

# Liberation

JUNE 2021

CENTRAL ORGAN OF CPI(ML)

Rs. 25

**SOLIDARITY  
WITH THE  
PEOPLE OF  
PALESTINE AND  
THEIR STRUGGLE  
FOR LIBERATION**





## Corpse-bearer Is The Ganga

-Parul Khakkar

*All the corpses speak in chorus: all is changa-changa  
Saheb in your Ramrajya, corpse-bearer is the Ganga.*

*No room in the charnel houses, no wood for the pyres,  
Our shoulders are weary, no tears left in our eyes,  
Yama prances door-to-door  
Dancing the Dance Macabre,  
Saheb in your Ramrajya, corpse-bearer is the Ganga.*

*Day and night pyres burn  
Begging a moment's rest  
Day and night bangles break  
The bereft beat their chest  
What games you play with the flames! Well done Billa-Ranga!  
Saheb in your Ramrajya, corpse-bearer is the Ganga.*

*Saheb you think your suit can dazzle us, so radiant and bright!  
Yet can you hide your feet of clay – when we lose our fright?  
“The Saheb has no clothes” – we’ll shout; Truth will out!  
Saheb in your Ramrajya, corpse-bearer is the Ganga.*

# Liberation

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## India's Covid-19 Genocide: Modi Must Go



**P**M Modi's televised tears have come far too late to convey empathy for those killed by Covid-19 or regret for his regime's callousness that led to those deaths. It is clear that he does not weep out of sorrow for us and the loved ones we have lost, nor out of regret for his own role in those deaths - but because he would like us to feel sorry for him and spare him the criticism he has earned. But Modi cannot play a victim to the calamity he himself has brought upon the country.

Modi, who credited even falling global oil prices on his own "luck", cannot now duck his own responsibility for the brutality of the Covid-19 second wave. He repeatedly credited his leadership for the so-called "victory over Corona" in the first wave – he cannot now blame the second wave disaster on the Opposition, "70 years of Congress rule", or indeed on any other scapegoat. These avoidable deaths lie squarely at PM Modi's door.

The RSS chief and several charlatan godmen are lecturing Indians on the need to replace "negativity" (code for criticism of the government, and indeed for any mention of the daily horrors of the pandemic) with an attitude of "positivity". This enforced "positivity" adds insult to the injury of Indians abandoned by the government to fend for themselves in the pandemic, waging a daily, often losing battle for oxygen, medicines, hospital beds, vaccines, and even for the means to decently cremate or bury one's dead.

The demand that Indians be "positive" in such circumstances is in itself highly insensitive. It is made worse by the callous and shameless language being used by the RSS and BJP to put a "positive" mask on the worst horrors of the pandemic in India. The RSS chief declared that those who had died of Covid-19 had been "liberated", and that Indians must not be perturbed by death since it was all part of the "cycle of life and death." A BJP leader, asked about the thousands of corpses in the Ganga and the mass graves on its banks, claimed that these are in keeping with the sacred Hindu tradition of "jal samadhi" (death by



Bodies buried in the sand near the banks of Ganga river in UP, allegedly due to shortage of wood for cremation, during the second wave of coronavirus.. (Photo: PTI)

voluntary immersion in water)! Death stalks every village in UP now, and is fast spreading all over rural North India. The poor, lacking means and space to decently cremate their dead, are forced to bury them on river banks or leave them in the river, where the corpses wash up downstream in Bihar. But the shameless BJP which rules at the Centre and in UP too, tells us that what we're smelling is not the stench of death but the scent of flowers.

Meanwhile, vaccines have dwindled, as have

government messages urging citizens to seek vaccination, and there is already an acute shortage of the anti-fungal drug Amphotericin-B, leading to avoidable deaths of Covid-19 patients who developed "black fungus" due to unhygienic conditions. The vacuum of reliable and affordable healthcare for the vast majority of people, is paving the way for charlatans peddling superstitions and "miracle cures" as Covid-19 remedies.

The Modi regime is suppressing data on cases and fatalities: data crucial to shaping a proper response and saving lives. A Gujarati poet whose poem on "The Corpse-Laden Ganga" declared that "My Emperor has no clothes", is being attacked viciously by the BJP's troll army. People, and even hospital administrators, posting about oxygen shortage are being arrested as a threat to "National Security." But these relentless attacks cannot suppress the questions. The continuation of the authoritarian and callous Modi regime itself is a recipe for the continued Covid-19 massacre. If India is to survive; if at least now, we are to prevent entire villages from being wiped out – Modi must go. □



## Foil the Modi Government's Conspiracy to Overturn the West Bengal Verdict

 DIPANKAR BHATTACHARYA

India's dysfunctional democracy, renamed elected autocracy by the international media, works best at nights. Forty-six years ago the Emergency had been ushered in through a dreaded midnight knock on the constitutional doors of democracy. In our current dystopian reign of 'achchhe din', major announcements like demonetisation and lockdown are all made usually late in the evening. Two weeks after the stunning West Bengal verdict, the state is now experiencing a whole new set of nocturnal intrigues. On 17 May the CBI arrested four politicians – including the serving Mayor of Kolkata and



the panchayati raj minister of Mamata 3.0 – in connection with a five-year-old corruption case. They got bail from a CBI court in

the afternoon, but the High Court stayed the bail through an ex parte order around midnight, following which the four accused were taken

to jail at the dead of night. The High Court stay on a reasoned bail order violated all procedural propriety and set up a shocking example of sending people unnecessarily to jail even as the Supreme Court has explicitly advised against it in these pandemic conditions.

Ever since the poll results announced an emphatic rejection of the BJP dream of conquering West Bengal, indications were clear that the BJP was in no mood to accept the verdict and let things settle down. Incidents of post-poll political violence were mischievously given a communal spin and massively exaggerated with forged reports and fake videos. The verdict was termed a 'minority veto' and a campaign was launched across the country and among the Indian diaspora against a so-called anti-Hindu terror and genocide in West Bengal.

Notorious for his extremely partisan role in West Bengal, Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar is working overtime to subvert the verdict and work as an independent centre of power over and above the elected government and beyond the parameters of constitutional propriety. Even as the incidents of post-poll violence ebbed and the state began to pay attention to the ominously escalating Covid19 graph, the Governor chose to visit Sitalkuchi and Nandigram. And while the MLAs and ministers were being sworn in, he authorised the CBI to proceed with the prosecution of the accused in the Narada case, as part of the script currently unfolding in West Bengal, without any consultation with the state government or reference to the Speaker.

We must remember that the Narada sting had actually been

conducted in 2014, but the tapes were released just before the 2016 elections, and became a big talking point in those elections. In 2017 the case was handed over to the CBI by the Kolkata High Court. Several of the key accused have meanwhile shifted to the BJP, including Mukul Roy, currently an all-India Vice President of the BJP and MLA and Suvendu Adhikari, currently the leader of the BJP legislature party and the leader of opposition in West Bengal Assembly. Why is the CBI, which showed little urgency with its prosecution all this time, suddenly in a hurry when West Bengal has just emerged from a protracted eight-phased electoral exercise and is trying to combat a raging pandemic? And why this selecting targeting of only TMC leaders to the complete exclusion of the accused who have now taken refuge in the BJP? Incidentally, one of the four leaders now arrested, is Sovan Chattopadhyay, a former Mayor of Kolkata Corporation and TMC leader who had recently joined the BJP only to resign after being denied a ticket.

There is however more to the CBI intervention at this moment than merely regulating the traffic of turncoats – past, present, and potential. The unmistakable message is that any state refusing to accept the double engine bait of the BJP will have to remain ready to pay a heavy price for its defiance. Delhi has had to pay the price even though the Aam Aadmi Party has hardly played any major oppositional role, and has chosen to go with the BJP on all major political issues, from stripping J&K of its constitutional status to the BJP narrative on the Delhi riots and the string of vindictive post-riot arrests of anti-CAA activists. Indeed, several BJP leaders have

blamed the people of West Bengal for committing a historic blunder by not voting the BJP to power.

It will be height of political naivety to see West Bengal developments as just another controversy over a few scam-accused politicians. The opposition to the politically motivated use of the CBI or the office of the Governor is not a defence of the scam-accused or advocacy of impunity for those implicated in corruption cases. The point is having failed to win the elections in West Bengal, the BJP is out to undermine the verdict by all means. The concerted intervention of the CBI and the Governor marks just a continuation by other means of the BJP's failed bid to conquer West Bengal.

The BJP is especially aghast with the West Bengal verdict because it has energised the ongoing struggles against the betrayal and incompetence of the Modi government and strengthened the people's yearning for a powerful national opposition and political alternative to the Modi government. Hence the desperate attempt to undermine and overturn the West Bengal verdict. Any imposition of President's Rule in West Bengal will be an all-out war on the constitutional foundation and federal framework of Indian polity. It will be not just a distraction of popular attention away from the Modi government's catastrophic failure in the face of the Covid second wave, but decimation of democracy in India. Opposition parties and people's movements across India must therefore condemn the Modi government's conspiratorial intervention in West Bengal and demand immediate recall of the partisan Governor. ■

# Casteism and the Spectre of Hindutva in America

 AISHIK SAHA



Caste violence reared its ugly head in the United States as Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) was exposed by its workers for exploitative labor practices and human trafficking. The workers who had been recruited in India and taken to the US on 'R-1' visas that are usually granted to religious workers, were made to work in inhumane conditions and for starvation wages. The Federal Bureau of Investigation raided the premises of the Swaminarayan Temple in Robbinsville, New Jersey, reportedly the largest Hindu temple in the US.

The workers alleged that they had been taken to the United States under false promises and had

their passports taken away once they reached the site. They were forced to work grueling hours with compensation as low as \$1.20 per day, which is a tenth of \$12 per day minimum wage in New Jersey, and prevented from taking breaks. The workers were even threatened as to not communicate with anyone outside of the community.

The close relationship between the Sanstha and Narendra Modi was pointed out by New York Times stating "The organization has strong ties with Narendra Modi, India's prime minister, and his ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. Mr. Modi has said that Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the spiritual head who built BAPS into the largest Hindu sect in the United States before dying in 2016, was his mentor. Mr. Modi

gave a eulogy at his funeral and laid the foundation stone for a temple that BAPS is building in Abu Dhabi."

The fact that most of the workers were Dalits is once again a stark reminder that caste discrimination runs amok in the United States, with Dalits having little way of legal recourse when discriminated against. The BAPS temple had previously also been found employing a 17 year old minor, who died on the construction site in 2017, but seems to have evaded any public scrutiny. Caste discrimination once again came into focus as a CISCO employee complained of caste discrimination in 2020. Neither is this the first time that human trafficking and slavery has been involved with the issue of temple construction. In the year

2000 a high profile case emerged where a temple was constructed in the UK using slave labor with the knowledge of the then UK Home Office Minister.

