare around COVID is a manufactured and unnecessary one. All this is apparently an elaborate conspiracy hatched by Big Pharma, with the connivance of politicians who are in their pockets! If we were to believe this campaign, it is Big Pharma which is selling us lies that a) COVID is a serious scare, b) they have the solution, and c) we will need “booster” doses of vaccines at regular intervals. In other words, what is being touted as a medical model and public health advice is merely a business model to boost profits.

Most dangerously, we are seeing a wholesale vilification of simple public health measures such as universal masking and vaccinations. We are being told that to remain healthy, all we need to do is to expose ourselves to germs and build immunity, eat a healthy diet, maintain healthy interactions, exercise regularly and reduce stress. The narrative is that Big Pharma and politicians are inverting decades of medical knowledge by now claiming that one needs to isolate and stay in a sterile environment to stay healthy, one needs to constantly live in fear and not meet basic social needs of a human being. In fact, in this campaign, masks have been derogatorily termed as “face diapers”! Another meme proclaims: “Science and neutral reporting are increasingly being oppressed”. This, apparently, is the result of an atmosphere of panic and fear foisted on us by Big Pharma and politicians, World Economic Forum and the World Bank. We are seeing an overt and covert propaganda against vaccines and masking. This propaganda promotes data on how people die even after getting vaccinated; how masks are ineffective.

What do we make of all this? To begin with, the fact remains that part of the reason for this skepticism is the well-documented nexus between scientific research and powerful funding agencies. We know, for example, how cigarette manufacturers influenced and even suppressed research on the impacts of nicotine consumption on human health. However, what we are seeing now is a concerted attempt to derail the work of public health officials; an effort which is laughable at best and downright dangerous at worst. And when such

skepticism about masking and vaccines are peddled during a raging pandemic, when people are literally gasping to death in large numbers and struggling due to lack of health infrastructure, it borders on the criminal.

For example, let us take the example of vaccines. Yes, we need studies on exactly how effective vaccines are. But let us suppose for a minute that two years down the line, we get to know after extensive studies that the Covishield vaccine is not 70%-90% effective as we are assuming now; but is rather just effective in 50% of the population who take it. So, it is not as effective as predicted initially. Does that mean that as responsible citizens, we spend all our time and energy convincing people not to take any vaccines at all? And to just exercise, eat well and build ‘natural’ immunity? Is it not the height of irresponsibility to vilify and demonise a solution that, while not perfect, at least helps to save some lives?

Similarly, let us talk about masking. Yes, the scientific community is constantly evolving its understanding of how effective masking is, and which masks are more effective than the others. Yes, we might come to know some months later that N-95 masks are not as effective as we thought they were. We might come to know that cloth masks need to be supplemented with surgical masks to be truly effective against new variants of the virus. There is always the space for expanding our knowledge. But that does not mean that in the here and now, we spent all our energy telling people to expose themselves to germs and build natural immunity, when the risk is that doing so could well kill them?

Let us ask ourselves what is most needed right now. What is needed is the ability to process ever-growing and yes, ever-changing information about coronavirus and its variants. What is needed is to help people deal with it, protect themselves from COVID. What we do not need is a campaign that could well and truly endanger people, with literally death. We need to equip ourselves with findings from the latest studies, and counter the misinformation campaigns doing the rounds. Some of these campaigns come from well-known misinformation mongers – the likes of right-wing trolls telling us that a cow is a source of oxygen and as effective as an oxygen cylinder. But what is infinitely more dangerous is misinformation and vilification coming from so-called meaning people; misinformation against masking and vaccines that has the potential to endanger people. □

Rohingyas: Genocide in the Backyard

 UJJAINI CHATTERJI

On April 8, 2021, a Supreme Court Bench headed by the Chief Justice of India, CJI Bobde refused an interim order for a blanket stay against the deportation of Rohingya refugees in Jammu and Kashmir. The Court observed that since India is not a party to the Refugee Conventions, they do not have an obligation towards the fulfilment of the principle of non-refoulement. This observation was very problematic from the perspective of the human rights jurisprudence within the Constitution of India as well as it was a flawed reading of the very basic principles of International Law and the commitments of India therein. The Supreme Court of India, in this extremely shallow interim order refused to comprehend the complicated history of South Asia. The order overlooked the manner in which nearly every major issue like the Rohingya Refugee crisis dates back to our shared colonial history. Therefore, it is not only cruel but also impossible to forget history and deny legal obligations from the crisis.

There are approximately 79.5 million refugees across the world today. Amongst them, the Rohingya community from Myanmar is one of the most vulnerable and endangered communities. Over 900,000 Rohingya people have already been displaced from Myanmar while many remain within the nation as Internally displaced persons. Several

Rohingya refugees have been hosted in camps by Bangladesh. Bangladesh has done a tremendously commendable job in hosting and protecting these refugees. Yet, despite repeated appeals, India has refused to share any of this refugee burden. In fact, India has validated the Myanmar claim that the Rohingya refugee people are not citizens of Myanmar and a threat to their internal security. Simultaneously, several mainstream journalists continue to support the hateful treatment of the Rohingya people with their emphatic masculine roars every evening. The question however remains that who are the Rohingya refugee people and why must India, at all, be bothered to protect them? As a nation, what stakes and obligations do we have towards this Bengali speaking community from Myanmar?

Even though International Law is extremely clear about the right to protection of refugees, nations often dispute their status and refuse to grant them refugee status. The reasons behind such denials are strongly rooted in the geo political, social and historical background of the nations and their international relations. Therefore, in order to comprehend the refugee protection policies of a nation, it is also important to observe the political strategies that direct them. International refugee law is the most politicized topic within International law. And South



Asian politics continues to premise itself around the partition. With several layers of history, politics, diplomacy and legality, the answer about India's position regarding the Rohingya crises, therefore, is extremely layered.

Who are the Rohingya people and what is their crisis?

The United Nations organization has called the Rohingya refugee crisis, a textbook example of ethnic cleansing. More recently, in the case of *Gambia v Myanmar*, the International Court of Justice took note of the ongoing genocide against the Rohingya population in Myanmar. (The Supreme Court interim order also records this). The Myanmar government and military have justified their actions, which include burning down Rohingya populated villages and drastic killing of the Rohingya population, as necessary internal security measures. Journalists in Myanmar, who reported such persecutions were jailed and the civil society of Myanmar has also maintained a careful distance from the issue. However, the systemic hatred and this operation to obliterate the ethnic group is not a very recent development. The source of this alienation dates back a very long time from the politics of the Colonialists, the World Wars and the Partition.

History of the Crisis

The Arakan region (of present-day Myanmar) was a key part of the Silk route, which hosted Arab traders since the 8th Century A.D. Later, a Buddhist kingdom emerged in the region. The Bengal Sultanate also continued in the close neighbourhood. Later, after the First Anglo Burmese War, when the Arakan region came under the

British Colony, migration of low-skilled Bengali workers happened into the region. Mostly poor Muslim and a few Hindus migrated to this region. Therefore, the Arakan region gained a significant Muslim Bengali population. These were the Rohingya people.

By the Third Anglo Burmese War, Burma became a part of British India. And therefore, the migration of Bengali people multiplied in the region to the extent of threatening the majority Buddhist population. This even led violent agitations amidst the two communities. Then, by 1937, Burma became a separate crown colony. Within a few years, the British had to launch their longest military campaign of the Second World War in that very region. And this was the root of several political and military repercussions.

Then, the Burma Campaign in 1942 was the turning point of the geopolitical history of South Asia. It was potentially a conflict between two colonial powers- Britain and Japan. While Britain struggled to protect their control over the colony, Japan promised independence to the Burmese. However, the Rohingya people supported the British as guerrilla fighters and with intelligence against the Japanese. They hoped to gain administrative control over Arakan if the British won. The British lost the war in 1942. And retributive communal violence broke out against the Rohingya Muslim population.

By 1944, Burma was disillusioned by the Japanese. They regained their allegiance to the British and even attempted to strengthen an ethnically homogenous military. Yet, ethnic representation within the administration remained ignored in Burma. Even though the British administrators found that

a challenge, Lord Mountbatten, the Supreme Allied Commander of the South East Asia Command, overruled that. In 1947, the Great Partition happened.

The British, as reward for the Rohingya support against the Japanese gave significant administrative posts to the Rohingya people in Arakan. However, they could leverage little of these positions to consolidate their autonomy. Therefore, the partition came as a hope to the Rohingya Muslim people to join East Pakistan. Yet, pre occupied in the existing challenges of the partition of Bengal, Jinnah chose to disregard the Rohingya appeal to integrate in the pretext of not interfering into the internal matters of the Rohingya people. The Burmese became independent in 1948 and thus began the persecution of the Rohingya people by the Burmese military. Many Rohingya people fled to the Bengali populated East Pakistan, where they found a friendlier population with more acceptance of their ethnicity. By 1982, the Burmese government passed the Citizenship Act through which the Rohingya people lost their very recognition within Myanmar. For this Act, the Rohingya people were expected to prove their citizenship in order to remain in Myanmar. The implementation of this law is grossly selective and arbitrary in implementation. The Rohingya people could not get their citizenship and the first batch of Rohingya to Bangladesh arrived in 1992.

Today, the Rohingya people have no citizenship, no rights. The Burmese Military thereby have pursued an ethnic cleansing mission in response to which, over 200, 000 Rohingya people fled to neighbouring East Pakistan, which

by then was Bangladesh. The migration continues till date as it has become increasingly difficult to establish Rohingya citizenship in Myanmar.

Why India?

The Partition of India created two new nations. However, the scattered effects of this bloody operation destabilized every little corner of South Asia. Our lives changed forever and so did our identities. In the past 70 years, we have endured crises in most borderlands including Balochistan, Northwest Frontier Province, Kashmir, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Assam, Nagaland and elsewhere. Ethnic complications, population, culture, self-determination are all extremely intertwined issues that bleed us and continue to seek answers. As we look for solutions, it is extremely important that we no longer disregard these issues as internal conflicts and engage in addressing them.

India is particularly a crucial nation in addressing these problems. The secular democracy, and a strong nuclear power, India has the significant edge of exercising regional influence.

India's response both in diplomacy and humanitarian assistance shall mean tremendously in taking some significant steps towards easing these exposed, unattended wounds of Partition. If India truly intends to participate with a leadership capacity towards their international relations, India must assist in finding durable solutions to the biggest humanitarian crisis in their neighbourhood.

One of the reasons for which India and China do not want to engage with Myanmar are their immense economic investments in Myanmar. However, that should precisely be

a worry for these nations. Without stability, economics shall not at all succeed in Myanmar. Besides, in response to the persecution, the Arakan Salvation Army (ARSA) is also a reason for worry. They do have links with terror outfits and without more attention to the situation, stability in the whole of South Asia can go out of hand. Instead of spreading hate through fake news on WhatsApp about the Rohingya people by labelling them all as terrorists, India must pay attention to the neutralization of the problem. If refugees have no place and are persecuted by all nations, children born to them may even be recruited in these fatal organizations and hence expose the entire world to a serious crisis. We need to find sustainable solutions and protect childhood, people and lives.

Durable Solutions, India and the International Community

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees suggests three possible durable solutions to any refugee crisis. The most commonly referred solution is the solution of voluntary repatriation, which is the process by which refugees lose their well-founded fear of persecution in their home countries. Therefore, with resolution of the crisis, refugees safely return to their homelands willingly. However, the most important component of this solution is that of voluntariness. Refugees must voluntarily return when they have no more fear in their minds. The second and third durable solutions are assimilation within the host community of the country in which the refugees take shelter and and resettlement in any third country. This assimilation is often a result of sustained stay and regular interactions within the two

communities. However, no solution is indeed complete, until there is accountability from the perpetrators who caused the crisis in the first place. Therefore, the solutions need to constantly interact with one another, and this interaction needs to be facilitated by host nations. There are two primary reasons for which India should assert themselves more in the facilitation of these durable solutions. Firstly, in order to seek accountability through the International Criminal Court, the Security Council must play a very crucial role to pass a resolution against Myanmar as Myanmar is not a state Party to the Rome Statute. However, China, having their strong economic and interests in Myanmar, shall not let the Security Council take that step. And thus, it is very important for India, an important South Asian nation, to raise the issue of accountability within the International community. Such engagement shall give India a chance to stand up to China and position themselves as a protector of Human Rights and a leader of developing nations for promoting democratisation and secularism. This strategic benefit shall lead India to the second advantage, which is, a stronger claim for a Permanent Seat of the United Nations Security Council.

The Politics and refugee legacy within India

Post-Independence, India forwarded a foreign policy for the promotion of decolonization and democratization in the world. With the Non-Alignment Movement, India approached a vision to emerge as a leader of the developing nations. Thereafter, India also rejected the unequal representation of nations within the United Nations Security Council and sought to lead United Nations reforms. Yet, crises in

South Asia continued and the effects of colonialization and the Great Partition was far from being diminished. Through the several crises that emerged within South Asia, India hosted several refugees from across Asia. From 1945 till 2016, India hosted millions of refugees from Afghanistan, East Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Tibet etc. During the 1971 East Pakistan war alone, Bangladesh hosted over 1 crore people from East Pakistan. Many of these migrants gained Indian citizenship and became scholars and entrepreneurs. Famous migrants included acclaimed intellectuals like Professor Amartya Sen, Mahashweta Devi, Ritwik Ghatak and several others. India's former Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh was also a refugee who had migrated from Lahore to present India in 1947. It would therefore not be improper to suggest that India comprises of a major immigrant population. Our social fabric is founded upon the very basis of migration. Several Indians have lived through the traumatic partition and their memories of bloodshed remain fresh. Therefore, despite the existing complexities within the Indian society, refugees always had a place here. And accordingly, the Courts in India, always delivered extremely favourable judgements towards refugee protection.

Indian support in all humanitarian crises of South Asia gained significant recognition from the United Nations High Commission. António Guterres, during his visit to India in 2013, had stated that the Indian refugee policy was an example for the world to follow.

India and the BJP

In 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) formed the Indian government. The primary values

of the political party were founded upon the premise of Hindu majoritarianism as professed by the doctrine of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Their politics is also an outcome of similar ideologies. Therefore, most of the policies and statements of BJP is premised around the view that India should position themselves as a Hindu State. This assertion is quite different from the image of a constitutional democracy, secularism and unity in diversity that India has created in the past years. In fact, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has significantly worked to alter many of the foreign policies that India followed so far. His regime has noticeably changed the Indian policies towards refugee protection in the recent years, particularly regarding the Rohingya refugee crisis. Apart from the fact that India has substantial economic interests in Myanmar, religion is also a major factor for which the BJP is denying asylum to the Rohingya refugees. There have been reports of hate crimes and propaganda against the Rohingya people in India and even those refugees who were recognized by the UNHCR have been rejected by India.

Most surprisingly, the Indian Supreme Court has also accepted this position of the Indian government in defiance of all existing Indian precedence and International directives. The Petition before the Supreme Court argued on the grounds that not only was the policy of deporting the Rohingya violative of International Human Rights Law regime, but also a clear contradiction of the Indian Constitutional provisions. Simultaneously, the decision of the government was also a deviation from the directives that have emerged out of strong precedents

in terms of treating displaced communities in India.

However, the State refused to accept all the stated arguments. Instead, the government asserted that since the displaced Rohingya people were not citizens of India, they were not entitled to the enjoyment of the fundamental rights or the constitutional guarantees. About the applicability of International Law, the Respondent Counsels declared that since India is not a part of the International Convention for Refugees 1951, they were not bound by it. And therefore, according to the government, they had no obligation to confirm to any international laws in the given case.

It is rather disappointing that the Supreme Court of India, despite the strong jurisprudence of refugee protection within India, accepted these rather shallow arguments. The observation that the Rohingya crisis was an internal matter of Myanmar was rather absurd. Under international criminal law, genocide forms one of the core crimes and it is therefore a responsibility of India to not be complicit to genocide taking place in their very own neighborhood.

It is important to understand that irrespective of whether a State recognizes displaced people as refugees, they shall be deemed as refugees if they fulfil the necessary ingredients to be refugees. Therefore, despite being a Non Party to the Refugee Convention, India is bound by Customary International Law to protect the rights of displaced people.

The foremost rule under customary international law is that of the rule of non-refoulement. Under the doctrine of non-refoulement, no state in the world is permitted to force refugees or asylum seekers

to return to the country in which they may be subjected to persecution. It is one of the fundamental principles that govern International Law and therefore irrespective of treaty bound obligations, no state in the world is permitted to derogate this doctrine. Non Refoulment is a peremptory norm in International law, also known as jus cogens. Therefore, the argument of India that the State has no obligations towards the Rohingya people because India is a non-party to the Refugee Convention, is absurd. Besides, India is a Party to several International treaties and Conventions including the ICCPR, Convention on the Rights of the Child. These conventions and treaties contain provisions not just for citizens of the country, but for every person within the territory of the country. The Convention on the Rights of the Child has specific provisions on the protection for children.

The Indian Constitution also provides for a broad framework that protects the rights of all people within the territory of India. The right to the protection of law can be enjoyed by all within the territory of India. The Right to life guaranteed by the Article 21 of the Indian constitution, mentions that the provision is available to all persons within India. Whenever there has been a conflict in the interpretation of these provisions, the Supreme Court of India has previously given extremely balanced judgements.

In the case of Louise de Readlt (1991 SCC 554); and the case of Khudiram [(1994 Supp. (1), Scc 615], the Supreme Court clearly explained that Article 21 of the Constitution extended to all persons including aliens. Similarly, in 1996, the Supreme Court had prevented the government of the state of Arunachal Pradesh

from forcibly expelling Chakma refugees.

In the case of Dr Malavika Karlekar v the Union of India (Criminal 583 of 1992), the Supreme Court had even declared that the State was bound to consider if refugee status could be granted and until the assessment was completed, the petitioner should not be deported. Similarly, in the case of U. Myat Kayew and Nayzam V State Of Manipur, the Supreme Court absolutely stated that all asylum seekers should who enter India (even illegally) should be permitted to approach the office of the UNHCR to seek refugee status.

In the case of Ktaer Abbas Habib Al Quatafi v Union of India, the Gujarat High Court had summarized all these principles that emerged out of these judicial precedents. The Court had clearly said that the International principle of non-refoulment was encompassed in the Article 21 of the Indian Constitution.

Clearly, legal rationale in India seems to have been unfortunately eclipsed by political agenda. The trend pursued by the BJP is a kind of nationalism that seeks to alienate Indians. In order to be nationalistic, Indians have begun to hate non-Hindus, especially Muslims. Secularism, in India today, is a bad word. And one must fit into the narrow mould of upper caste Hindu nationalism to remain safe in India. Therefore, the present Indian nationalism is a concept of alienation of communities and isolation from internationalism. Yet, India aims for international leadership. This ambition is particularly contradictory as India hardly wants to engage with the international community anymore. ■

(A portion of this article appeared previously in The Leaflet.)

● ● ● Assembly Elections: BJP's Communalism, Repression, EVM Fraud, Misogyny At Its Height

On 31 March 2021, the Union Finance Ministry cut interest rates on various small savings schemes sharply by 40-110 basis points. Early the next morning, on April 1, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman tweeted that the rates would remain the same and that "orders issued by oversight shall be withdrawn". This U-turn was announced on April Fool's Day, but the Modi regime could not fool anyone as to their motives in hurriedly reversing the rate-cut decision. Clearly, the Finance Ministry had been advised that the rate cut decision be postponed

till after elections – since a decision delivering a major blow to small savings holders during Elections would be politically costly to the BJP. Nothing underlines the cynicism, dishonesty and incompetence of the Modi regime more than this episode.

Meanwhile, as has become commonplace during elections, an Assam BJP candidate's car was found transporting a polled EVM! The Election Commission's cock-and-bull story claiming that the polling party's car had broken down, and

that they had taken a lift in the next car without realising it belonged to the candidate, can convince no one. This EVM theft can only be compared to the booth capturing that used to happen with paper ballots in the past. In another Assam polling booth where there are 90 voters, 171 votes were cast. If EVM machines are just as susceptible to capture or rigging than paper ballots, why use them in the first place?

There is a pattern to the long trail of dubious episodes involving faulty, malfunctioning and stolen EVMs. In the vast majority of reported instances, the “faults” have benefited the BJP. The Election Commission has strenuously rejected the suggestion that EVM and VVPAT machines are susceptible to tampering, despite the fact that most countries the world over have rejected ballot machines precisely because they acknowledge this possibility. It is clear that regardless of the outcome of the elections, Indian voters must demand a return to paper ballots to ensure that their votes are secure.

All over India, including in the states where elections are underway, the BJP is aware that it is perceived as a party that has “sold everything, sold our assets.” Privatisation of public sector assets, plunder by crony corporations of people’s savings in public sector banks through unpaid loans that are written off, the attempted rate-cut in small savings, the farm laws that sell agriculture to the companies, the labour laws that are diluted to suit the employers, privatised education and healthcare as well as the worst unemployment in 40 years – all these are more the pro-corporate measures, anti-people measures, the effect of which people are experiencing and resisting.

Unable to answer people’s questions on these fronts, the BJP is resorting to its old staple in its election campaign – venomous anti-Muslim hate speech. In Assam, Amit Shah has asked voters to choose between “atma-nirbhar Assam and maulana-nirbhar Assam” (Assam that is self-reliant or Assam

that is reliant on Muslim clerics). The reference is to the AIUDF, led by Badruddin Ajmal, that is a member of the opposition coalition. In West Bengal, the Prime Minister addressed the sitting Chief Minister in a highly offensive and misogynistic tone. BJP West Bengal President Dilip Ghosh told the CM that it went against “Indian culture” for her broken leg in its cast to be seen while she wore a sari, adding that she should wear shorts instead. Displaying the BJP’s trademark violence towards intellectuals and artistes, Dilip Ghosh declared that intellectuals are a social liability and also threatened film, theatre and music artistes who have been speaking up against the BJP: “If they don’t leave politics aside, I will take care of them. And, artistes know how I do it.” Such threats are especially disturbing in a state like West Bengal, long known for its vibrant and argumentative cultural sphere.