## Hindutva in the United States

As a racial minority, Indians have faced a long history of discrimination in the United States, with Punjabi immigrants playing a pioneering role since the late 19th century in California. Many South Asian students and academics have played crucial role in opposing racial discrimination and police atrocities in the US.

However Hindutva has sought to use the community in order to purchase political currency in Washington and in order to ensure its own acceptability in the international community. Pieter Friedrich, a US based South Asian

Affairs Analyst, has exposed the flow of saffron dollars into the pockets of US politicians like Preston Kulkarni and US Senator Tulsi Gabbard, who has often positioned herself as a 'progressive'.

Hindutva has played a key role in attempting to downplay any criticism of caste discrimination as a product of the 'colonial gaze'. In a recent, high intensity debate in the Santa Clara county in the US, which has a high number concentration of South Asian American residents, the extent of caste discrimination became clear as did the extent that supporters of Hindutva will go to downplay the issue. As the Santa Clara County (California) Human Rights Commission debated whether to recognize caste as an axis of discrimination, the Hindu American Foundation, a major voice for Hindutva in the US, employed a particularly dubious piece of logic. It

argued that the existing provisions against discrimination in the US are sufficient and inclusion of caste would associate the entirety of the Indian origin population in the US with caste discrimination. One is tempted to ask if the regular occurrence of caste based discrimination in US soil not affect Indian origin people or if Dalits are not Indians in the eyes of Hindutva?

Proponents of Hindutva play a particularly devious game in the United States and western world at large. While claiming their status as a racial minority, they do everything in their power to undermine the voices of minorities and ensure the continuance of white supremacy in the US. This is the basis of their alliance with Trump and the white supremacist groups within the US. This policy of running with the hares and hunting with the hounds will inevitably backfire. □



# Arguments For Dropping Kerala's "Rockstar" Health Minister Are Unconvincing

 KAVITA KRISHNAN

**K**K Shailaja, popularly known as Shailaja "Teacher" made her mark as Kerala's Health Minister, during the Nipah virus attack, and then during the Covid-19 pandemic. She received acclaim for her exemplary work, not only in India, but internationally. And she was reelected with the largest margin of victory ever in the history of Kerala Assembly elections. No doubt, she contributed in a big way to what People's Democracy, the CPIM organ, reminds us was a "collective effort" to buck Kerala's usual pattern and re-elect the LDF

for a successive term for the first time since 1977.

With this impressive track record, KK Shailaja should have been a shoo-in for Health Minister once again. But, in a move that made no sense to any observers of politics in Kerala or India, Shailaja was dropped from the cabinet, and instead given the post of Party Whip (a largely ceremonial post in a disciplined party like the CPIM). In defence of this decision, we have been told that the Kerala State Committee of the CPIM decided that new faces should be given a

chance, and so no Minister from the previous cabinet has been given another term. Further, the State Committee had also previously decided, to the same end, not to field any MLA who had already served two terms.

Let us address these, and some other, arguments in defence of this decision to drop KK Shailaja as Health Minister. But before we do so, let us clear the air on one question being raised by many CPIM supporters on social media: do I, as a leader of the CPIM, have any locus standi to be commenting



on a decision internal to the CPIM and its Kerala State Committee? My humble reply here is: everyone has every right to comment on a decision that affects the general public. This is not a decision about who will lead the CPIM party and in what capacity. The Kerala State Committee of the CPIM has every right to take any decision. But when it takes a decision that has implications for public interest, a decision about a cabinet post, and about the role assigned to an elected people's representative – I have every right to question it, as a citizen of India and as a woman in Indian politics. As a leader of a left party, I question the decision out of concern for the health and wellbeing of the left in India.

**Now, let us take a look at the arguments being offered.**

***New faces must get a chance***

- While this is an admirable principle, it cannot possibly be written in stone. Surely a

cabinet needs a judicious mix of experience as well as fresh blood? Why drop and replace an able Health Minister, who has passed the test of fire with flying colours, when the pandemic is still ongoing? Surely, the Kerala mandate cannot be interpreted only as one for Pinarayi Vijayan's role as Chief Minister? There is no doubt that Kerala voters believed they were getting Vijayan as CM and Shailaja as Health Minister; dropping Shailaja now is not in consonance with the mandate.

- Measures like limiting MLAs to two terms, and replacing old Ministers with new ones are tools meant to ensure that those from privileged and entitled backgrounds make way for those from marginalised backgrounds who are usually overlooked. These

tools are meant to correct the underrepresentation of politicians from oppressed and marginalised backgrounds. These tools, meant to promote social and political justice, become unjust if applied to those from already underrepresented identities and communities. Women are severely underrepresented in political leadership. When a woman achieves political success and mass acceptance, she should be given more rope rather than be reined in, so that she is free to explore how much further she can go. The right thing to do would be to keep Shailaja on as Health Minister, while inducting more women as Ministers.

- The glaring exception to the "new faces" rule is the Chief Minister, Pinarayi Vijayan. If the rule is so hard and



fast, apply it to everyone. Why make an exception to the rule for a man already at the pinnacle of his political career, while applying the rule to a woman even though it effectively prevents her from building on the popularity she has just begun to achieve? The man who has enjoyed the sun shining on him for so long, continues to enjoy his place in the sun; while the woman who has just found a place under the sun, is sent back to the shade: this is not a just or welcome outcome.

***Shailaja has welcomed the decision, respect her agency***

I am intrigued to see the invocation of the concept of “agency” in this context. Shailaja did not make a personal decision to step down as Minister; she cheerfully and gracefully accepted a decision made by her party.

But her acceptance is not enough to persuade others to accept an unreasonable decision. Hers cannot be the last word on the subject, because the harm of the said decision is not to Shailaja alone: it affects public health; it affects the future of gender policy in political parties; and it affects women in politics.

It sends the message that women are most admirable when they eschew ambition and embrace decorum and discipline. As we laud these qualities in Shailaja, should we not ask ourselves if we even expect a similar lack of ambition in, say, a VS Achuthanandan or a Pinarayi Vijayan? When it comes to male

politicians, do we not accept ambition as a given, and even welcome and enjoy the tussle between rival political ambitions?

***In a communist party, the individual is not important***

Once again, this is an admirable principle that can combat the culture of cults and foster a democratic culture.

But if this admirable principle is being applied to every Minister in the former cabinet, why not apply it to the CM as well?

When Vijayan is retained as CM while all experienced Ministers are replaced by newcomers, does it not give Vijayan, as an individual political figure, a disproportionate status and power? Does it really serve a democratic political culture when the decision seems to treat Vijayan alone as irreplaceable and “above the fray”, while deeming all others to be expendable?

There is another aspect of individuality, however, that must be emphasised. In the case of women (and persons from other marginalised and underrepresented categories), it is important to stress that they are individual women, and not merely token symbols of WOMAN as a category. When KK Shailaja is replaced by Veena George, it diminishes the individuality of both.

***Critics of this decision do not understand communist culture, party discipline***

It’s time to worry if a left party responds to questions from non-party “commoners” about

a decision to drop their highly popular health minister during a pandemic, by saying “You have to be One of Us to understand this, you are bourgeois idiots who are too inferior to be able to appreciate communist party discipline and culture.”

Equating “communist culture” with opaque, arbitrary, arcane, and esoteric rules that the general public lacks the specialised consciousness to question, is very damaging for the Left’s health.

The Left should be able to show itself to be more democratic and transparent, and more welcoming of criticism than any other party. To declare that your principles and decisions are “too complicated and abstruse” to be understood or criticised by those outside your fold, is better suited to authoritarian cults, not communist parties.

Asked to comment on the decision, CPIM Politburo member Brinda Karat clearly conveyed that the Kerala State Committee of her party was on its own when it came to defending its decision to drop Shailaja, saying, “it is for them to give an explanation and answer the questions which are being raised by their decision.”

Indeed, the onus is on the Kerala Chief Minister to explain his cabinet choices, and answer why he did not insist on retaining the Health Minister who won such laurels for his Government and his party in the middle of a global pandemic. ■

# Continuing Ethnic Genocide in Palestine



**A**fter 11 days of bloody mayhem, a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas was declared on 20 May this year. International media coverage of the recent developments in Palestine routinely refer to a 'war' between Hamas and Palestine; as an armed conflict between two powers. The fact however is that this was no 'war': it was a planned, well-executed, genocidal assault by Israel on Palestine. For 11 days, Israel launched genocidal airstrikes on Gaza targeting essential services like power supplies, hospitals and schools. Attacks were launched even on school playgrounds. Journalists, doctors and several children were killed by Israeli forces. Throughout this mayhem, Israel touted its usual excuse – that it was 'provoked' by the Hamas and has a right to defend itself. The 'provocation', in fact, was some crude homemade rockets

shot by Hamas, most of whom were easily demolished by Israel's sophisticated weaponry, supplied by its faithful allies such as the United States.

What really happened was a thoroughly unprovoked attack on the Al-Aqsa mosque in April by the Israeli police, a month before any rockets were hurled towards south Israel by Hamas. As several observers have noted, the police action in the Al-Aqsa mosque, on the first day of Ramzan (or Ramadan, as it is referred to in Palestine), was clearly designed to humiliate, subjugate, bully and terrorise Palestine. What really happened in Palestine was Israel attempting the ethnic cleansing of Sheikh Jarrah, a predominantly Palestinian neighbourhood in East Jerusalem. Armed lynch mobs of Israeli settlers attacked Palestinian homes, supplementing the official Israeli Defence Forces.

This recent spurt in violence is the latest in a long story of settler colonialism, of forced displacement, ethnic and cultural genocide. For the people living in Gaza, and also for the residents of the West Bank in Palestine, mayhem and massacres are nothing new. Israel has been illegally occupying vast tracts and controlling both areas for decades. Both Gaza and West Bank resemble vast jails where economic blockades enforced by Israel are a part of daily existence. Israel still controls access to the area, and over Gaza's air space and seacoast, and its forces enter the area at will. Fuel, electricity, imports, exports and the movement of people in and out of Gaza have been slowly choked off, leading to life-threatening problems of sanitation, health, water supply and transportation.

All tall talk of 'two sides' to the violence, and all of Israel's

justifications for the right to defend itself, fly in the face of Israel's own words and deeds over the decades. Israeli leaders have referred to Palestinians and Arabs as 'grasshoppers' who need to be crushed; as mosquitoes and wild animals destined to disappear. In 1948, David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel, stated that Israel was not "obliged to state the limits of our state". To begin with, in 1947, the United Nations carved the state of Israel for the Jews out of Palestine, giving Israel 55% of Palestinian land, an event that will probably go down as the most audacious legalised thievery of our times. Since then, Israel has blatantly violated every single international agreement. Over the decades, it has far overstepped the boundaries allocated to it by the UN. Today, Israel claims control over way more than 80% of Palestine. The planned forced evictions from Sheikh Jarrah this month are a part and parcel of Israel using its considerable military and political weight to literally throw Palestinians away from more and more parts of land that is legitimately theirs. Far from fighting for its legal and moral "right to exist", Israel is waging a virtual holocaust against peoples struggling to protect their lands.