But by far the most toxic part of the BJP’s campaign has been its hate speech aimed at creating a Muslim-hating Hindu votebank that has, till now, never been a prominent feature of Bengal politics. In the Nandigram seat, the BJP candidate attacked his rival, the sitting Chief Minister, using terms to suggest that she is a Muslim who is an “aunt” to “infiltrators” and “Rohingyas”. A Union Minister campaigning in Bengal said the CM had belonged to the “Rohingya gotra (sub-caste)”. This campaign, using one of the world’s most oppressed refugees as a term of abuse, and suggesting that a candidate who is Muslim, or is a Hindu person who does not hate Muslims, does not deserve votes of Hindus. The Election Commission, as has become usual, has remained silent on this open, blatant hate speech.

But the communal hate speech by the BJP only reveals its bankruptcy and desperation. Modi’s pet media houses are working overtime to create an illusion of invincibility for the BJP. Helped by such media, the BJP is browbeating the electorate and declaring itself the inevitable victor even before votes have been cast!

But as the Elections proceed, voters of all five states are calling their bluff. Fighting back in the face of the BJP’s vast funds (dubiously obtained through the shady electoral bonds scheme) and propaganda machinery, farmers and workers, women and young people, are succeeding in keeping people’s issues at the forefront and refusing to be influenced by hate speech.

BJP Leaders Threaten “More Sitalkuchi-style Killings”

Four voters, standing in a queue to vote in Sitalkuchi, Cooch Behar, West Bengal, have been killed in firing by the CISF central forces.

These four are reported to be working class men from poor families: two migrant workers Nur Alam Mian and Maniruzzaman Mian, a first-time voter Samiul Haque, and a mason Hamidul Mian. In addition, in a separate incident, an 18-year-old first time voter Ananda Barman, was shot dead by unidentified miscreants.

Such firing raises grave questions about the role and motives of central forces in the West Bengal elections. Rather than keeping the peace and ensuring free and fair elections, the central forces are committing bloodshed and intimidating voters. Statements by BJP leaders have added to the impression that the central armed forces are serving to intimidate voters to further the BJP’s interests.

Here is a list of instances where BJP leaders have sought to use the Sitalkuchi firing for communal targeting and intimidation of voters:

The CISF and other central forces answer to the Home Ministry headed by Amit Shah, who is currently campaigning for the BJP in West Bengal, and using the firing in his speeches to sharpen communal polarisation. Shah alleged (falsely) that the CM mourned only the four victims whose community she wished to “appease” and did not mourn Ananda Barman. The fact is that all over W Bengal, all five victims are being



mourned. Four of them were killed by the bullets of central forces - and the ECI and the Home Ministry bear responsibility for those deaths.

BJP's West Bengal President Dilip Ghosh has threatened "more Sitalkuchi-like incidents in many places" if the "bad boys do not behave", adding that the "bad boys" must not be allowed to "remain in Bengal."

Another BJP leader Sayantan Basu declared that in the four remaining phases of elections, 16 Sitalkuchi-style massacres would be committed.

During the Lok Sabha elections, Sayantan Basu gave a speech urging central forces to "shoot booth captors in the chest, not the legs." At the time, the EC had said they would act against Basu. Was any action taken? If not, the failure to punish him has certainly emboldened Basu to continue to issue threats on behalf of the central paramilitary forces.

The fact that the BJP leadership is able to speak on behalf of the CISF as though it were their private militia, indicates how the central forces are being misused by the BJP-led Central Government in the WB elections.

The fact that all four voters who killed in the CISF firing are Muslims, makes Dilip Ghosh's and Sayantan Basu's words a thinly veiled communal threat

against the minority community.

Unanswered Questions About The Massacre:

a) The fact is that there is no evidence whatsoever that the four victims attempted to snatch CISF rifles, as alleged by the CISF, or indeed that they indulged in any other form of violence.

b) A survivor of the massacre, a teenager named Mrinal Haque, has been found to have several injuries consistent with a thrashing with sticks. Villagers say that when they protested the unprovoked thrashing to which Mrinal was subjected, the CISF opened fire and killed four voters. The injuries on Mrinal's body give the lie to the police observer's report to the EC, that Mrinal had fallen sick, and that onlookers mistakenly assumed he had been beaten by jawans and assembled a violent mob which attacked the CISF.

c) Media reports which initially claimed that there was a mob of 300-400 people, now states that there were merely 70-80 people. Crowd control requires minimum force. Why was the CISF deployed in West Bengal, when it is well known that the CISF has neither experience nor training in crowd control? Even assuming that the CISF claim about villagers getting agitated about a boy's thrashing, why could the CISF not control a crowd

of less than 100 persons, without resorting to lethal firing?

d) Even the CISF has not claimed that the victims came to the poll booth armed. Had they in fact been planning violence, they would have been armed - they came unarmed because they came to cast their votes. It is inconceivable that four unarmed persons would suddenly seek to snatch rifles from CISF men - knowing full well that they were vastly outnumbered by a CISF battalion armed to the teeth.

e) We want to know why the EC has accepted the CISF version without demanding evidence to back the story. Surely there must be CCTV footage, or other videographed evidence of the CISF claims?

Our Demands:

- We demand an independent enquiry into the CISF firing at Sitalkuchi
- We demand that the responsible CISF personnel including any officer who ordered the firing be arrested and prosecuted for the massacre.
- We demand that CISF deployment be withdrawn by the EC and measures taken to restore voter confidence.
- We also demand that the EC ban

Dilip Ghosh, Sayantan Basu. Amit Shah and any other leader who vilifies the victims of the firing, or communalises the firing, from campaigning, and book them under the relevant sections of Model Code of Conduct and People's Representation Act for hate-mongering and intimidation.

On 13 April, protest gatherings were held all over India to mourn the victims of the CISF firing, and demand justice for the all five voters killed in Cooch Behar.

EC's Partisan Role

The month-long election campaign in West Bengal witnessed what seemed to be a disturbing nexus between central armed forces, the Election Commission and the BJP.

The EC announced that central forces would have a right to fire in "self-defence" – a statement that was bound to embolden violence by central forces and offer them a ready-made pretext for such violence. Sure enough, the CISF firing at Sitalkuchi followed in Cooch Behar, killing four migrant workers who had returned to West Bengal to cast their votes. The CISF pleaded "self-defence", and the EC rushed to absolve the CISF of any blame. Meanwhile, several BJP leaders threatened West Bengal voters with "more Sitalkuchis", and communalised any demand for justice for the victims of the firing by branding it as "appeasement of Muslims".

The special police officer submitted a report to the EC endorsing the CISF claims without even visiting the firing site and meeting the injured persons and eyewitnesses. There is a wealth of evidence which is at odds with the CISF claims. Every ground report by journalists indicates that those killed and injured in the firing are not violent "strongmen" but ordinary unarmed voters. There is no evidence of any provocation by the voters that would justify the use of lethal force by the CISF. Yet the EC has shown no concern about ensuring justice for four voters killed while waiting to cast their vote.

The Election Commission has been displaying a pronounced selectivity and bias in its treatment of poll code violations. The EC debarred the West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee from campaigning for 24 hours for her speech asking women voters to ensure that central forces do not prevent voting. But the EC has taken scant notice of rampant hate-speech by BJP leaders. The EC debarred BJP leader Rahul Sinha for 48 hours for his comment that the central forces should have killed eight instead of four people in Sitalkuchi. But it did not take any action against BJP leaders Dilip Ghosh and Sayantan Basu for celebrating the Sitalkuchi massacre and threatening more massacres of the same kind. It did not take any action against Home Minister Amit Shah for insinuating that the Chief Minister's grief for the four Sitalkuchi firing victims was an instance of "appeasement of Muslims".

The EC also merely issued a mild "warning" to BJP's Nandigram candidate Suvendu Adhikari for his venomous hate-speech against the minority community. It failed to invoke relevant sections of the Representation of People Act and the Model Code of Conduct, relating to inciting hatred between communities.

Democratic forces in West Bengal are having to contend not only with the BJP, but with partisan central forces and EC as well. The EC's conduct – its lack of concern for voter safety, and its willingness to ignore or condone hate speech and intimidation by the BJP, compounded by its dubious record on EVMs - is a disgrace to the democratic process, and gives weight to the assessment by the V-Dem study that India is an "electoral autocracy" rather than a full-fledged democracy. *EC Fails To Act Against Hate-Speech and Threats By BJP Leaders in West Bengal*

As the month-long election schedule unfolds in West Bengal, it is marked by what appears to be a disturbing nexus between central armed forces, the Election Commission and the BJP.

The EC announced that central forces would have a right to fire in "self-defence" – a statement that was bound to embolden violence by central forces and offer them a ready-made pretext for such violence. Sure enough, the CISF firing at Sitalkuchi followed in Cooch Behar, killing four migrant workers who had returned to West Bengal to cast their votes. The CISF pleaded "self-defence", and the EC rushed to absolve the CISF of any blame. Meanwhile, several BJP leaders threatened West Bengal voters with "more Sitalkuchis", and communalised any demand for justice for the victims of the firing by branding it as "appeasement of Muslims".

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The Ominous Aftermath of Modi's Bangladesh Visit

The Golden Jubilee of the independence of Bangladesh was meant to be an occasion of celebration. Unfortunately, in the wake of Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh, the country has been caught in a trail of deaths, bloodshed, repression and violence. Given India's role in the liberation of Bangladesh, it was perhaps natural for Bangladesh to invite the Indian Prime Minister on this occasion. But then India now has Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister and it is perfectly understandable why large sections of Bangladesh society have been extremely uncomfortable with Modi's visit, that too on this kind of an occasion. The protests in Bangladesh were quite expected.

The autocratic government of Bangladesh and organisations sponsored by or allied with the ruling party tried to suppress the protests and attacked the protesters. As a reaction to Modi's visit and this repression unleashed by the Hasina

government, some organisations have also attacked Hindus and their institutions in Bangladesh. This must be condemned unequivocally. The Hindus in Bangladesh have nothing to do with either the Modi government and the communal politics of RSS-BJP or the repressive measures of the Hasina government. We hope the common people of Bangladesh who wish communal harmony and peace will prevail over this fundamentalist violence and not let it escalate and vitiate the environment on the solemn occasion of the golden jubilee of independence.

It will be wrong to conflate the anti-Modi protests in Bangladesh with any generalised anti-India sentiment. Modi is certainly not India and the protests against Modi are as universal as protests against Trump or other autocratic rulers in today's world. It is Modi's infamous track record as Gujarat CM and now as India's PM which has been fuelling these protests worldwide ever since the 2002 Gujarat genocide. Till his ascent to power at the Centre in 2014, several countries in the world used to deny him visa. Even now protests greet him on almost all his foreign visits and large sections of the Indian diaspora participate in these protests. Within India Modi has to face protests in several states especially whenever he ventures beyond the northern and western parts of the country. It is common to see 'Modi Go Back' trend on Twitter in several languages.

In India, Modi's Bangladesh visit attracted attention primarily because of his claim to have been arrested for participating in a satyagraha in 1971 for Bangladesh's freedom. It appeared as though Modi had gone to Bangladesh to celebrate the golden jubilee of his first satyagraha and arrest. While most people disbelieved his claim as yet another typical Modi bluff, many people dug up records to verify that the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, the predecessor of the BJP, had indeed organised a satyagraha campaign from 1 to 12 August which had culminated in a rally in Delhi. Modi may well have taken

part in this satyagraha as a young Jan Sangh activist, even though what he calls arrest may well have been just a customary 'courting of arrest'.