What makes the current violence even more despicable is the cynical and political manipulation of the conflict by Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu is an unpopular leader in Israel today. He has been unable to cobble up a parliamentary majority in several consecutive elections. He has failed to establish a majority even after being given three chances to do so. Moreover, he is plagued by serious charges of corruption, which have been dogging him for a while now. Several political

commentators have pointed out that this deliberate escalation of tensions in East Jerusalem has allowed Netanyahu to corner his opponents on the right – forcing them to support him. Netanyahu, for his political survival, needed to prevent leftists, rightists and Arabs from coming together as a rival faction to unseat him. Since the current violence has successfully rekindled fractures between Arabs and Jews, thus helping Netanyahu, speculation is rife that he had a hand in actively promoting and fomenting it. Now, the chances of Netanyahu coming back to power are brighter than they were before the conflict.

### **The Global Response: Signs of a Breaking Bipartisan Consensus in the US?**

As Israeli forces continued to pound Palestine and attempt to forcibly take over Sheikh Jarrah, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu thanked 25 countries – including the United States and the UK – for their "resolute" support. For years together, Israel has banked on primarily the US and UK to carry forward its racist, expansionist and genocidal project in Palestine. In a recent statement brought out by the South Asia Solidarity Group, it was pointed out that the US has provided \$146 billion dollars to Israel since 1948, and an additional \$375 million worth of arms to Israel. Arms sales from UK to Israel have risen from £74 million in 2008-2014 to a £361 million in 2014- 2018. The US, by using its veto power in the UN Security Council, has repeatedly provided Israel with diplomatic immunity and freedom from sanctions for its horrendous war crimes.

The current spate of violence

however indicates that the winds of support for Israel might just be shifting in the US. For years together, Israel enjoyed unconditional bipartisan support from both the Republicans and Democrats in the US. This bipartisan consensus is facing unprecedented and public challenges today. Progressive Democratic leaders including Bernie Sanders, Rashida Tlaib, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and others have gone on record, openly condemning Joe Biden and his administration's support to the ongoing carnage in Palestine. They are pointing out that Palestinians have a right to live, that Israel is a apartheid state today. For probably the first time in decades, the pro-Israel lobby in the US is having to contend with strong opposition in the Senate and the House of Representatives. This support for Palestine, of course, is being strengthened by spirited political and civil society mobilisations against Israel in the US, UK and Europe. In one of the most beautiful expressions of solidarity, dock workers in Italy and the UK refused to load arms and war material meant for Israel. Young Jews, in particular, are standing up to say that they oppose the Israeli state's Zionist agenda. Whether this will lead to a long-term shift in international support to the US is something to watch out for.

### **India's role**

For quite some time now, the Indian government's foreign policy has been seeing a shift. India, which was one of Palestine's staunch supporters, slowly started building diplomatic, military and economic ties with Israel – leading to a significant dilution in its condemnation of Israel's genocidal

war crimes. Under Narendra Modi, the Indian government took this process to the next level. As a result of the RSS-BJP's growing influence, the popular discourse in India shifted against the Palestinian struggle. The Hindutva project found a kindred spirit in Israel's Zionist, anti-Arab, anti-Muslim agenda.

As the current violence flared up in Palestine, the Modi government did not join the caucus of unconditional support for Israel. It issued a statement condemning some of the Israeli violence. However, the devil is in the details. The Indian government, shifting away from decades of its own policy, refused

to state unequivocally that East Jerusalem is and should always be part of Palestine. Without East Jerusalem going to Palestine, a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict is virtually impossible. In other words, the Indian government's support for Palestine was toothless because it did not state the specifics.

As the Modi government was equivocating on its support to Palestine, right-wing supporters were cheerfully trending hashtags on Twitter in support of Israel. Right-wing activists were proudly stating their willingness to fight alongside Israeli troops brutally evicting Palestinians from their

homes. And the Indian government was arresting youth in Kashmir for holding protests in support of Palestine. Kashmiri artist Mudasir Gul was arrested for the 'crime' of producing graffiti with the words 'We are Palestine'.

The battle for justice and freedom for Palestine is going to be a long and arduous one. It will require people across the globe to press against racist, fascist ideas and put pressure on their own governments. We, in India, have a historic responsibility to defend the Palestinian resistance, to stand against all forms of colonial and imperial agendas. □



## Solidarity with the Palestinian People's Resistance against Israel's Annexation Plan and Crimes Against Humanity

### - CPIML Statement

**T**he people in the occupied Palestinian territories of West Bank and Gaza are facing a new wave of brutal aggression by Israel apartheid regime. On the night of May 10, 2021, Israeli military forces launched series of airstrikes in Gaza massacring 26 people— including nine children\*. The youngest victim of this Israeli crimes against humanity was 10-years-old. The aggression comes as a further blow to the people in Gaza who are already reeling under devastating humanitarian crisis due the

ongoing land-air-sea blockade and continuous bombings by Israel, that has destroyed Gaza's most of the vital infrastructures.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, has warned of a full force attack on Gaza, with Defense Minister Benny Gantz mobilizing thousands of reserve troops. Netanyahu, who is already facing massive corruption scandal and electoral crisis, had been long unleashing violent acts against Palestinians to woo the country's right-wing sections in his favour. He had already announced a full-scale plan to

annex 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.

The airstrike comes in the background of growing resistance by Palestinians against Israel's annexation move in Sheikh Jarrah, locality in the occupied East Jerusalem. Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood has more than 3,000 Palestinian families who face constant violence by illegal Israeli settlers, and evictions and



destruction of property by Israeli forces.

On May 7, worshippers gathered at the al-Aqsa mosque expressed their solidarity with the families who were threatened with eviction in Sheikh Jarrah neighborhoods. The Israeli forces stormed the mosque and brutally attacked people who were inside the compound, lobbing tear-gas and firing rubber bullets.

Since then, Israeli forces have escalated their violence inside the mosque and against the protests by Palestinians demanding end to the illegal annexations and military occupation. Armed Israeli settlers have also been given free hand by Israeli military forces to attack Palestinians. More than 700 Palestinians have been injured in Israeli attacks in the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem since last Friday.

The annexation plan by Israel

is a clear act of ethnic cleansing and eliminating the presence of Palestinian population for their own land.

Indian Government Must End Support To Israel's Apartheid

India had played a crucial role in supporting the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa and was one of the first countries to sever trade relations with the apartheid regime and subsequently imposed wide range of embargo on South Africa. Today, Narendra Modi led Indian government is standing on the wrong side of the history by supporting the Israeli apartheid regime. India government continues to expand its relation with Israel and is importing both Israeli arms and tactics to be used against the people in Kashmir and for repressing the democratic and people's movement in India.

The need of the hour is that India and international community

must impose military embargo on Israel's apartheid regime and stop enabling Israel's brutal siege of Gaza and mass crimes against Palestinians through their support of Israel's military industry.

As the Palestinians continue to resist the Israeli brutality, apartheid and military occupation, CPI (ML) Liberation reiterates its complete solidarity with the people of Palestine and their struggle for liberation. We also reiterate our support for strengthening the global Palestinian call of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BSD) against Israel.

*\*Ed: At the time of declaration of ceasefire on 21 May 2021, Palestinian death toll stood at 248, including 66 children, with more than 1,900 people wounded from Israeli air and artillery attacks. □*

# In Solidarity With People of Columbia Against Iván Duque Government

## - AICCTU Statement

Colombia is witnessing massive protests and general strike since April 28 against the regressive proposals of tax reforms and privatization of healthcare by government of Ivan Duque. Hand in glove with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the United States, Duque government had been spread-heading neoliberal agenda in Colombia, robbing jobs, livelihood and rights of the people.

While all concessions are being given to capitalists and corporation amid COVID-19 pandemic, the burden of government's economic failure are being forced upon the working class with policies like the new tax reform and privatization of healthcare.

Resisting the tax reforms and privatization of health plans, the workers' union in Colombia had given the call for national strike on April 28. Massive mobilizations and road blocks were witnessed across Colombia with tens of thousands joining the strike in Bogota and Cali. On the day of International Workers' Day (May 1), Duque government deployed military forces in three largest cities, the capital Bogota, Medellin and Cali, to quell the resistance where tens of thousands had come to streets in solidarity with the strike. Despite facing brutal repressions organized by military forces and the infamous Mobile Anti-Disturbance Squadron (ESMAD), the protests continue to expand in strength and spirit across Colombia. According to reports, more than 42 people have been killed in the police violence against the protesters and more than 1,139 people were arbitrarily arrested.

Facing tremendous resistance,



the Duque government on May 2 announced the suspension of the proposed reforms, but the national mobilizations across Colombia continues demanding an end to neoliberal policies of Duque. The people are also demanding an end to police brutalities and justice for victims of police repression.

State sponsored violence against indigenous and peasant leaders, students, trade unions activist and human rights defenders had been rising since the government of Duque came to power in 2018. Just in 2021, 57 indigenous and peasant leaders and human rights defenders were assassinated and 33 massacres were orchestrated against people. According to United Nations, in 2020, 255 people killed in 66 massacres in Colombia and around 120 human rights defenders were assassinated.

The neoliberal economic model, rampant privatization and state sponsored repression, along with the failure of the government to tackle COVID-19 pandemic has robbed people of their livelihood, dignity and right to justice. According to a study carried out by the Index of Regional Development—Latin

America in October 2020, Colombia is one of the most unequal countries in Latin America and it has the widest development gap among its own regions. In Colombia, more than 7.4 million people are living in extreme poverty. The lack of economic support for people during the pandemic has led to further increase in unemployment rate in the country to around 15% in 2021, with more than 3 million currently without any job.

The working class and toiling masses of Colombia are determined to put a stop to the anti-people neoliberal policies and sponsored state violence of Duque regime. The people are also demanding an end to Colombian government's support to the US imperialist agenda in Latin American region.

AICCTU extends its unwavering solidarity to the on-going national mobilization in Colombia by working class, peasants, students, indigenous groups and different sections of the population. We also reiterate our support to the demand of an end to the US and IMF's neoliberal and imperialist project in Latin America. ■

# WORKERS IN THE SECOND WAVE

## The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic and Lockdown on Local and Migrant Workers in Bengaluru

*(Excerpts from reports prepared by AICCTU Karnataka on the health, dignity, and rights of local and migrant workers and crematorium/graveyard workers in the pandemic.)*

The objective of this report is to highlight the status of workers during the COVID-19 2nd wave in Bengaluru and the second set of restrictions and lockdowns. To be able to represent concerns of a diverse range of workers, we ensured that we spoke to diverse set of workers including Construction workers, Garment workers, Metro workers, Security guards, Workers in small shops, Waste pickers, Domestic workers, Taxi drivers, Library workers, MC Gang men, Street vendors, Hospital workers, Ready Mix Concrete

workers, Pourakarmikas (Sanitation workers) and Auto drivers. A total of 73 non-migrant workers and 46 migrant workers were interviewed by telephone. These interviews were conducted between May 1st to May 6th.

AICCTU collaborated with Garment and Textile Workers Union (GATWU) and Domestic Workers Rights Union (DWRU) for the report. Below are the recommendations of the report.

### Recommendations

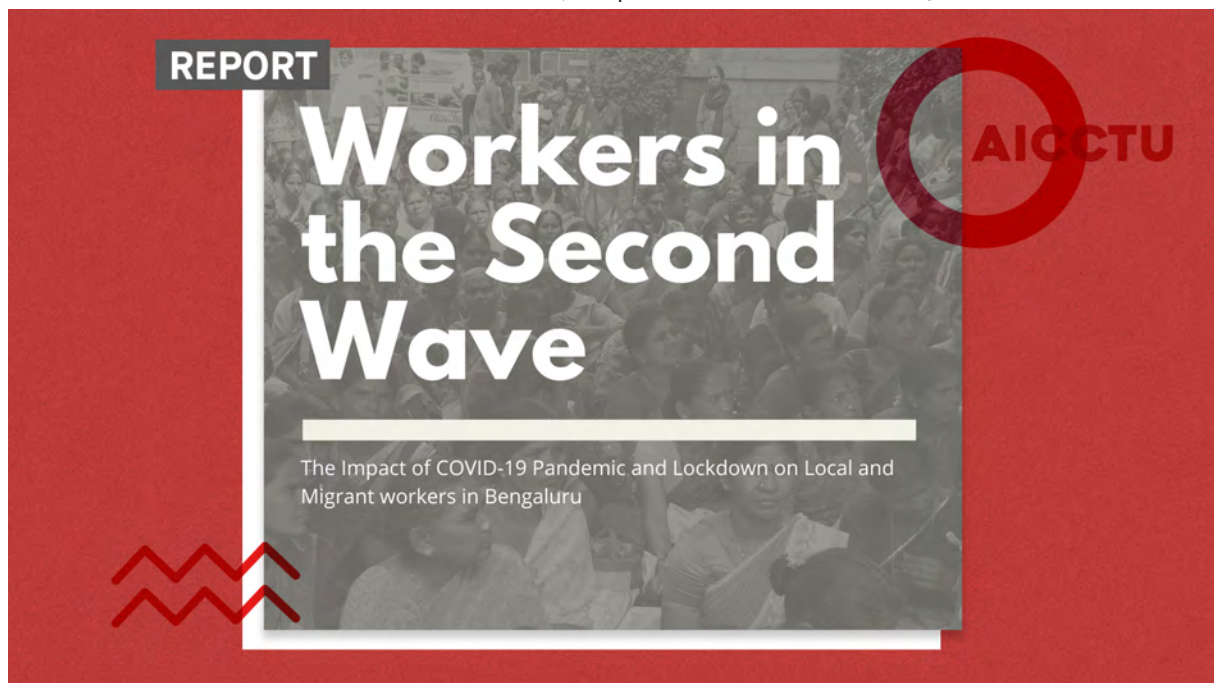
#### 1. Health aspects

##### i. Ensuring Adequate supply of medical facilities

a) Strengthening Public Health Infrastructure: Public health infrastructure, especially COVID-19 care centres, hospitals and health

Centres, on which the working class entirely depend on, need to be upgraded and expanded extensively. The medical infrastructure including oxygen, beds, and medicines must be ramped up.

b) **Oxygen, Bed, and Medication shortages:** In coordination with the Central Government, the State Government must procure adequate supply of oxygen along with buffer stocks. The details of requests placed, oxygen supply granted, procurements, and distribution to various districts and hospitals must be placed publicly on a regular basis. State Government must take immediate steps in coordination with BBMP to ramp up ICU beds and High Dependency Unit (HDU) beds availability across the State, including conversion of identified



public buildings. Medication required for the treatment of COVID-19 such as Remdesivir and Tocilizumab must be acquired in advance, having assessed the requirements, along with buffer stocks. Local production must be incentivized.

**c) Priority in ESI Hospitals:** Workers must be provided medical treatment of priority in ESI Hospitals.

**d) Compensation for COVID-19 deaths:** In case of Covid-related deaths among BPL families, the family must be paid compensation of Rs. 10 lakhs.

## ii. Testing and facilities

**a) COVID-19 testing camps:** State Government must immediately organize free COVID-19 testing camps in all slums, working class layouts and colonies, migrant and construction worker labour camps and colonies, along with distribution of masks and sanitizers across the State. Information regarding the free COVID-19 testing camps and their schedules must be made publicly available at least 10 days in advance so that adequate testing is carried out. Results of the testing must be released within 24-48 hours to ensure that quick remedial steps are taken. Testing must be conducted in all slum areas and working class areas.

**b) Sanitizing areas:** All slums, working class layouts and colonies, migrant and construction worker labour camps and colonies must be sanitized on a weekly basis.

**c) Random testing:** Random testing of the public at hotspots for transmission must be restarted, such as bus stations, railway stations, airports, and markets. Especially since containment zones are not being utilized by the State during the second wave, random testing must be conducted

in densely populated areas, with a special focus on slums.

## iii. Quarantine facilities

**a) Home quarantine facilities:** Persons required to undergo home quarantine must be provided with "Home Quarantine Kits" which would contain Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) kits, masks, gloves, sanitizer, oximeter, thermometer, Vitamin D, Vitamin C, Zincovit, cough syrups, Dolo/Paracetamol, steroids (when required), and inhalers (when required). This must be provided free of cost to families who cannot afford the same.

**b) Covid Care Centres (CCC):** Covid Care Centers must be increased in number for more decentralization and must be established at ward/community level with adequate beds and facilities to ensure proper isolation and treatment of COVID-19 patients free of cost.

## iv. Treatment

**a)** The Covid Care Centres (CCC) shall be the first point of contact for those requiring hospitalization. These CCCs must have emergency oxygen stock as well as necessary medications. Arrangements for any person requiring hospitalization including ICU shall be provided by the CCC. Every CCC shall have at least 2 ambulances for the purpose of bringing people to the CCC or to shift them to the hospitals.

**b)** All treatment and medical arrangements shall be provided free of cost.

## v. Awareness

**a) Information:** There is a dire lack of basic information among the general public in the State which is causing panic and fear. Intense information dissemination

is the need of the hour. Information dissemination can be done by video broadcasts on all TV channels in all languages, along with official videos, posters, and information being circulated on social media and WhatsApp. It must be constantly reiterated that no stigma is attached to a positive result, and action will be taken against those stigmatizing COVID-19 patients.

**b) Helplines:** Most workers are not aware of the helplines for COVID-19 support. The few that reached out to the helplines did not receive support. Steps must be taken to increase awareness regarding the helpline numbers. It must also be ensured that helpline desks are adequately staffed and equipped to provide 24/7 help.

**c) Awareness for Migrant workers:** Government must specifically keep in mind that there are vast numbers of Migrant workers in Karnataka state, and helplines and awareness programmes must also be enabled to handle their needs as well as to reach them.

## vi. Vaccination

**a) Universal vaccination:** All persons must be given free vaccination, to be provided within a fixed period of time. A priority list must be created to distribute vaccination amongst those most vulnerable on account of shortage of vaccines. The Government must also push for centralized procurement of vaccines, and localized distribution. Legal barriers to vaccine availability must be removed, and the Government must explore mitigating measures such as compulsory licensing and waiver of Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs).

**b) Method of vaccination:** The system of requiring prior online registration for vaccination



along with documentation is inherently exclusionary and in violation of the right to equality. The Government must undertake door-to-door vaccination and establish vaccination camps to ensure free and universal vaccination. Additionally, vaccination must be administered at every block level, in CHCs, PHCs, government hospitals, schools, colleges, etc.

**c) Vaccination timelines:** With the suspension of vaccination for persons from 18-45 years of age as on May 12, 2021, the Government must provide a timeline as to when vaccination will restart, and the method in which vaccination will be carried out along with details of procurement and supply to various districts.

**d) Workers' camps:** Free vaccination camps must be organised in all labour camps, worker colonies, migrant worker colonies and slums

**e) Vaccine information:** The Government should make publicly available information regarding vaccination procurement, payments made, and orders placed. Information dissemination should contain simplified results of vaccine trials, any post-vaccination deaths or complications, and must dispel vaccination hesitancy.

## 2. Livelihood

### i. Compensation

**a) COVID-19 compensation packages:** Government must declare a COVID-19 Financial Compensation package benefiting all Below Poverty Line (BPL) families, residents of slums (identified, declared or otherwise), contract and casual workers receiving wages below Rs. 15,000/-, domestic workers, street vendors, construction workers, waste-pickers, manual scavengers,

Powrakarmikas, garment workers, plantation workers and other sections of the unorganised sector. The package is a must for allowing maintaining a dignified life during the lockdown period.

### ii. Protection of Livelihood

**a) Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme:** Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme in line with the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) should be initiated to ensure employment for those in urban areas

**b) Ensure Job Security:** Introduce legislation to make job security a right, abolishing all forms of contract and casual labour and ensuring that those workers are made permanent

**c) Protection of livelihood:** Government of Karnataka must take all necessary steps to ensure that no worker is terminated, and full payment of wages is made. In line with the Circulars dated May 10, 2021 issued by the Government of Karnataka directing employers not to terminate construction workers, to pay wages, sanitize their residences, and pay wages, similar directions to be issued to other industries to ensure the protection of livelihood of workers.

### d) Transportation to workers and Protection against Police Harassment:

Although the Government has permitted allows for certain works to continue, workers are in fact unable to go, due to lack of transportation. There is also no safeguard against police harassment, in case they are travelling in private vehicles. Immediate steps need to be taken to ensure provision of transportation and prevent police harassment.

**e) Payment of wages:** It is seen that in a large number of

establishments, wages have not been paid for the periods prior to the lockdown and it is unsure if wages will be paid during the lockdown. This has led to complete desperation amongst workers. Necessary orders must be issued directing payment of full wages for the lockdown period irrespective of whether work has been undertaken.

**f) State as model employer:** Where the State is the employer, it must act as a model employer and ensure the fullest protection of rights of its workers, including workers in BMRCL and Bengaluru Smart City, from full payment of wages, to healthcare to provision of proper living conditions to non-termination of employment.