The real point that merits attention is the context of the Jan Sangh Satyagraha which coincided with the signing of India's friendship treaty with the Soviet Union. This was a major departure from India's erstwhile policy of non-alignment and was a crucial step to secure diplomatic and military support for the Bangladesh liberation war and India's eventual direct intervention. The RSS-BJS campaign opposed this treaty, saw this as delay on India's part to accord recognition to Bangladesh and declare war on Pakistan. The course prescribed by RSS would have meant walking straight into the American trap and weakening the cause of Bangladesh. The RSS clearly had no ideological affinity with the secular, progressive, socialist orientation of the Bangladesh liberation war.

For Narendra Modi what perhaps mattered most was the fact that his Bangladesh visit coincided with the elections in West Bengal and Assam, the Indian provinces bordering Bangladesh. His Bangladesh itinerary included visits to the Jesoreshwari Kali temple in Satkhira and Orakandi Thakurbari in Gopalganj district, the holiest shrine of the Matua community and the birthplace of the Matua movement's founder Harichand Thakur. He was accompanied by the BJP MP from the Matua community Shantanu Thakur and a delegation of the Matua Mahasangh from West Bengal and following his visit to the Orakandi shrine, Modi made specific announcements about the Matua community both in Bangladesh and West Bengal. This was a clear violation of the model code of conduct and a brazen misuse of a foreign visit with a view to influencing voters back home.

The Matua movement was an anti-caste movement that became popular among sections of dalits in undivided Bengal in the nineteenth century. Founded by Harichand Thakur and

carried forward by his son Guruchand Thakur, the movement was quite akin, in terms of its focus on education, social equality and women's rights, to the anti-caste movements initiated by Phule and Ambedkar in Maharashtra. After Partition, large sections of the Namasudra community, the core Dalit group following the Matua movement, migrated to West Bengal and founded a new centre called Thakurnagar in North 24 Parganas district. Today, the Sangh-BJP establishment tries to subvert the anti-caste egalitarian legacy of the Matua movement and fit it in its own ideological framework of social collaboration and Hindu supremacist nationalism. The anti-caste egalitarian origin or core of the movement is being sought to be overshadowed by playing up the post-Partition insecurities of the community and deceiving them on the issue of citizenship.

Among the bilateral issues and initiatives discussed during the visit, the two countries finalised a connecting road called 'swadhinata sadak' (freedom road) and a third train route between the two countries connecting Dhaka and New Jalpaiguri. There

has however been no corresponding headway on the unresolved issue of water-sharing between the two neighbours. In an ironic twist of history, the two countries have resolved to observe December 6 as 'Maitri Diwas' (friendship/harmony day) in memory of December 6, 1971 when India had formally accorded recognition to Bangladesh as an independent republic. Twenty-one years later, it was December 6, 1992 which delivered the biggest blow to communal harmony within India and friendship between the two countries when the vandals of the Sangh brigade demolished the Babri Masjid in broad daylight displaying brazen contempt for India's syncretic culture and the modern constitutional rule of law.

Modi's Bangladesh visit has unleashed a new phase of unrest in Bangladesh with its ominous social and political implications for Bangladesh's poll-bound neighbouring provinces in India, West Bengal and Assam. Peace and democracy-loving people in both Bangladesh and India will have to show great restraint and maturity to deal with this dangerous aftermath of Modi's politically loaded visit to Bangladesh. □

As a presiding officer, I went to conduct voting in a remote village of the South 24 Parganas in West Bengal. Elderly women came leaning on sons and grandsons. The men wished to accompany them to the voting compartment and even cast vote for them. 'They hardly know whom to vote', they said, infantilising the elderly women on the basis of their physical frailty and the supposed mental and intellectual ineptness of women in general. The women themselves, too, seemed confused. "Don't men know better than us?", their facial expression said.

Women who were not infirm or aged, who came to vote on their feet, too, hardly seemed to have any 'agency'. A woman surrenders to the 'gotra' of his husband in the process of the Hindu marriage. At the same time, over the course of the election, she surrenders to the political creed and symbol of her in-laws. Often during campaigning, one may hear the patriarch of a family committing to the campaigner of a particular party that all the votes from his family will go to that party. How one can commit on behalf of all the members, one wonders.

When my booth was almost empty in the afternoon, the alertness of one of the three polling agents hinted that someone special might have come. A girl, clad in salwar-suit and her head covered with orhni, entered the room. The agent introduced her as his wife. She was well acquainted with the EVM, but not with the new unit called VVPAT. The agent instructed his wife from the outside, "Make sure you see the symbol in the VVPAT slip." She got more confused and failed to keep a watchful eye on the VVPAT screen. He then rebuked her publicly and said, 'You are good for nothing.'

The body language of the likes of him often betrays them and clearly states how 'you-are-good-for-nothing' is the essence of what they think of the female polling officials as well. The female polling officers need to be doubly cautious, as a result. A

Looking At Bengal Assembly Elections Through The Glasses Of The 'Other'

 SATABDI DAS

A tale of betrayal, as told by a Bengali newspaper published from Assam, left me dumb-founded. From March 22, officers from the election commission went door to door in Assam to help octogenarians (and septuagenarians who were Covid-19 survivors) to vote via paper ballot from their own house. A humanitarian endeavour on the part of the Commission, one may think. In my native state, West Bengal, too, such measures were taken. But the news that I am talking about comprises

a terrible complaint. An old woman in Assam complained that the personnel from the election commission forced her to vote for the symbol of 'lotus', grabbing the opportunity to misuse his power in the absence of her family members. Apart from being a horrific example of state oppression, the incident is a metaphor for a larger truth. A woman's vote, no matter what her age, has seldom proven to be 'her own vote'. From the family to the State, it is controlled by various people, mostly men, at various levels.

female presiding officer knows that any of her mistakes will be deemed as evidence of the incapability of her gender.

As the election approached, misogyny and gender-discrimination was exhibited for everyone to see across the country, even in West Bengal. Female candidates were not spared. Fake porn pictures were circulated in the case of Rafika Sultana from Murshidabad Assembly Constituency. She is a non-party, independent candidate. After it was reported in the thana, the miscreants were arrested, but she continued to receive online threats.

A study shows that in over 29 countries 44% of female politicians have received threats of murder, rape or abduction, or faced those crimes in reality. As it was reported, in West Bengal, Meenakshi Mukherjee, a female candidate, was stopped while entering her own constituency and also received veiled threats. On the other hand, Mukherjee's party continued with their narrative of unapologetic denial of Tapasi Malik's rape and murder even in 2021. The brutal incident took place fourteen years back, when Mukherjee's party was there in power.

As we continue to encounter the unceasing misogynist rhetoric spewed by male politicians, we could not help doubting their commitment to the women-centric agendas of their own manifestos. In West Bengal, even small-screen stars, Debaleena And Sayoni, were slandered with gang-rape threats for simply airing their voice on freedom of choice, freedom of choosing what to eat and cook. Later, one of the victims was promptly declared as a candidate from another party. Parliamentary politics utilised the woman's victimhood, as often as it does.

Mamata Banerjee, the chief minister of West Bengal, is no less maligned for being a woman. The Prime Minister himself hisses out banteringly, 'Didi, Oooo Didi!' in a public meeting, a tune that became

an 'instant hit' with street-harassers, as per reports.

The state secretary of BJP in West Bengal, Dilip Ghosh, advised the chief minister to wear bermudas because she was seen keeping her injured leg lifted up in her public meetings, revealing a part of her leg, which according to Ghosh was 'unbecoming of a Bengali woman'. When he was asked about the aforesaid comment on a TV channel, he waved off the woman questioner with an entitled, masculine jibe, 'Nyakami korben na' (Don't show me your silly, affected attitudes).

Hoardings, memes and slogans, too, were replete with misogyny. As one party adopted the slogan 'Bengal wants her own daughter', the opposition tauntingly implied a daughter, being *paraya dhan*, should be soon driven out of her paternal home. People even compared the sexual appeal of various women contestants and termed some of them as 'kajer mashi' (maids) in memes.

The most intimidating and shocking incident however was reported from Tarakeswar. It was reported that a CAPF jawan attempted to sexually abuse a minor girl who had gone to bring books from a friend's house. Local people rescued her and reported the incident to Tarakeswar thana and the matter was recorded. The Chairperson of West Bengal Child Protection and Child Rights Commission rushed to the spot on April 7 and met the victim and her family who were seemingly traumatised. She also wrote to the Election Commission requesting that the jawans not be allowed to move from Tarakeswar as they were to be charged under POCSO, 2012, for the gruesome offence. But on April 8 in a press meet she said that the jawans were allowed to leave Tarakeswar and reach their next posting.

The CAPF commanding officer also lodged a counter complaint against the girl and her family on April 7 claiming the previous complaint to be

false. Objectionable things were said casually about the girl's character.

The jawans are deployed to keep the law and order so as to ensuring safe polling. It is unfortunate if they themselves are reported to violate the law and harm even a minor. It is also unfortunate that the POCSO is being violated grossly, endangering the security of minors who are the most vulnerable.

In a society that is patriarchal as a whole, the role of a woman in an election is either that of a puppet or that of a victim and Kolkata is no exception. As a presiding officer and a gender rights activist, I could hardly ignore the fact that transgender people did not come to my booth and neighbouring booths. Neither did the sector officer ask for the account of trans voters, while they readily collected all data related to male and female voters.

In Assam, women have been the worst victims of NRC. An anxious Saira Bibi jumped into the well, though her name finally appeared in the list. Reziya Khatun travelled 250 kilometres to attend a NRC hearing and breathed her last in the queue. Shefali Hajong, a construction labourer, was found carrying bricks on the site of a would-be detention camp that was going to be her own abode thereafter.

The election system is one that gives us the liberty to choose between limited and not-so-ideal options, has its own lacunae and those limitations become more prominent when seen from the perspective of the women and the trans community. However as long as patriarchy persists, the season of elections comes and goes, otherising us every time. ■

(This article first appeared on Feminism in India).

REPORT FROM STATES

CM Yogi orders Digging of Well to Douse Already Raging Fire

CPIML Uttar Pradesh state unit said on 19 April 2021 that Chief Minister Yogi's order to start an oxygen plant in view of the huge number of Covid deaths in Lucknow and other parts of the State due to oxygen shortage is like starting to dig a well in order to douse a fire that is already raging.

The party said that by the time the said oxygen plant is ready, a great many more lives would be lost due to shortage of oxygen. The government pontificated for an entire year about social distancing and masks, but indulged in sheer negligence by not utilizing the one year's time to put any preparations in place. Scientists had warned of the possibility of a second wave. But the government did nothing to make adequate life-saving arrangements like testing, treatment, ambulances, hospitals, beds, oxygen, ventilators, ICU, injections and vaccinations and wasted the precious period on unnecessary things instead.

As a result, there is no space even in crematoriums now. The government is very ready to blame the people for the spread of Covid and slap heavy fines for violations. But the question is, who will take responsibility for the criminal negligence in preparedness on the part of the government? Rampant loot is going on in the name of treatment. Huge black-marketing of Remdesivir and oxygen is going on. Common people who are Covid patients are running from pillar to post but unable to get proper treatment. Such a government, that leaves the people to fend for themselves in this crisis and die due to lack of beds, medicines and oxygen, has no right to remain in power.