**g) Arrears of wages:** Workers in various sectors, including garments, suffered in the last lockdown as many companies refused to pay salaries. The Labour department must ensure that companies pay the salary or ensure government relief is provided.

**h) Wages helpline:** Labour Department must set up a helpline for workers who are not paid wages and who have complaints in regard to termination, and immediate remedial steps must be taken.

**i) Strengthening of Labour Department:** Government must take all necessary steps to strengthen the Labour Department in order to enable it to ensure immediate remedial action for deductions in wages/non-payment of wages.

**j) Social security:** In regard to workers in the unorganized sector, the Karnataka State Unorganised Worker Social Security Board must step up and take responsibility to provide social security. This must not be limited to those registered under the Act.

### iii. Rent, loan and utility waivers

**a) Rent Waiver:** The Government must issue necessary orders directing house-owners not to insist on payment of rent for the lockdown period and a period of two months after the lockdown ends. It must also issue orders to ensure no evictions of any persons are conducted in this period.

**b) Loan moratoriums:** The Government must issue necessary order directing loan repayment moratorium across the state of Karnataka for the months of April and May. It must be clarified that the said order is applicable to private and public lenders, individuals and institutions.

**c) Loan waivers:** The Government must declare waiving of loans owed by workers to Micro Finance Institutions (MFIs), banks and private lenders.

**d) Interest free loans:** At this time of social and economic crisis, the State Government must provide interest-free loans to those in need based on a transparent policy. Loans must be prolonged recovery periods, without any requirement of securities, and with minimal documentation required.

**e) Waivers on utilities:** The Government must waive electricity and water bills to provide financial security to its citizens who are suffering at the hands of a pandemic and lockdown.

### iv. Food Security

**a) Ration kits:** The State Government, in coordination with local municipal corporations, must ensure food security by free distribution of ration kits consisting of rice, wheat, ragi, masala, cooking oil, salt, sugar, etc. to suffice for a period of one month. The

Government must also implement the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY) to all persons in PDS shops without insistence on ration cards.

**b) Indira canteens:** Per the BBMP's decision to provide food packets at Indira Canteens, steps must be taken to ensure that when households are located far away from the Indira Canteens, they are provided food at their doorstep.

**c) Community kitchens:** Community kitchens should be set up to ensure decentralization of food assistance. Support can be taken from street vendors to run such community kitchens. An example may be drawn from the Kerala model of community kitchens.

**d) Food Help-line:** The Government must set up a helpline that caters to food security specifically, and must ensure provision of food in a time-bound manner on receiving any such requests. Publicity must be given to these helplines.

## 3. Sector Specific Recommendations

### i. Migrant Workers

**a) Helpline:** A specific helpline must be created to address needs of migrant workers with operators are fluent in Kannada and Hindi languages. The operators of the helpline must be enabled to give real assistance to those who call, including

- Travel assistance
- Assistance with non-payment of wages/ termination of employment
- Health assistance
- Information assistance etc.
- This helpline must be widely publicized through social media

posters and auto announcements, along with posters to be circulated in various languages.

**b) State assistance:** Steps must be taken to that any worker who desires to return to his native place must be provided travel assistance to return home.

**c) COVID-19 safety measures:** Government must ensure that masks, sanitizer, ration kits etc. are distributed at migrant worker colonies specifically as also at railway stations.

**d) Provision of safe living conditions:** The government must take proactive steps to ensure safe living condition for workers, including undertaking regular fumigation of these areas, have intense awareness campaigns and equip each colony / areas with adequate primary care facilities.

**e) Periodical testing** should also be done so that early detection of the illness is possible thereby arresting its spread.

**f) Temporary shelters** must be established to ensure migrant workers have facilities until the lockdown is lifted.

### ii. Hospital and Frontline Workers

**a) Employers must ensure quality safety equipment, COVID-19 quarantine facility** while on duty with food and other facilities for stay

**b) Risk allowance** of Rs. 10,000/- per month must be provided to all Group – D housekeeping staff in recognition of their service during the pandemic

**c) Immediate medical attention** must be provided in case these workers show symptoms of COVID-19.

**d) Institutional quarantine** facility for isolation must be provided for those workers who require it

**e) Timely payment of salary** must be mandated and ensured by the Labour department

**f) Workers above 45 years** of age must be recused from work, with payment of full salary and benefits.

**g) Sick Leave with Pay:** If any worker is suffering from any of the symptoms, they must be mandatorily granted sick and casual paid leave for 28 days.

**h) Employers must ensure provision of food** during working hours in view of the lockdown.

### iii. Sanitation Workers

a) Government must ensure that pourakarmikas and their families are covered under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana and are entitled to compensation of Rs. 50 Lakhs if they lose their life due to COVID-19.

b) Government must ensure the provision of priority vaccination to pourakarmikas and their families

c) Government must ensure Risk allowance of Rs. 15,000/- to all pourakarmikas

d) Health check-up and daily screenings must be provided as follows including daily thermal screening, a master health check-up, regular health check once a month. Their health must be monitored through the health check-up card or book given to each pourakarmika.

e) Government must identify workers who are suffering from co-morbidities and ensure that they are provided sick leave with pay

f) Provision of complete and adequate safety equipment

g) Government must ensure

that workers and their families are provided complete medical treatment, in the event of being tested positive

h) Government must ensure the provision of all basic facilities including drinking water, food, toilet, restroom and facilities with soap and water.

i) Government must ensure the provision for transportation facility to be made for all pourakarmikas

### iv. Gig-Workers

a) Gig workers must be recognized as workers and ensured all rights including job security and social security.

b) Government must issue necessary order mandating employers to

- ensure provision of personal protective equipment such as gloves, N95 masks, sanitisers, gloves, face-shield, etc.

- provide COVID-19 risk incentive.

- Ensure regular testing of the workers

- Provide health and life insurance benefits

- Provide free medical treatment in case they test positive for COVID-19

c) Government must ensure toilet, water & food supply for workers at various areas across in the city

d) Government must provide for priority vaccination of gig workers.

### v. Domestic Workers

a) Domestic workers must be allowed to work or alternatively be given full wages without imposition of any conditionalities such as prior vaccine or RT-PCR test.

b) Directions must be issued not to terminate any domestic worker and steps must be taken against employers who violate the same.

c) Karnataka State Unorganised Workers Social Security Board must take immediate steps to bring a COVID-19 compensation scheme specifically for the Domestic worker sector

### vi. Cab-drivers and Auto-drivers

a) Government must issue necessary order waiving interest on the vehicle loans

b) Government must issue necessary orders to prevent police harassment

c) Provision of regular testing of the workers, free medical treatment, and health and life insurance benefits must be mandated

d) Government must ensure toilet, water & food supply for drivers at various areas across in the city

e) Government must provide for priority vaccination of drivers.

### vii. Street Vendors

a) Government must issue necessary orders to prevent police harassment against street vendors and ensure that they are able to vend throughout the day.

b) Street vendors should be employed in community kitchens in slums and other working class areas to provide employment and protect food security

c) Provision of regular testing of the workers, free medical treatment, and health and life insurance benefits must be mandated

d) Government must provide for priority vaccination of street vendors.

#### viii. Garment Workers

a) Government must issue necessary order mandating employers to make full payment of wages on time, that workers must not be terminated and establishments should not be closed. There must be strict enforcement of the order.

b) Government must issue necessary order mandating employers to provide transportation for workers in view of lockdown

c) Employers must ensure payment of risk allowance to all garment workers

d) Government must issue necessary order mandating employers to provide full and adequate safety equipment including N95 mask, gloves, hand sanitiser etc.

e) Provision of regular testing of the workers, free medical treatment, and health and life insurance benefits must be mandated

f) Government must provide for priority vaccination of garment workers.

#### ix. Metro workers, Bengaluru Smart City Workers and Other construction workers

- The employer must organise free COVID-19 testing camps in all labour camps, worker colonies, migrant worker colonies and slums along with distribution of masks and sanitisers. These areas should be sanitized on a weekly basis.

- The employer must provide free treatment and paid leave for workers who test positive for COVID-19

- Free vaccination camps

must be organised in these camps as well.

- Workers must be provided proper dignified and sanitary living conditions with all basic amenities that allow them to practice physical distancing.

- Employers must ensure full payment of wages to all workers and to undertake and ensure that no lay-offs or retrenchments will be made

#### x. Other concerns

a) Social media: State must set up responsive government officials/ help-handles to respond to distress calls. Especially when users point to failure of government mechanisms, due follow up must be made

b) Movement passes: Volunteer passes have to be issued to ensure to the Trade Unions, volunteer organizations and social workers so that they can undertake relief work.

c) Digital divide: Government must take steps to bridge the digital divide that is preventing those without access to technology from availing COVID-19 resources. Pamphlets, newspaper information, auto announcements, radio communications, and TV broadcasts must be utilized.

d) Government coordination with Voluntary Organizations: A connection between the government helpline and the organisations would streamline the present process. A ward level connection to hospitals is necessary, along with real time data.

Preparation: In view of predictions of an upcoming third wave, all precautionary steps must be taken to strengthen medical infrastructure and protect livelihoods of workers, to ensure that the lives of workers do not face a similar disaster yet again. □

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## DIGNITY DISPOSED

### AICCTU Report on Crematorium and Burial Ground workers in Bengaluru during the COVID-19 pandemic

#### Introduction

The widespread infection during the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the reality of, and further strained, an already bare public health system. The high number of deaths has also put a strain on the crematoriums and

burial grounds in Bengaluru city. While there were several circulars on precautions to be taken during the cremations / burials to ensure the dignity of the deceased, there has been very little thought to the concerns of the workers.

According to some newspaper

## REPORT

AICCTU



reports, there are 42 crematoriums and 58 burial grounds in Bengaluru. The city on an average saw 30,000 cremations/burials in a year before the outbreak of the pandemic. According to a newspaper report in July 2020, the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) had plans to construct 10 crematoriums cum burial grounds totalling an area of 35.2 acres, which would have space to bury the dead and 2 electric crematoriums. However, there is no update on the current status of these plans.

In the early days of the 2nd wave, the existing crematoriums / burial grounds were overwhelmed with the large number of deceased COVID-19 victims, far more than their capacity, were being brought there. This resulted in workers working for several hours more than prescribed under the law. Yet, clearly, the state government way back in November 2020, had anticipated that there would be an increasing number of deaths and had planned to increase the number of crematoriums / burial

grounds. But the lack of any preparedness and general laxity by the government has brought us to the current situation. Had the government proceeded with the plans – both for space as well as workers, neither would families be left waiting for several hours to lay their dear ones to rest, nor would the workers have to work under such pressure and unhealthy conditions.