The Yogi government has failed on all fronts due to its lack of foresight and has failed to curb the galloping number of Covid cases and deaths. In order to hide their failure they are fudging statistics so that the people do not get the correct information. Government figures show

only a low number of deaths whereas burial grounds and crematoriums are overflowing with bodies that are Covid deaths. The government is even boarding over crematoriums to hide the truth.

CPIML said that for the BJP votes, power, and attention to religious events is more important than human lives, as is evident from the Bengal election to the UP Panchayat election to the Haridwar Mahakumbh. The height of insensitivity is being witnessed not only in the UP government but also in the top leadership of the BJP. The honorable Prime Minister and Home Minister are busy with election rallies and road shows instead of handling the huge Covid crisis that is engulfing the country. The party that detests democracy is pretending to be the champion of democracy.

Campaign to Save Historic Khudabakhsh Library in Patna

Note on Khudabakhsh Library

The Khudabakhsh Oriental Library is situated on the left side, ahead of Patna Medical College and Hospital (PMCH) on Ashok Rajpath between Kargil Chowk and NIT. This library has made a significant contribution to Bihar's education world and is renowned not only nationally but internationally as well. It is an important source for knowledge and understanding of history. Mahatma Gandhi as well as many Presidents, politicians and intellectuals have visited this library. It is also an important centre for historical studies.

This library is the biggest treasure-house of the intellectual and cultural heritage of South and Central Asia. It houses about 21000 manuscripts and a unique collection of 2.5 lakh printed books. Keeping in view the infinite historical and intellectual importance of its valuable collection, the Government of India had declared this library an institution of national importance through an Act of Parliament in 1960.

This library contains manuscripts written on paper, palm leaf, deerskin, cloth and various other materials. It contains lakhs of printed books in German, French, Punjabi, Japanese and Russian as well as Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Hindi and English. It plays an important role in fulfilling the needs of students, youth and citizens for research work and Oriental Studies. There are two separate reading rooms for researchers and scholars and casual readers. In this situation, damaging or demolishing even a single inch of this library or its grounds is an assault on the entire world of education.

We are witnessing repeated attacks by the BJP-JDU government on educational-academic institutions. The attack on Khudabakhsh Library is the latest in this series. We demand that the government should desist from tampering with declared heritage buildings and damaging and destroying Khudabakhsh Oriental Library in the name of constructing flyovers.

A meeting of Patna's citizens was organized on 13 April 2021 under the call given by Bihar Vidhan Sabha Library Committee Chairman and CPIML MLA Sudama Prasad against the demolition of part of Khudabakhsh Library for construction of the Kargil Chowk-NIT flyover. The meeting at the Young Men's Institute in Patna was attended by well-known doctors, teachers, cultural activists, journalists, students and lovers of education. Among those who spoke on the occasion and participated in the discussion were Library Committee member and Paliganj MLA Sandeep Saurabh, Prof Bharti S Kumar, Dr Satyajit Singh, Dr PNP Pal, and many student-youth leaders, advocates, journalists, social activists, educationists, AIPF leaders and student union leaders.

MLA Sandeep Saurabh read out the draft of the letter to be written to the Chief Minister with details of the historical relevance of the library. The letter would also point out the



danger to other important buildings like BN College and many Patna University departments, whereas other alternatives for construction of the flyover bridge are available.

The citizens' meet agreed on getting the letter signed by citizens and submitted without delay to the Chief Minister so that damage to historic buildings could be prevented. Since the Khudabakhsh Library is Bihar's only international heritage building, it was also agreed to send a letter in this context to UNESCO. The meeting decided to launch an all-round campaign to save the library. Along with writing to Bihar Governor, Chief Minister and others, protest initiatives were also discussed. A Save Khudabakhsh Library Save Heritage Buildings Sangharsh Morcha was formed with AIPF leader Dr Kamlesh Sharma as Convener.

Poisonous Liquor Deaths in Bihar: Prohibition Fails

Bihar is currently in the clutches of criminals to whom the Nitish government has abjectly surrendered. Heinous incidents like murder, crime, loot, rape have become the norm, whether it is the recent brutal killing of 4 persons in Madhubani or the police in Bhagalpur mercilessly beating a government employee to death.

The government has fully surrendered to dominant sections and criminals. On the one hand autocracy is being established in the State through Police Raj, while on the other hand the dance

of death by criminals goes unchecked. It is the common people who have to bear the brunt of all this.

The prohibition law is wreaking havoc on the poor of Bihar while the illicit liquor business is flourishing under the patronage of politicians and the administration. Despite repeated proofs given by CPIML, the government is taking no action on this and is only indulging in empty self-praise.

As a result of giving free rein to the liquor mafia, the continuing deaths due to poisonous liquor is extremely worrisome. After Gopalganj and Muzaffarpur now reports are coming of painful deaths due to poisonous liquor in Beguserai and Nawada. The poor are even being sentenced to death by hanging, in the name of prohibition.

CPIML demands that the government should stop using the prohibition law as a weapon to repress and oppress the poor and override proper medical treatment and de-addiction programs for persons who are really addicted, and the deteriorating law and order situation in Bihar should be corrected without delay by the government.

Government Hiding Truth in Nawada-Beguserai Liquor Deaths

The illicit liquor business in Bihar is flourishing under the politicians-administration-liquor mafia nexus, but Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, displaying his arrogance, repeatedly attempts to deny this truth. As a result

today poisonous liquor has become a synonym for the death of the poor in Bihar. Instead of curbing the liquor mafia, the poor are being punished through the draconian Prohibition Act. Only recently painful deaths due to poisonous liquor had occurred in Gopalganj and Muzaffarpur, but the state government learnt no lessons and as a result a dozen more poor persons have died in Nawada and Beguserai.

A CPIML team met the victims' families. The terror of the prohibition law is such that people try to hide the truth out of fear. Therefore timely medical treatment is not done and people die untimely deaths.

The Nawada District administration has washed its hands of responsibility by saying that the deaths are due to heart attack and diarrhea. They are also putting pressure on the victims' families not to talk about poisonous liquor. The truth is that after consuming poisonous liquor all of them first had vomiting and diarrhea, but this fact is now being attempted to be covered up.

Ever since poor persons were sentenced to death by hanging for the crime of liquor consumption in the Gopalganj Khajurbani case, the poor across Bihar are living in terror. They fear that they will also be sentenced to death. What kind of nonsense is this? Fully knowing the truth, the government does not curb the liquor mafia, but on the other hand gets the poor punished through the prohibition law.

Nitish Kumar should acknowledge the truth about the Prohibition Act and first of all dismantle and destroy the politicians-administration-liquor mafia nexus and stop unleashing terror on the poor. The government should make special medical arrangements for de-addiction centres at the sub-division level.

A protest march was organized on 1 April in Nawada against the growing number of poisonous liquor deaths. CPIML expressed deep condolences for the victims.

Nitish Kumar must apologize for the Troubles inflicted on the People of Bihar

through the Prohibition Act

On 5 April a high level CPIML enquiry team met the family members of the 17 people who have died till date and the 8 people admitted in hospital in the poisonous liquor incident in Nawada, and attempted to understand the truth of the entire matter. The enquiry team comprised Ghosi MLA Rambali Singh Yadav, State Standing Committee member and AIKM leader Ramadhar Singh, District Secretary Narendra Singh, Bhola Ram and AIPWA leader Sudama Devi.

Speaking for the enquiry team, MLA Rambali Singh Yadav said that the death toll has reached 17 due to administrative negligence and terror of the draconian Prohibition Act. If the administration had taken timely action, many lives could have been saved. The area in which the incident occurred is right behind the DM's office in the city. Lower level police personnel are being targeted in the matter in order to protect the truly guilty persons. The team demanded strict action against the DM, SP and the liquor mafia. Nitish Kumar must apologize to the people of Bihar. The Prohibition law has failed absolutely. Bihari society is coming into the clutches of poisonous liquor. This illicit liquor business cannot be run without the politicians-administration-liquor mafia nexus.

On the other hand, the terror of the draconian Prohibition Act is such that even hospitals and relatives hide the truth about alcoholism. As a result, victims do not get timely treatment and they are pushed into untimely deaths. The attitude of the police-administration in this matter is extremely negative. They use force and put pressure to hide the true nature of the deaths. All these facets have come out into the open in Nawada.

The enquiry team visited the affected mohallas including Budhoul, Gendapur, Siswan and Kharidibigaha. They met the families of victims Gopal Sharma, Bhushan Rajvanshi, Prabhakar Gupta, Loha Singh, Dinesh Prasad, Ramdev Yadav, Akash Kumar, Shivshankar Yadav, Dharmendra Kumar, Sanoj

Kumar Mishra aka Sonu, and others. In the morning of 30 January when the condition of those who had consumed poisonous liquor started deteriorating and they were taken to hospital, the initial reaction of the hospital was to tell them, take these people back otherwise it will become a case of alcohol consumption. Only after 2 or 3 deaths was the administration forced to conduct post-mortems, bringing out the fact of liquor consumption. If the hospital had begun timely medical treatment many lives could have been saved, but the draconian Prohibition Act has created an atmosphere of terror in the entire area.

Despite the post-mortems showing proof of poisonous liquor the police forced the victims' family members to write that these deaths were caused by heart attack or epilepsy. When the enquiry team went to deceased Bhushan Rajvanshi's house they saw that 2 police personnel were already seated there on chairs. Under pressure from the administration the victim's daughter told us that his death was due to tension and not to alcohol, whereas the report says otherwise. The most shameful thing was that when our team was returning from Genda Bigaha, the police attacked the village and beat up people for the alleged crime of talking to us about liquor! It appears as if Nitish Kumar has decided to destroy Bihar totally. This matter should be probed.

Nitish Kumar's officials are sitting inside Circuit House and enquiring into the matter. Clearly they want to wash away the case lightly. The police has nabbed a poor corn-seller woman Mata Devi and sent her to jail, and suspended a chowkidar Vikas Mishra on the charge of manufacturing poisonous liquor. Thus a veil is being laid over the actual liquor mafia-administration nexus.

CPIML demands that the government should pay Rs 20 lakhs compensation and a government job to each of the dead victims' families, proper medical treatment at government expense for the 8 people being treated in hospital, and immediate action against the DM and SP.

Bhagalpur: Brutal Police Killing of Government Employee

CPIML and RJD jointly organized a protest on 30 March at Ghanta Chowk in Bhagalpur against the brutal beating to death of Irrigation department employee Sanjay Kumar by the police at Barari Thana. Mahagathbandhan activists protested by burning Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's effigy and raising slogans against the brutal killing and demanding the repeal of the Bihar Special Armed Police Bill 2021.

The protest was led by CPIML State Committee member SK Sharma, District Secretary Bindeshwari Mandal, AICTU State Secretary Mukesh Mukht and RJD District President Chandrashekhar Yadav. The leaders said that Police Raj has been imposed on Bihar through the Bihar Special Armed Police Bill 2021. The police dance of death on Holi day 29 March led by the City SP and the Barari Thana in-charge is a consequence of this. The police picked up Irrigation department employee Sanjay Kumar from his home and beat him so brutally that he died on the spot in the Thana.

CPIML and RJD demanded the removal and arrest of the Bhagalpur City SP and the Barari Thana in-charge and strict punishment for them under murder charge. CPIML and RJD also demanded Rs 50 lakhs compensation to the family of deceased government employee and a government job for his dependent.