Crematorium and burial ground workers in India already live on the margins of society. They predominantly belong to the Dalit community and have been doing this work inter-generationally, as it is a caste-ordained occupation. Workers in several crematoriums and burial grounds are 3rd - 6th generation workers. A crematorium worker in Sumanahalli said that all workers in the crematorium are Dalit except one who is an OBC, who happened to be a friend of the workers in this crematorium and started working here since he was in need of employment. Cremating and burying the dead being a 'traditional' occupation (a term used to glorify

what is basically a stigmatised occupation), it already tends to attract informal employment, whether the facilities are owned and run by the government or private trusts. The government's inaction has therefore impacted these workers manifold.

It is with this intention that AICCTU - Karnataka sought to understand the implications of COVID-19, the 2nd wave and lockdown on the lives and work of crematorium / burial ground workers and their families. A team of 3 members (including 1 volunteer) visited 26 crematoriums / burial grounds across Bengaluru city between May 4th – May 8th.

### Status of Workers

#### In Regard to Cremations / Burials

In the electric crematoriums, workers start their day around 6.00 – 7.00 am and continue working till late in the evening around 7.00 – 8.00 pm. While cremations in these crematoriums start around 9.00 am, the workers need to maintain and prepare the machines before the

start of the day and in the evenings, the workers need to clean the crematorium and compound since flowers and other material used for last rites are left strewn around. The COVID-19 crematoriums reported that they were cremating 35-40 deceased persons a day.

In the 3 crematoriums where wood is used to cremate the deceased persons, the process takes much longer. Workers start work around 5.00 am and finish sometimes even at 1.00 - 2.00 in the night. Cremations start at 11.00 am and go on until 5.00 – 6.00 pm. Cremations using wood take much longer than when using electricity. The Tavarekere crematorium has 40 slots and the Giddenahalli crematorium has 50 slots. Yet, at the peak of the 2nd wave, these crematoriums were cremating sometimes almost twice their capacity. The pyres would burn through the night and the workers would start collecting the ashes at 6.00 am since family members would come from 8.00 am to collect them. The workers come from 30 – 35 kms from the crematoriums and travel by auto for this.

It must also be noted that the workers are dealing with an unprecedented workload. In Kalpalli Christian Cemetery, the workers stated that it takes about 4 hours to dig a grave and with the present situation wherein they are burying about 18 deceased persons a day, it must take approximately 72 hours a day to dig graves. There are additional workers helping out the existing workers with the digging. Therefore, not only were the grave-diggers seeking assistance from additional workers employed during this time, but were also working overtime. None of the workers are compensated for the overtime work being done. The same will be taking

a toll on their health and make them susceptible to bodily injuries. The workers are also not being given enough time to rest themselves and are overworked, thus compromising their immunity.

### Working Conditions

Based on our visits to the 23 crematoriums / cemeteries in Bengaluru, we found that workers are not paid even minimum wages, nor given any statutory or constitutional benefits extended to a 'worker'. Rather, in some instances, they are not even considered workers and instead are termed as 'caretakers' of burial grounds. They work under very precarious working conditions.

Crematoriums / burial grounds under the administration of the BBMP have a Writer who keeps records in the facility. Overall functioning is the responsibility of the Supervisor. The BBMP facilities have not more than 3 – 4 regular workers who have been issued identity cards. The other workers stated that they worked on a 'contract' basis, but were unable to inform us as to the form or nature of the contract.

### Health

The workers in crematoriums and burial grounds have been working under precarious conditions as has been described in the sections above. The onset of the 2nd wave of the COVID-19 pandemic is further threatening their health and that of their families. With the exponential increase in the number of COVID-19 victims, the crematorium and burial ground workers are highly exposed to those succumbing to the disease. In their operational guidelines to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India dated 28.12.2020, crematorium workers were deemed to be

'frontline' workers eligible to be vaccinated. However, no benefits to be accrued to a frontline worker and the protection of health prescribed has been granted to these workers.

The workers in electric crematoriums who handle deceased persons by transporting them from the ambulance to the crematorium facility wear PPEs - where in some crematoriums are provided with PPE kits by the BBMP, and in some, the family of the deceased provides the PPE. Some of the workers wore masks in electric crematoriums. The worker AICCTU spoke to in Peenya Electric Crematorium only wore a disposable mask as he swept flowers, incense sticks etc. on the premises of the crematorium.

Workers in mass cremation centres wore PPEs sporadically, and only when they had to place the body of the deceased persons on the firewood. Those who were lighting the pyre did not wear any form of PPE since there was a danger of the material catching fire. However, in TR Mills crematorium none of the workers wore full-body PPE kits in either handling or cremating COVID-19 victims. As a result of not using protective gear which is fire resistant, workers have sustained burn injuries.

None of the grave-diggers wore PPEs while digging a grave nor when they would close the grave. Most of the workers stated that PPEs are uncomfortable to work in, especially while digging in the summer sun.

None of the workers were provided with sanitizer or soap solutions to maintain hygiene levels after handling of bodies of the deceased persons. Moreover, the workers living conditions are abysmal, thus ensuring not only higher risk of exposure to

COVID-19, but also means that lack of basic infrastructure meant they were forced to not follow any of the safety protocol and measures prescribed.

While extreme precautionary measures have to be undertaken in handling and management of bodies of deceased COVID-19 victims, what is important is that the health of the personnel are also required to be monitored constantly. It must be noted here that there has been no action initiated by the BBMP to conduct a health assessment of the existing workers about the age group they belong to or the co-morbidities they suffer from. There have been no health camps undertaken by the BBMP or other authorities in-charge of the cemeteries to gauge the fitness and health of the workers before they are made to cremate or bury COVID-19 victims. Therefore, workers who are above 60 years of age have not been identified, and neither are workers suffering from co-morbidities such as respiratory illness, heart disease, diabetes or compromised immune systems.

These workers were considered as frontline workers by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in December 2020 and vaccinations for frontline workers started in January 2021. Despite the same, none of the workers have been provided with even a single dose of the vaccination when the AICCTU team met them.

Except for workers in Mysore Road and Panathur electric crematoriums who reported that regular testing for COVID-19 was taking place, none of the workers were tested. The workers also stated that no one had developed symptoms so far and hence did not require to get themselves tested. Most of the workers told AICCTU

that they did not need to get tested as “there is God above us who will take care of us”.

The workers suffer from occupational hazards, where they suffer from back issues, burns, injuries, among other occupational hazards, the workers are not provided with health insurance either in the form of ESI, private or government health schemes. The workers themselves bear the costs of treatment, or in one case at the Panathur Electric Crematorium, the villagers bore the cost of treatment. The BBMP does not compensate the workers in case of workplace accidents or even death of the workers. At Harishchandra Ghat crematorium, when a worker passed away recently, there was no compensation paid to his family. Recently, when a worker contracted COVID-19 and was hospitalised in an ICU, a private foundation started a crowd-funding appeal to raise money for his medical treatment.

Additionally, while the directives prescribe that the workers must maintain hand hygiene after handling of the dead body, it must be noted that each crematorium is handling over 30 bodies of deceased persons and burial grounds are handling 15-25 bodies of deceased persons on a daily basis. Several family members request the workers to open body bags and show the face of the deceased member for the last time. While the same is permitted by the guidelines mentioned above, it also requires workers to maintain absolute measures thereafter. The same cannot be done due to the increase in workload for the workers. Therefore, not only are the workers not wearing protective equipment as prescribed, they do not have any opportunity or infrastructural facilities for washing after handling

the dead bodies either. This holds good for especially those workers who are presently employed in mass cremation centres.

Should a crematorium / burial ground worker contract COVID-19, they struggle to access the health system. At least one burial ground worker has died since he was unable to secure a hospital bed. It is unfortunate that frontline workers who have been tirelessly working for the past year should not receive the necessary medical help on time.

### **Food Security**

Workers in the Christian burial ground in Kalpalli said that during the lockdown in 2020, they had received ration kits from the church and others, but this year they have received no support. The only support that the workers have received is the hot food from some NGOs. In the electric crematoriums, workers reported that they are given 3 meals a day and in some instances even refreshments. In other cemeteries like Kalpalli, they receive food once a day. Neither do families who live in the burial ground or those who live outside have received any food grains or cooked meals.

### **Living Conditions**

**B B M P administered crematoriums / burial grounds**

The workers in the electric crematoriums designated for COVID-19 cremations, all lived on the premises of the crematorium since their workload had increased manifold. The workers in Summanahalli, Kudlu, Yelahanka, Panathur, and Kengeri live inside the crematorium, with no proper facility for resting, toilet or bathrooms. In Kengeri electric crematorium, the workers stated that since it gets too late to finish their work, they stay in the crematorium. The workers

had stayed on site for anywhere between one week to more than 15 days. This was either because they lived too far away or it was too late to go home by the time they finished their work for the day. One worker lived all the way near Ghati Subramanya, and therefore could not commute to his house every day. In this crematorium, they were provided with two small rooms sufficient for two people, but during this time, it is shared by four or five workers. The workers also sleep inside the crematorium on mattresses, which they have purchased themselves. They do not use blankets or pillows and the mattresses are worn out and use gunny-bags of rice as pillows. Here, when the workers started this job about 15 years ago, the BBMP promised them that they would take care of the housing rent for the workers, but hasn't followed-up on the promise thus far. In Kudlu and Summanahalli, the workers who hail from Doddaballapura could not commute to their homes on a daily basis, and are hence living on the premises for the time-being. A worker at Kengeri crematorium centre also shared that they face stigma back home because they are cremating COVID-19 victims and one of the workers was asked to vacate their rented house as the house-owner found out that the worker cremated COVID-19 victims.

The workers employed in several crematoriums / burial grounds are 3rd to 6th generation workers, whose families lived on the premises of the crematorium / burial ground. Although they lived on the premises, these workers and their families do not have adequate basic infrastructure such as water, electricity and sanitation.

In the Kalpalli Hindu Crematorium as well, where the workers are living

on the premises of the cremation ground. They live at the centre of the premises, surrounded by the electric crematorium, fire wood crematorium, graves, and now the newly dug COVID-19 graves. The women in the families of these workers were employed as domestic workers in the nearby areas. However, once the employers learn about where the woman lives, she immediately loses her job. There is a public toilet which is used by the families for their daily ablution.

One of the workers at Peenya was allotted government land near the crematorium on which he built a house and lives with his family. While there is a family living on the premises of the Wilson Garden Hindu Burial Ground, there are two other workers who help with grave-digging, who live in the neighbourhood in rented houses.

## Recommendations

- **Protection during burials/ cremations:** All crematorium and burial grounds workers should be provided with PPE kits - one for each burial / cremation. Masks, gloves, sanitisers and bleaching powder or hypochlorite solution for use during the digging and covering of the grave, as the case maybe.