Nitish Kumar has Shamed Democracy

CPIML held a press conference in Patna on 1 April and said that the goondism by the police inside the Assembly was not only Nitish Kumar's extremely condemnable act to insult and repress Opposition MLAs, but also an act that lowered the prestige of the Legislature. By endorsing police violence on the Legislature, all established democratic processes were thrown to the winds. Nowhere else in history do we find such an example; possibly not even during the British Raj

was the Legislature treated thus. Nitish Kumar passed the draconian Bihar Special Armed Police Act by using police force inside the Assembly, and the entire world is casting shame on him for this.

Parliamentary democracy has always had a tradition of establishing consensus over laws. In case of opposition, the provision is for detailed discussion or submission to a select committee. But this government did no such thing and hastened to pass the Bill by using the police to kick and beat MLAs and drag them out of the House. Gheraoing the Assembly Speaker is the democratic right of MLAs but it was used as an excuse to blot the history of the Vidhan Sabha on 23 March 2021.

This act is actually an extension of the autocracy being imposed on the entire country by the Modi government. Nitish Kumar is actually furthering the BJP's agenda. We have already seen how the 3 black farm laws were forcibly passed in Parliament, and now the Modi government is intent on curbing the Delhi government's rights and handing over all the rights to the LG.

Carrying this autocratic process further in Bihar, Nitish Kumar first banned social media and then issued a diktat that those who participate in protests will not be given government jobs or contracts. During the Budget session the Chief Minister was flummoxed by questions posed by CPIML and other Opposition MLAs, and started using unseemly language, merely doling out advice. On 23 March he added a black chapter to parliamentary history. The Speaker has reiterated his statements putting the blame on the MLAs. By doing so he wants to wash away the stain on his conduct, but the entire world is watching his actions.

CPIML Bihar Secretary Kunal said that the party will go amongst the people to speak about the BJP-JDU's autocracy and this anti-democracy action which has globally shamed democracy-loving Bihar, and will campaign across the State to demand an apology from Nitish Kumar. All our MLAs will campaign in their respective areas with village

meetings and the slogan 'Loktantra Hua Shamsaar--Maafi Maango Nitish Kumar' (You have shamed democracy - Apologize to the people, Nitish Kumar).

No Relief for SHG Women in Bihar Budget

The Self Help Group And Jeevika Sangharsh Samiti held a meeting on 6 April in Patna, attended by women from across the state.

AIPWA General Secretary Meena Tiwari said that during the Lockdown period in 2020 we had raised the issue of loan waivers for women in SHGs and Jeevika workers and organized many programs. After the Assembly elections on 5 March we organized a protest in front of the Chief Minister with these demands. But no relief has been provided in the recent Bihar Budget, and the decision taken by the Modi government at the Centre to collect these loans has greatly disappointed these women.

The loan waiver for SHG women is becoming an issue in many states. After Andhra Pradesh, loan waiver for SHGs has emerged as an important demand in the Assembly elections in Tamil Nadu, Assam and West Bengal.

After the Lockdown, employment has dwindled to zero for poor and marginalized women already mired deep in debt due to the policies of

the autocratic Modi government. In many cases the women have been constrained to use the loan money to make both ends meet for lack of any other source of income during that period.

Due to the initiatives taken by many organisations in that period, arbitrary loan collection by micro-finance companies was stayed in some places, but on a large scale the problem of loan collection at exorbitant interest rates remains as it was. The government has taken no steps to stop the wilful arbitrariness of private finance companies and there is no guarantee of procurement of products made by SHG women. 1.10 crore women are associated with the Jeevika groups alone run by the Bihar government's Ministry of Rural Affairs. Add to this the groups run by private finance companies and NGOs, and that makes a large population of women who have been pushed into the quagmire of debt.

AIPWA State Secretary Shashi Yadav said that the tragedy that has struck the lives of these debt-ridden women is heart-rending. Private finance company agents behave indecently with them in the name of loan and interest collection.

Sangharsh Samiti State Convener Rita Barnawal said that Block level protests would be organized across Bihar on



Protest against Brutal Police Killing of Government Employee in Bhagalpur

28 April with the demands for loan waivers, interest-free loans, formation of a regulatory State Authority, safety, id cards, insurance and Rs 21,000 honorarium for Jeevika workers.

The meeting was also addressed by Dr Prema Devi, Daulati Devi, Deepa Kumari, Anuradha Devi, Ruby Manjhi and others. A 6-member Convening Committee including Rita Barnawal, Anuradha Devi, Deepa Kumari, Mala Devi, Manmohan, and an 18-member State Committee was formed through the meeting. Rita Barnawal was unanimously elected State Convener.

Recruitment and Justice Convening Committee formed in Patna

CPIML MLAs Sandeep Saurabh, Manoj Manzil and Ajit Kushwaha informed on 17 March that the Bahali Nyay convening committee has been formed to bring candidates of various exams together on a single platform to highlight the recruitment crisis and young people's demands. A state level convention will be organized in Patna and a booklet will be brought out to expose the irregularities in competitive exams.

A 25-hour dharna was organized on 23-24 March in Patna. Sandeep Saurabh said that youth had marched to

the Bihar Assembly on 1 March on the issue of 19 lakh jobs but the government had unleashed a brutal lathi charge instead of listening to them while more than 19 lakh posts are lying vacant in various departments.

Agiaon MLA Manoj Manzil said that huge irregularities, corruption and paper leaks are rampant in job recruitments. 83%, 61%, 40% and 65% posts are vacant in the National Health Mission, health, PMCH doctors and nurses, and government hospitals including PHC and CHC respectively. We have placed the matter of vacant teachers' posts in the Assembly. As per quality education norms of 30:1 student-teacher ratio, Bihar needs a total of 12 lakh teachers (primary, middle and higher education).

Ajit Kushwaha said that the issue of unemployment is the biggest issue in Bihar today. The BJP-JDU had promised 19 lakh jobs but are now trying to rub off the issue by saying they will give loans for self-employment to students and youth. This is not acceptable. The youth of Bihar need permanent secure jobs as was promised to them during the election, not even contract work. We will raise the issue of employment consistently inside the Assembly for the next 5 years.

ITI Instructor candidate Rajesh Jha said that there are only 400 instructors

for 25000 students who take admission in 149 ITIs in Bihar. Vacant post appointments are lying pending for 10 years. On behalf of technical students organizations, Sawan Kumar said that Bihar is the only state where candidates who have higher education qualifications cannot appear for exams that require minimum eligibility. Dr Sumit Saurabh said that BPSC and Bihar State Civil Services should include Women's Studies as an exam subject. Progressive Electricity Workers Association President Avinash Kumar said that after cutting government jobs this government wants to snatch away private jobs through temporary contract work.

Statistics Volunteers Association State President Abhishek Singh said that Nitish Kumar had threatened agitating candidates in 2015 that they would be forced on to the road with one signature by him if they did not end the agitation. In 2016 he issued an autocratic diktat nullifying the panel of selected candidates.

The press conference held on 17 March was also addressed by candidates from other competitive exams like Police Mitra and Niyojit Evam Aniyojit Karyapal Sahayak. □

Continuing Massacre of Democracy in Myanmar

In February 2021, earlier this year, the military in Myanmar executed a coup, overturning the government led by Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy. The coup was followed by an unprecedented and widespread resistance on the streets of Myanmar. In response, the military rulers have now unleashed a brutal crackdown against the protests. The military has launched ground attacks and air strikes. As per some



reports emerging from Myanmar, more than 700 protestors are now killed. Another 3300 are in jail. An estimated 2,50,000 people have been displaced from their homes. People are fleeing for their lives to neighbouring countries, terrified and hiding in forests and desperately trying to find safe spaces.

Journalists, reporters and human rights activists who are documenting the assaults on democracy are being hounded, arrested, detained, jailed and killed. Thin Thin Aung, human rights activist and founder of the media house Mizzima, is one of these dissenters being hounded in Myanmar right now. She was picked up by the military in early April and is now being held in the notorious Yay Kyi Eaing interrogation centre.

This present moment in Myanmar is important for multiple reasons. Ethnic tensions between the Buddhist majority in the country and the Rohingya Muslims have unfortunately been an enduring feature in Myanmar, with the Rohingyas becoming the victims of a racially-motivated, genocidal campaign against them even under the rule of the democratically elected Aung San Suu Kyi. They have been

denied the basic rights of citizenship, and have been brutally hounded out of the country. The present moment is important because we are seeing efforts to forge solidarities between protestors who are recognised as citizens of Myanmar, and the Rohingya minority.

Secondly, we are seeing dissenting voices against the latest coup from within the military too. According to a report, three-fourths of the security forces in Myanmar are opposed to the current crackdown on protestors. While this might not result in an overthrow of the coup, it surely points out the extent of unpopularity of the military rulers.

While there is some international outrage as well as domestic resistance to the coup, the military leaders in Myanmar seem hell-bent on continuing the regime of terror and intimidation. Military leader Min Aung Hlaing, who faces international sanctions for his role in military atrocities and the brutal crackdown on pro-democracy protesters, is defying protests and insisting on attending an international meeting to discuss solutions to the current crisis.

Role of the Modi Government

Even as the Myanmar military rulers

are massacring the people, the government of India sent its military attaché to attend the Myanmar Armed Forces Day military parade on 27 March. It is well known that the Adani group, whose owner is a close crony of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has deeply entrenched business dealings with a company owned by the Myanmar military. It is difficult to avoid the inference that the Modi regime is prioritising Adani's interests over the values of democracy and human rights.

The Modi government's covert support of the military regime does not end there. The state government of Manipur issued a circular refusing food and shelter to refugees fleeing Myanmar, though it was later forced to withdraw the circular. Moreover, over the past few years, the government of India has been trying to deport Rohingya refugees to Myanmar where they face almost certain death at the hands of the military regime. The need of the hour is for all of us to stand by the principles of justice and liberty. We must join international efforts to demand safe shelter to refugees, including Rohingya refugees, fleeing massacre by the military in Myanmar. □

Release Thin Thin Aung

We, women human rights and democracy advocates, call for the Myanmar military coup council to immediately release woman rights defender and journalist Thin Thin Aung and other illegally detained pro-democracy activists.

We appeal to the government, the international community, transnational business stakeholders and the morally conscious public to put pressure on the Myanmar military to end the brutal violence against protesters, restore peoples' democratic will, restore the rule of law, and restore people's rights including the right to freedom of

expression and assembly.

We, in neighbouring India, are extremely troubled at the humanitarian and human rights crisis resulting from the February 1 military coup. The violent crackdown on democratic protests has resulted in random killings -- including of children -- mass arbitrary arrests, and the use of lethal weapons including airstrikes on urban sites especially of Myanmar's ethnic communities.

According to the rights group, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, since the February 1 military



coup, statistics of indiscriminate killings are pushing upwards of 600, with more than 4,000 arbitrary arrests.

The terror and pain of the spiralling statistics was brought home to us when

one of Myanmar's brightest and tireless rights and democracy activists, co-founder of the online media platform, Mizzima, disappeared on April 8. She was found held at the notorious Yay Kyi Eaing interrogation centre, and subsequently her apartment and belongings were ransacked, her computer seized, her bank account and the Mizzima funds that she managed, emptied.

Mizzima has confirmed that its co-founder, Daw Thin Thin Aung, and an office staffer, James, were also picked up. Reporters Ko Zaw Zaw and KoThan Htike Aungare also in custody.

Some of us know Thin Thin. She lived amongst us for 15 years in exile as a Burmese refugee. She was one among the many student activists seized by the dream of democratic freedom in 1988, when the Myanmar military experimented with a democratic election and Aung Sang Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy won. The crackdown on the student uprising propelled her flight across the border to Mizoram. At that time, people were sympathetic to these student refugees and they had public support.

Thin Thin and her husband Soe-Mynt exemplified refugees who had become part of the resistance in India. Thin Thin got a business management degree and the two co-founded the news media, Mizzima, in 1998. Many of us remember Thin Thin working in Delhi to get basic entitlements of food and shelter for less fortunate Burmese women refugees.

When after 50 years of military rule Myanmar opened up, Thin Thin and Soe-Mynt left for Myanmar, becoming part of the struggle to build independent journalism there. Once in Yangon, Thin Thin carried over her struggle for women's rights through the Women's League for Democracy. She also carried with her goodwill and friendship towards India and Indians. Many of us met her at meetings in Kathmandu and Brussels.

She, determinedly, pushed against the patriarchies entrenched during 50 years of military rule and its accompanying

social hyper-masculinities. And always, along with Women's League of Democracy, she was outspoken on the need for federal inclusion and attention to women of the ethnic nationalities of Myanmar. (Sadly that did not include the persecuted Rohingya).

Today, Thin Thin and thousands of young women and men have been picked up and now face the likelihood of custodial torture in a situation where the rule of law has been suspended. Moreover, the military has been listed by the U.N. secretary-general as a party "credibly suspected of committing or being responsible for patterns of rape or other forms of sexual violence."

We appeal to democratic governments, including India, to not align themselves on the wrong side of history with brutally repressive military dictators in Myanmar. As concerned citizens, we are distressed at the Indian government's equivocation and delay in robust condemnation of the violence and support for the peoples' will.

We are distressed at India's diplomatic representatives gracing Myanmar's military day parade in the midst of mounting evidence of the brutal use of force.

We are at a loss to understand the determination of Indian state agencies and institutions to flout the jus cogens principle of non-refoulement upheld by Indian jurisprudence and reiterated in international human rights treaties which India has signed and ratified. We are outraged at the government's directive to deport Rohingya Muslim refugees (including a 14-year-old girl) as 'illegal migrants' back to Myanmar from where they fled 'ethnic cleansing' and where after the military coup the rule of law has been suspended.

We are perturbed at why for Indian state owned and private enterprises it is business as usual, when other democracies are snapping economic and military links.

The UN independent Fact Finding Mission 2019 has warned foreign companies, including named Indian companies, to sever their economic

relationship with the hydra headed military business conglomerates or risk being seen as complicit in the military's violation of human rights.

In the backdrop of the coup, three interrelated international accountability processes are taking place focused on Myanmar's human rights abuses -- particularly the Rohingya genocide: at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), at the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM), which was created by the U.N.

Human Rights Council to build criminal cases for international crimes committed in Myanmar since 2011. This includes crimes committed in the context of the February 1 military coup.

It is time for India, the international community, transnational corporations, and all morally conscious sections of society to support the will of the people of Myanmar.

We appeal that the military should be pressured to immediately release Thin Thin Aung and others illegally detained.

We urge that in the interim, the military coup council give immediate access to International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to Thin Thin Aung and the other detained as per humanitarian law and protocols.

We are in complete solidarity with the people of Myanmar at this critical hour.

- Abha Bhaiya, Albertina Almeida, Amrita Chhacchi, Chhaya Datar, Chayanika Shah, Devaki Jain, Enakshi Ganguly, Gabriele Dietrich, Geeta Seshu, Hasina Khan, Kalyani Menon-Sen, Kamla Bhasin, Kavita Krishnan, Lalita Ramdas, Masooma Ranalvi, Meena Seshu, Meera Sanghamitra, Navsharan Singh, Pamela Philipose, Saswati Ghosh, Sheba Chhachhi, Uma Chakravarti, Vibhuti Patel, Vrinda Grover and many others ■

Al Nakba Anniversary: Saluting the Revolutionary Resistance of Palestinian People

As we enter the month of May, another year has been reduced from the lifespan of brutal Israeli occupation of Palestine. One more year has passed in West Bank and Gaza Strip, with tens of thousands of Palestinians - old and young - holding high the glorious banner of resistance in the face of the brutal Israeli oppression.

This year, on May 15, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Palestinians will commemorate the Al Nakba or the day of catastrophe, when in 1948 more than 700,000 Palestinians were thrown out of their own land by armed Zionist groups following the 'declaration of independence of Israel'. Palestinian villages and towns were burnt down and destroyed, and more than 13,000 Palestinians were summarily executed. Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish describes this agony and pain of being refugees in their own in his poem, 'Refugees':

*They fettered his mouth with chains,
And tied his hands to the rock of the dead.
They said: You're a murderer.
They took his food, his clothes and his banners,
And threw him into the well of the dead.
They said: You're a thief.
They threw him out of every port,
And took away his young beloved.
And then they said: You're a refugee.*

The oppression against Palestinians didn't end there, instead, the 'Israeli state' established one of the most brutal and industrialised systems of persecution witnessed by the world since World War II. A whole nationality – its people, heritage, and culture - was caged in their own land. But what the oppressive apparatus couldn't cage was the revolutionary spirit of resistance of the Palestinian people that continues to fight the Israeli military occupation and also provides inspiration to people's movements across the world.

In March 2018, on the Land Day anniversary the Palestinian people in Gaza launched a new wave of resistance movements known as the Great March of Return, that continued for more than a year. Tens of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza demanding the right of return and end to the siege and occupation marched towards the border fence put up by the Israeli military.



What unfolded in this Great March of Return was visible to the whole world, unarmed Palestinians – men and women, young and old – were massacred and maimed by Israeli forces.

The largest massacre happened on 14 May 2018, coinciding with the illegal move by the United States of America recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Israeli soldiers shot dead 60 Palestinians and injured 1200 people on this fateful day. Many injured were shot in their legs with explosive 'butterfly' bullets, crippling them for life. And yet none of this dampened the spirit indomitable spirit of Palestinian resistance.

Oppression, the Pandemic, and Everyday Life in Occupied Palestine

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the worsening situation in occupied Palestinian territories of West Bank and Gaza. In the backdrop of the massive concrete wall running along the perimeter of West Bank and the 14 year long Israeli land-air-sea blockade of the Gaza strip, people in these occupied territories are faced with daily raids and kidnappings by the Israeli military. For Israel, these occupied territories are the open laboratories for testing its new weapons technologies and tools of mass surveillance and control.

In West Bank, people continue to resist daily raids, kidnappings, demolition of Palestinian homes and expansion of illegal Israeli settlement by Israeli forces. Recently, in March 2021, Israeli forces opened fire on a protest against an illegal Israeli settlement and killed 42 year old Atef Yussef Hanaysheh. Facing corruption charges and an electoral crisis, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, with support from then US President Donald Trump in 2019 had announced the plans to further expand 'Israeli sovereignty' over 30% areas of West Bank, particularly in the Jordan Valley. The proposed annexation will mostly be in Area C of the occupied West Bank, where most of the illegal Israeli settlements have been built. This annexation plan of Netanyahu coincided with Trump's infamous 'Deal of the Century' that aimed at giving 60% of West Bank territories to Israel in exchange for Palestinian statehood.

In Gaza, the humanitarian situation is unimaginable, with people in the besieged coastal strip living with less than 12 hours of electricity every day. The three brutal wars on Gaza by Israel have already destroyed vital public infrastructure, crippling hospitals, as well as water and sanitation plants. Due to the blockade, healthcare in Gaza faces a severe shortage of medical supplies, including lifesaving drugs and ICU beds.

Faced with an acute shortage of tertiary medical treatment, many Palestinians are forced to approach hospitals in Israel, but have to go through an inhuman approval process. Many patients are forced to travel without companions because their exit permits are rejected by Israel. With the COVID 19 pandemic, and suspension of cooperation between the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Israeli state in the background of Israel's new annexation plans, many applications for exit permits were declined by Israel leaving critical patients from Palestine without crucial healthcare.

Amid the pandemic, Israel has devised a new tool of oppression against Palestinians - vaccine apartheid. While Israel is being portrayed as the world leader in its vaccination drive, Arabs in Israel and Palestinians in occupied regions were initially denied access to the vaccine. Only after a long delay, Israel provided a very limited number of vaccine doses to the Palestinian Authority. For the rest, Palestinians have to rely on donations. Under International Law and the Fourth Geneva Convention, Israel as an occupying power is obligated to provide all measures to provide health services and combat the spread of contagious diseases and epidemics.

"The disparity in access to vaccines - with Palestinians having very little access and Israel leading the world in vaccine coverage - is a direct result of the apartheid and colonial aspects that characterize its occupation," said international law expert, Nuriya Oswald of the Al Mezan Center for Human Rights.^a

World Health Organization (WHO) reported that since March 2020 more than 309,564 Palestinians in the occupied territories have tested positive for Covid-19. The case fatality rate for occupied territories areas at 1.1 per cent, whereas Israel's is 0.76 per cent.

Palestinian political prisoners imprisoned in Israeli occupation jail continue to be at the receiving end of both, the Coronavirus pandemic and Israeli brutality. According to recent reports, there are 4450 Palestinians, including around 40 women and 140 children lodged in Israeli prisons. Most of them were simply put behind jails for protesting or on suspicion of protesting against Israeli occupation of Palestine. Many of them are forced into solitary confinement and subjected to physical and psychological torture. Palestinian prisoners are denied proper healthcare despite the raging

[a] Human rights defenders call for end to Israel 'vaccine apartheid', March 24, 2021, <https://genevasolutions.news/global-health/human-rights-defenders-call-for-end-to-israel-vaccine-apartheid>

Coronavirus infecting around 368 of them. More than 500 prisoners suffer from various diseases and comorbidities, making them more vulnerable.

Palestinians in Israeli jail continue to resist Israeli occupation and brutality through hunger strikes as a tool of protest. Last year, 32 Palestinian political prisoners went on a 100 day long successful hunger strike in Israel's Ofer Prison demanding the release of the seriously ill inmate Maher al-Akhras. The strike ended after al-Akhras was released on November 26.

The BDS Movement

The Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel continues to expand into a global movement despite attempts by Israel and pro-Israeli countries and lobbyists to vilify and sabotage the movement. Modeled after the anti-apartheid movement of South Africa, the BDS movement aims to end "international support for Israel's oppression of Palestinians and pressure Israel to comply with international law".

In the past few years, the BDS movement has been successful in pressing countries, organizations and companies across the globe to withdraw from activities or contracts that are in contravention to international law and directly/indirectly complicit in Israeli oppression of Palestinians. In April last year, after a sustained movement the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) office in Jordan announced "that it would not be renewing its contract with G4S, a private security corporation with a lengthy history of involvement in Israel's crimes." In mid 2016, the BDS campaign was successful in ensuring the withdrawal of South Africa based retail chain Woolworths from its purchasing activities of Israeli products from occupied territories.