- **Testing:** Free testing must be conducted for all crematorium / burial grounds workers on a regular basis as per prescribed protocol. The same must be organised by the BBMP or the private trust in-charge.

- **Vaccination:** Since all crematorium and burial ground workers must be considered as frontline workers, they must be vaccinated on priority. Along with the workers, the families of these workers who are also susceptible to contracting the disease should also be vaccinated on priority basis. Many of the families live on

the premises of cemeteries and crematoriums, thus making them as vulnerable to the virus as the workers themselves.

- **Sanitisation Initiative:** As per the recommendations and guidelines issued by various authorities in regard to dead body management, crematoriums must be sanitised everyday as per protocol. Similarly, the houses of workers living on the premises of the crematorium / burial grounds must also be sanitised.

- **Ensure Job Security:** Regularise the services of all the workers in cemeteries and crematoriums, irrespective of whether the burial grounds or crematorium is managed by the BBMP or a private trust. All measures to secure their jobs and livelihoods must be made by the relevant authority.

- **Wages:** At the very minimum, minimum wages of Rs. 13,132 must be paid to the workers every month. In fact, fair wages must be paid to the workers. Workers must receive full wages on or before the 7th of every month. The workers must be issued with wage slips every month, and be provided with their ESI and EPF account numbers, along with ID cards for every worker. The BBMP must ensure direct payment of wages to these workers via bank transfers. The Labour Department should ensure that those working with privately managed cemeteries also receive minimum wages and that all benefits as that of the BBMP workers are provided to them.

- **Overtime:** There is an exponential increase in workload for the workers since there are a large number of deaths during the renewed waves of COVID-19 infection – be it COVID-19 or



non-COVID-19. The workers are working above and beyond their usual working hours. The BBMP and the State Government needs to ensure that the workers are compensated for the hard labour put in by the workers.

- **Risk Allowance:** These workers must be provided risk allowance for they are exposed to the grave risk of contracting the COVID-19 infection as they are conducting the last rites of COVID-19 victims. This must be paid over and above the wages due to them.

- **Social Security:** Every worker in crematoriums and cemeteries must be provided with ESI and EPF facilities, and must also be provided with gratuity

and pension benefits upon superannuation. Yearly bonus and incentives, and all other benefits accrued statutorily must be extended to these workers.

- **Insurance:** These workers must be recognised as beneficiaries under the Central Government 50 lakhs insurance Scheme.

- **Housing:** The workers live on the premises of cemeteries and crematoriums with scant resources and basic amenities. They must be provided with BBMP quarters with all basic amenities including water, electricity and sanitation.

- A committee must be set-up to look into the working conditions of these workers. The committee will recognize that the occupation is caste-based and

take concerted steps to ensure that the children of these workers have adequate access to education and employment, among other opportunities etc. The committee will make recommendations to overhaul the manner of functioning of crematoriums and cemeteries, in a manner that ensures dignity, health and wages for these workers, and enables their children to move out of the caste-based occupation. It must also look into compensation to be paid to these workers and their families for forcing them into caste-based occupation and with a view to rehabilitate these workers. The committee must consist of members from the Social Welfare Department, Labour Department, Health Department, among others.

□

## TRIPS Waiver and the Struggle to Free the Vaccine

 AISHIK SAHA

“

“There is no patent. Could you patent the sun?”

- Jonas Salk, inventor of the polio vaccine, on being asked why he did not patent his vaccine

**T**he snail-paced vaccination program in India is a matter of major concern globally, not only due to the fact that the periodic waves of COVID will result in hundreds of thousands even possibly millions of preventable deaths and result in economic shutdowns, but also because such spread may lead to mutations that can render vaccines completely ineffective. This can effectively wipe out the painstaking gains made by the global scientific and medical community through immense sacrifice and take us back to square one. One of the hurdles to

rapid vaccination is the meshwork of Intellectual Property regulations that prevents the free flow of technological knowhow, which has benefitted wealthy corporations at the expense of billions of poor in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

### TRIPS and the Global IP Regime

In October last year, India and South Africa, along with 57 members of WTO proposed a waiver from certain provisions of the TRIPS agreement for prevention, containment, and treatment of COVID-19. For seven months, the

proposal has made little progress due to opposition from the US, the EU, Switzerland, the UK, Japan and others. Modi's much touted foreign policy, which played a major role in securing him a second term in 2019, however collapsed like a house of cards in the face of such opposition. While Modi engaged with a competition against China to win a point with 'Vaccine Diplomacy' by providing vaccines to the wealthiest nations of the world like Canada, maitri failed to flow both ways as no such reciprocal gestures have been available at the time of our need.

While in the early months of the pandemic, world leaders and corporate executives embraced a



language of social collaboration, it soon emerged that under capitalism, profits will always triumph over people. Socialists around the world had criticized the attempts at allowing capitalist corporations to profit from the sale of vaccines, supporters of the system claimed that it is because of 'profits' that pharmaceutical companies were able to swiftly roll out the vaccines. This claim is simply a lie as most of the vaccines could only be developed because of generous amounts of public funding and publicly funded research<sup>1</sup>. Adar Poonawalla, who became the poster-child of India's vaccine production prowess, was able to ramp up production precisely because it had received WHO funds specifically aimed at ramping up production since 2006<sup>2</sup>.

The free flow and exchange of information that allowed for the development of the vaccines however was abandoned with a model that placed capitalist profit at the center

[1] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/04/covid-vaccines-patents-ip-bill-gates-big-pharma>

[2] <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0264410X11006852>

of the vaccination drive<sup>3</sup>. Wealthy nations however have blocked any effective way for making the vaccines available to all for free. We are well aware how the US had even blocked India from even importing the crucial raw materials for the development of life-saving drugs as the second wave of COVID19 hit India in April. Under international pressure, the US has agreed to a partial waiver of IP regulations for vaccines<sup>4</sup>. This however is far short of the original proposal by India and South Africa that sought a waiver on all medical products essential to fight COVID19 including treatments, diagnostic kits, ventilators etc<sup>5</sup>.

### Vaccines for All

The rich countries with 14% of the global population have 53% of the vaccines, much of which will go into stockpiling. The US, which

[3] <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/12/socialism-vaccine-capitalism-distribution>

[4] <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2021/may/statement-ambassador-katherine-tai-covid-19-trips-waiver>

[5] <https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/SS/directdoc.aspx?filename=q:/IP/C/W669.pdf&Open=True>

sat on a stock of tens of millions of AstraZenca, even as it itself refused to authorize the vaccine, while other countries that had sanctioned its use even out of desperation failed to find imports. South Africa was forced to pay more than 2.5 times of the price for vaccines that the EU had to pay<sup>6</sup>. These demonstrate the very fundamental problem of a vaccination program that is driven by capitalism.

While the TRIPS waiver could help with speeding up the process of manufacturing vaccines, this is far from the solution we need. It has been pointed out that "Pharmaceutical companies may need to be incentivised to share knowledge and build capacity in developing countries to produce quality, generic versions of the vaccines"<sup>7</sup>. This leads to the fundamental problem of IP regulations that aim at protecting profits rather than seek to drive innovation. The idea that profits drive innovation has been proven false

[6] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/22/south-africa-paying-more-than-double-eu-price-for-oxford-astrazeneca-vaccine>

[7] <https://theconversation.com/trips-waiver-us-support-is-a-major-step-but-no-guarantee-of-covid-19-vaccine-equity-160638>

time and time again.

In order to remedy the situation, the People's Vaccine Alliance<sup>8</sup>, a coalition of organizations from around the world has appealed for the following:

- Ensure the vaccine is purchased at true cost prices and provided free of charge to people.
- Prevent monopolies on vaccine and treatment production by making public funding for research and development conditional on research institutions and pharmaceutical companies freely sharing all information, data, biological material, know-how and intellectual property.

[8] <https://peoplesvaccine.org/>

- Ensure the vaccine is sold at affordable prices: Pricing must be transparent and based on the cost of research, development and manufacturing, as well as taking into account any public funding provided.

- Implement fair allocation of the vaccine which prioritizes health workers and other at-risk groups in all countries. Distribution among countries should be based on their population size. In-country vaccination programmes should include marginalized groups, including refugees, prisoners, and people living in slums and other crowded housing conditions. Allocation between and within countries should be based on need

and not ability to pay.

- Ensure full participation of governments in developing countries as well as civil society from north and south in decision-making fora about the vaccines (and other COVID-19 technologies) and ensure transparency and accountability of all decisions.

In the long term however, it is important to undo the damage that privatization has rendered to our healthcare incapable of fighting a serious crisis. People's health and profit do not go hand in hand, and it may be now time to untangle the two. ■



## COVID-19 Vaccine Debacle:

### Why are people left at the mercy of the market?



V ARUN KUMAR

**A** rusty board at the gate and a deserted campus awaits anyone visiting the Integrated Vaccine Complex (IVC) in Chengalpattu, around 56 kilometers away from Chennai. At first glance, one may think this is an obsolete place, but what lies behind those arc shaped gates is the state-of-the-art publicly owned vaccine manufacturing set up in 2012 and has a proposed capacity of producing one billion doses annually. But, for the past nine years the complex has been lying idle, and HLL Biotech Ltd, a Government of India enterprise that owns the complex now wants to sell it to private players.

The story of HLL Biotech Ltd's IVC represents the criminal act of sabotaging the public healthcare system and free universal vaccination program, leaving people

at the mercy of private players. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic and shortage of vaccines, IVC could have boosted India's COVID vaccination drive but the facility only contributed by manufacturing hand sanitizers.

At a time, India is facing a massive shortage of COVID vaccines, India's neglect of its state owned vaccine manufacturers is a clear case of criminal act. It is estimated India would need 1 to 1.2 billion doses (considering the current two dose vaccine schedule both for COVIDSHIELD and COVAXIN) to inoculate around a minimum of 60 percent of the population. Till now only less than 3.5% of the population, roughly around 40 million people have received their complete vaccination. But it is clear from the graph (Figure 1), rather than ramping up the vaccination

drive, the inoculation graph is drastically falling down since mid April. So, why is India only relying on two vaccine manufacturers?

The Modi led Central government claims that IVC is not a feasible option due to cost escalation and in 2019 it refused to approve the increased cost of Rs 905 crore (from Rs 710 crore in 2017) to make the facility functioning. While the Modi government refuses to provide further financial support for IVC to make it functioning for COVID-19 vaccine production, it readily provides "whatever support is necessary" to private vaccine manufacturers like Serum Institute of India (SII) and Bharat Biotech. Recently, amid the vaccine shortage, India provided further a grant (which the government claims as advance payment) of Rs 45.67 billion to SII and Bharat Biotech to



boost production in April 2021.