In India, BDS is engaging with people's movements and civil societies to resist the Israeli investment in the Indian agriculture sector, while

whitewashing its crimes against Palestinian farmers. "The interventions in Indian agriculture play out by creating the myth of Israel 'seeing' India from its agrarian crisis—a notion both patently wrong and racist. Crucially, such myths serves Israel's PR machinery by serving as cover for its war crimes, occupation, and apartheid against Palestinians—a veneer for the everyday injustices meted out to Palestinian farmers" said Apoorva Gautam, BDS South Asia Coordinator.^b

BDS and other people's initiatives of global solidarity continue to strengthen the fight against Israeli oppression at a time when 'old friends' especially many countries in the Arab League have turned complicit in the Israeli oppression and crimes against humanity. In 2019, Israeli and United Arab States (UAE) with the assistance from the US normalised ties and also embarked on military cooperation. Today, UAE along with the US and Israel are attempting to sabotage the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) that provides much needed humanitarian projects, including schools in occupied Palestinian territories.

While expressing solidarity with the cause of Palestinian freedom and the resistance against occupation, the 10th Party Congress of CPIML held in 2018, reiterated the importance of

[b] Corporate Complicity: Israeli Interventions In Indian Agriculture, Apoorva Gautam <https://bdsmovement.net/sites/default/files/Corporate%20Complicity%20Israeli%20Interventions%20in%20Indian%20Agriculture.pdf>

BDS movement:

Despite Israel's ceaseless attempts to discredit its critics by falsely conflating anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement is growing in strength internationally and there is now very widespread recognition that Israel, like pre-1994 South Africa, is an apartheid state which must be strenuously opposed by all anti-imperialist and anti-racist forces. Considering India's growing strategic ties with Israel, it is important for us in India to strengthen the BDS movement.

Renewed Call to Strengthen The Fight for Palestinian Freedom

On May 22, areas under Palestinian Authority (PA) will be holding elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). The PLC only has authority in Area A under the Oslo Peace Accord of 1993-95 between Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel, while in Area B, PLC only has power over civilian matters, while security is under Israeli military. Area C is under full control of Israel.

But the long-delayed election (last election was held in 2006) has not generated much enthusiasm among the Palestinian population. According to political observers, the main reason is the failure of Oslo accord, from which PA and PLC were created. Many members of the Palestinian movement considered the Accord-termed as 'historic' by international community- was destined to fail as it was disadvantageous for the cause

of Palestinian Liberation. Today, the critics argue that Oslo Accord is only on paper. The frequent annexation of Palestinian land (under the Accord) by Israel and expansion of illegal Israeli settlement has made the 'objective' of the 1993 agreement void.

The limited impact of Palestinian Authority to further the cause resistance against Israeli oppression, and the extensive collaborations made by PA with Israel in the fields of security, intelligence and economy against Palestinians has created a sense of alienation among the people of occupied territories.

Against the backdrop of increasing Israeli oppression and annexations, there had been renewed calls for another Intifada (uprising). The Great March of Return symbolized this aspiration of the Palestinian people. The everyday resistance against occupation by millions of Palestinians-in streets, universities, refugee camps, Israeli jails and abroad- continue to challenge the military might of the oppressor. The final Intifada, the last nail in the coffin of Israeli military occupation is nearing with the passing of each day. Like every oppression in the history, this will also fall. □

"The Palestinian cause is not a cause for Palestinians only, but a cause for every revolutionary, wherever he is, as a cause of the exploited and oppressed masses in our era."

- Ghassan Kanafani (8 April 1937- 8 July 1972), a Palestinian author and a leading member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

Obituary

Sankha Ghosh

We bid farewell to poet Sankha Ghosh, who passed away from Covid-19 at the age of 89. Sankha Ghosh will always be remembered as one of the finest poets and literary critics in modern India, as well as a voice of conscience in the Bengali social and cultural sphere.



Dashrath Mahatia

Comrade Dashrath Mahatia, senior CPIML kisan leader from Nighasan in Lakhimpur Kheri passed away on 9 April 2021. He was about 94 years old. Originally hailing from Fattepur village in Rudrapur Tehsil, Devaria District (then Gorakhpur), Comrade Dashrath joined the Communist movement during the days of the freedom struggle under his uncle's ideological influence. Comrade Dashrath could remember

the Chauri Chaura incident, which took place during his childhood. Comrade Dashrath Mahatia organized hundreds of landless people for 'dakhal' in the Khalla region of Nighasan. Later he had this land registered in the name of farmers through the Bhudan Samiti. He continued to play a leading role in the land 'dakhal' movement for thousands of landless families.

The entire region held Comrade Dashrath in the greatest of respect. He was the strong backbone of the farmers' movement and the party in Kheri District. His entire family is associated with the party and Kheri District Committee member Comrade Tapeswari is his daughter-in-law. On receiving the news of his demise, hundreds of people including party activists paid silent tribute to him and the party flag was dedicated to him, after which they accompanied him on his final journey.

Adieu Comrade Dashrath Mahatia! Your memories will remain forever alive, Red Salute!

Laxmanbhai Wadia

Comrade Laxmanbhai Chhaganbhai Wadia, 64 was a dedicated and popular leader from the Warli adivasi community of South Gujarat. This was very shocking to hear his passing away on 12 April. He developed breathing problem and chest congestion and owing to miserable medical infrastructure in Gujarat this wasn't even possible to get him diagnosed properly. His demise is a big loss to us and to the struggles he was leading against land grab in Valsad, Navsari, Dang and Suraj regions. His leadership was decisive in preventing land grab of thousands of adivasis after the implementation of Forest Rights Act in 2006. Since then he has organized dozens of protest rallies and campaigns at Valsad, Umargam, Kaprada and other places to provide land rights to adivasis. He also relentlessly fought against private organized corporate land mafia who tried to grab Adivasi lands by illegal means. He had to pay a heavy price for his commitment and the struggles he led. He escaped attack on his life twice by mafia in collaboration with BJP goons. In one such attack he got injured. Nothing could stop him from leading the struggles from the frontline which certainly led to empowerment of Adivasi community in that region to newer heights. He fought against indiscriminate industrialization by GIDC being done at the cost of Adivasi lands and livelihoods and won struggles for potable water for the community, for wages as well as against the hold of private money lenders over Adivasi lives. Comrade Laxmanbhai Wadia participated in Una March held in Gujarat against atrocities on Dalits. He was instrumental in organizing rural labour and women in his district and organized many conferences and cadre meets for AIPWA and AIARLA. He had attended AIARLA National Conferences held in Bhubaneswar, Patna and Jehanabad along with many delegates from his district. He was also very helpful in organizing adivasis in adjoining Palghar district of Maharashtra. After the brutal lockdown that was imposed last year this was Comrade Laxmanbhai who took initiative to send back home tens of thousands of Andhra Pradesh fishermen and their boats which got stranded near the coast of Gujarat. He personally supervised and ensured nearly 1100 boats reached home safely in their state. His father was a poor farm worker, and so he could not study beyond Std IV. Since childhood he helped support his family by working as bonded and farm labour. He toiled to educate his younger brother who later became the branch manager of a nationalized bank. In the 80s young Wadiabhai joined the Adivasi Sena against repression and loot by feudal lords and the land mafia, and became a prominent leader in that organization. He fought a long battle against grabbing of his ancestral land by GIDC and won in the end. Later, most top leaders of the Adivasi Sena joined the BJP. In 2005 Wadia joined the CPIML. In 2007 he was the party candidate from Umargaon constituency in the Assembly election. In the 2009 Lok Sabha election he was the party candidate from Valsad and polled 9,700 votes. In addition to being responsible for the Gujarat State leading team, he was also a member of the AIARLA National Executive and AICCTU National Council. Laxmanbhai Wadia was the delegate for the CPIML's 9th and 10th party congresses. He struggled relentlessly for about four decades against the land mafia associated with BJP as well as Congress. During this period he was attacked numerous times, but he never accepted defeat. His death due to sudden illness is a sorrowful event for the party and for all who knew him.

Red salute, Wadia bhai! Your memory will always fill our hearts!

Gulshan Bharti

Comrade Gulshan Bharti was a young CPIML member of the new generation, whose family, relatives, and Tola all are part of the CPIML legacy. He belonged to a dalit family from Kaup village in Gadahani Block. He leaves behind his teacher mother, farmer father and a sister and other family members including an uncle and grandfather, all of whom are active members of the party in all struggles against feudalism as well as today's fascist forces. Gulshan became a member of the party in 2015 and was active in our student organization AISA as well as at the forefront of social and party responsibilities. He played an important role in ration disbursement during the Lockdown, as a volunteer in the Gadahani Shaheen Bagh, Sadak-Par-School initiative, working tirelessly for the Agiaon election campaign, and looking after the social media front. Recently he played a leading role in the Vidhan Sabha march for education-health-employment. Comrade Gulshan was a B.Sc (Maths) Part 2 student at the Jagjivan College in Ara. He was a brilliant student and had passed Matric-Inter from Kshatriya High School in the 1st Division. His untimely death is an irreparable loss for the entire party. We stand with his family in this hour of sorrow.

Red salute to Comrade Gulshan Bharti!

Ashish Yechury

CPIML extends the deepest condolences to CPIM General Secretary Comrade Sitaram Yechury and Indrani Mazumdar on the untimely loss of their son Ashish to Covid-19. We stand together with Comrades Sitaram and Indrani as well as all other family members and comrades who mourn Ashish's passing. In this very difficult hour, when the pandemic is affecting lakhs of Indian households and claiming thousands of lives every day, let us try and share the burden of this collective grief.



Condemn the police killing of 5 coal plant workers in Bangladesh

On April 17, 2021, five workers were killed and more than 50 injured when police in Banshkhali, southeast of Bangladesh opened fire on a protest by thousands of contract workers of a coal-based power plant. The workers were holding a protest demanding payment of unpaid wages, better working condition and reduced work hours during the month of Ramzan.

The under-construction 1,320-megawatt power plant, a joint project between S Alam group and China's SEPCOIII Electric Power Construction was announced in 2016. According to environmental groups and local people, the power plant was built without public consultation and does not comply to environmental impact standards. Despite the protests from local population demanding proper public consultation, the Bangladeshi government allowed the construction of power plant to go ahead. In 2016, police opened fire at protest by locals against the acquiring the land for the power plant project. Four villagers were killed in this police firing.

The Left Democratic Alliance and other progressive groups protesting against the police killing demanded a proper investigation into the incident, arrest of those responsible for the killings. The organizations also demanded financial compensation equal to lifetime income to the families of the victims, and free and proper treatment for those who are injured. The working class of Bangladesh continue to suffer under the impact of government's neoliberal offensive. Low and unpaid wages, poor working conditions, union busting and discrimination are rampant despite assurance of improvement by the government after the Rana Plaza clothing factory collapse in 2013. More than 1,000 workers were killed when eight story building housing various garment manufacturing units collapsed.

The use of state violence against union activities and workers protests have long been a tool for Bangladeshi government to suppress the demands of the working class. Last year, during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of garment workers across the country came to streets demanding the payment of unpaid wages. The government refused to hear their demand and instead unleashed police violence against the workers in an attempt to break the protest. A much larger protest in January 2019 by garment workers demanding wage hike faced similar response from the state. Protesters were assaulted, arrested and haunted by state authorities, while the industries dismissed more 7000 workers from their jobs for demanding their rights.



Protest organised in front of Raju Memorial Sculpture in Dhaka against massacre of workers by police in Banshkhali.



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