Despite providing government advance and money for clinical trial (ICMR spent Rs 46 crore) to SII's COVIDSHIELD and Bharat Biotech's COVAXIN (which was produced in collaboration with government institutes like ICMR and National Institute of Virology), Modi allowed these companies to engage in super profiteering. By his own submission, SII's CEO Adar Poonawalla claimed he was making a profit even at a price of Rs 150 per dose, so why did the government allow SII to sell the vaccine at Rs 600 per dose for private hospitals and Rs. 300 to government hospitals?

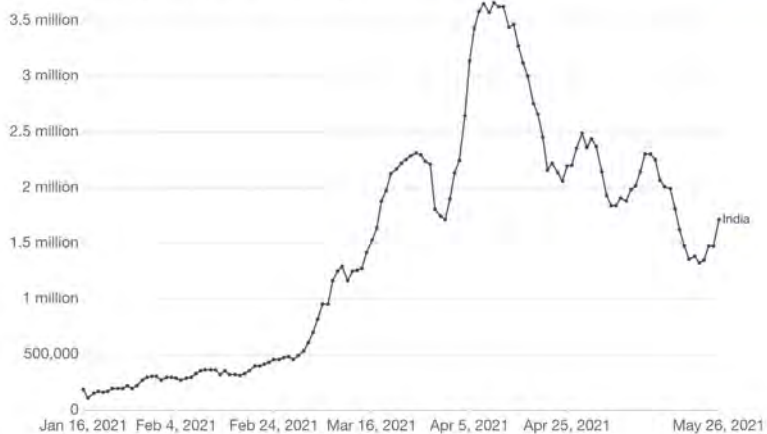
The same is the story of neglect of six other state owned vaccine manufacturers that once formed the backbone of India's universal vaccination program. Apart from IVC, India's other public sector vaccine manufacturer are- Central Research Institute

(CRI) in Himachal Pradesh; BCG Vaccine Laboratory (BCGVL), Pasteur Institute of India (PII) and HLL Biotech in Tamil Nadu; Bharat Immunologicals and Biologicals Corporation Limited, Uttar Pradesh; Haffkine Bio-Pharmaceutical Corporation Limited, Maharashtra; and Human Biologicals Institute, Telangana.

But most of these are left to die a slow death due lack of funds for upgradation and quality control. It was only on April 16, 2021, amid rising shortage of vaccine, Modi government decided to include three PSUs (Haffkine Biopharmaceutical Corporation Ltd, Indian Immunologicals Limited, Bharat Immunologicals

#### Daily COVID-19 vaccine doses administered

Shown is the rolling 7-day average. This is counted as a single dose, and may not equal the total number of people vaccinated, depending on the specific dose regime (e.g. people receive multiple doses).



Source: Official data collated by Our World in Data - Last updated 27 May, 14:14 (London time)

OurWorldinData.org/coronavirus • CC BY

Figure 1: Daily COVID-19 vaccine doses administered in India as of May 26, 2021 (Source: Our World In Data)

and Biologicals Limited) in COVID-19 vaccine production.

As a Down to Earth investigation report noted<sup>1</sup>:

“India has adequate capacity — the country has a panel of seven PSUs that have the capability to produce vaccines. But the manufacturing licences of three of these PSUs — Central Research Institute, Kasauli; BCG Vaccine Laboratory, Guindy; and Pasteur Institute of India, Conoor — had been cancelled in 2008 as they were not following the good manufacturing practices laid down in the Drugs and Cosmetic Rules, 1945.

In 2012, a decision was taken to revive these units. However, they were not made fully functional.

The DTE investigation revealed that India also has an Integrated Vaccine Complex in Tamil Nadu which was established to provide vaccines needed for the country’s Universal Immunisation Programme after the closure of the PSUs. Though ready since 2016, this unit too is defunct at the moment.”

The real reason behind the government’s neglect of state owned vaccine manufacturers is giving away the space for private players and markets. Rather than reviving PSUs and upgrading their capacity and quality, the government since Congress led UPA decided and then BJP led NDA chose to leave the space to market. Back in 2008, an Economic Times report quoted a health ministry official saying

[1] <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/health/a-dose-of-truth-the-real-story-of-india-s-covid-19-vaccination-programme-76548>

## WHAT WE NEED TO MAKE

Vaccine doses required to achieve stabilisation based on production capacity, in million. (Move right to see entire table on mobile)

	Fully vaccinated	Fully vaccinated as % of popn	Production capacity
Apr	25.3	1.9	75
May	45.5	3.4	85
Jun	67.3	5.0	105
Jul	96.4	7.2	155
Aug	128.2	9.6	155
Sep	162.2	12.1	155
Oct	199.0	14.9	155

TOI

Serum producing 70m per month in April and expected to increase to 90m from July, Bharat Biotech at 5m per month in April and expected to increase to 8m by July, Sputnik vaccine to be available from May  
 \* Source: SBI Research

on the question of Vaccine PSU<sup>2</sup>, “these facilities have served their purpose and now will be used as diagnostic testing centres which will start operating in the next few months. The 800-900 employees in these units would be retrained for the same”.

Vibha Varshney, the lead investigator and writer of the magazine’s report noted: “This is exactly what Down To Earth has been asking for — way back in 2009, we had called for revival of PSUs for making vaccines. India could have avoided the ongoing crisis of vaccines if it had taken these proactive steps earlier. But what is notable here is that the three major vaccine manufacturing units under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, which have the maximum

[2] <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/healthcare/biotech/pharmaceuticals/government-leaves-vaccine-space-for-private-companies/articleshow/2992740.cms?from=mdr>

expertise and capacity to produce vaccines, have not been included in this list. Even the Integrated Vaccine Complex does not come in this list.”

Very clearly, the Modi government decided to sideline India’s public manufacturers from the beginning. And instead of augmenting the capacity of these PSUs to manufacture COVID-19 vaccines for universal free vaccination drive, the government chose to go with private players eyeing for profit amid pandemic.

## India Should Invoke Section 92, 100 and 102 of Patents Act

India’s overall COVID deaths have already crossed 2.9 lakh and the daily death rate is still more than 3800. It is clear that currently the only way to control the pandemic is through vaccination, but India’s inoculation drive (one dose out of two) has only been

able to cover around 11 percent of the population. So, why is India not expanding its manufacturing capacity by involving state owned vaccine companies like state-of-the-art IVC?

Under the Indian Patents Act, 1970, Indian government has to issue compulsory licences and to override intellectual property rights for essential drugs or vaccines.

Section 92 of Patents Act - Special provision for compulsory licences on notifications by Central Government.- stipulates,

*“If the Central Government is satisfied, in respect of any patent in force in circumstances of national emergency or in circumstances of extreme urgency or in case of public noncommercial use, that it is necessary that compulsory licenses should be granted at any time after the sealing thereof to work the invention, it may make a declaration to that effect..”*

Furthermore, Section 100 of Patents Act -Power of Central Government to use inventions for purposes of Government- notes,

Notwithstanding anything contained in this Act, at any time after an application for a patent has been filed at the patent office or a patent has been granted, the Central Government and any person authorised in writing by it, may use the invention for the purposes of Government in accordance with the provisions of this Chapter.

Despite having powers to do so in view of the health emergency and extreme urgency caused by the pandemic, the Modi government chose to remain silent on releasing the patents for mass manufacturing of COVID vaccines available in India. Infact, India has

also refused to give compulsory licenses for essential drugs involved in COVID treatment. In response to a petition filed in the Supreme Court on April 30 regarding compulsory license for vaccines and other COVID related medical products, the central government called for a silence on this issue and noted in its affidavit:

*..... When there is a surge in cases and in demand of patented medicines/drugs/vaccines from all over the world the solution needs to be found out essentially at an executive level engaging at diplomatic levels. Any exercise of statutory powers either under the patents act 1970 read with TRIPS agreement and Doha declaration or in any other way can only prove to be counter-productive at this stage, the central government is very actively engaging itself with global organisations at a diplomatic level to find out a solution in the best possible interest of India. It is earnestly urged that any discussion or a mention of exercise of statutory powers either for essential drugs or vaccines having patent issues would have serious, severe and unintended adverse consequences in the countries efforts being made on global platform using all its resources, good-will and good-offices though diplomatic and other channels.*

India issued first compulsory licenses in 2012 to Indian generic manufacturer Natco to produce affordable generic versions of the chemotherapy drug sorafenib tosylate. German multinational pharmaceutical, Bayer had the patent over the drug in India and was selling it for a price of Rs, 280,000 for a monthly dose! The compulsory licence sorafenib tosylate had a dramatic effect on

the drug's price – bringing it down to only Rs 8,800 for a month's dose.

India can easily issue compulsory licence, especially for COVAXIN, developed jointly by the government and Bharat Biotech, so why is the government not releasing its patent and engaging in mass production? India is clearly taking a contradictory stance in terms of intellectual property rights. At the World Trade Organization (WTO), India and South Africa introduced a proposal for temporary waiver of Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) provisions on intellectual property rights regarding COVID-19 vaccines and related medical products. This proposal is facing massive obstacles from developed countries and the global pharma industry. Though the United States government recently decided to support the TRIPS waiver proposal, it may take at least a year before the proposal reaches its final stage of negotiations. At the same time, the Modi government is refusing to override patents on COVID-19 vaccines and other medical products available in India.

Amid the crisis, India government must invoke Section 92 and 100 of Indian Patent Acts and augment the state-owned vaccine manufacturers for mass production of COVID-19 vaccines. Instead of leaving people at the hands of private vaccine companies and market forces, the Modi government must immediately bring COVID vaccination under the free and door-to-door universal immunization program. Furthermore, such a move for mass production will not only be able to cater India's domestic needs but also its international vaccine commitments to developed countries. ▣

# People's Charter

## Provide Covid-19 Care And Public Healthcare For Every Indian



**T**he Covid-19 pandemic has shown us the nightmare created by the Modi regime's disastrous neglect of scientific advice and callous authoritarianism. But this nightmare also rests on the legacy of decades of privatisation of healthcare, dismantling of public health structures, due to neoliberal policies. The millions of deaths in India caused not only by the virus but by shortage, hoarding, and predatory pricing of oxygen, beds, ventilators, lifesaving medicines, vaccines; by shortage of staff and unsanitary conditions in hospitals, especially government hospitals accessed by the poor; by the absence of medical infrastructure and staff in rural areas; and by the collapse of public health system including epidemiological

surveillance, to predict and prevent communicable diseases. There are no individual, insurance-based solutions to communicable diseases – Covid-19 in its highly contagious Indian variant underlines this truth.

The goal of healthcare in India cannot merely be to provide individual citizens access to hospitals, through insurance coverage. To predict and therefore prevent the outbreak and spread of communicable diseases and epidemics like encephalitis, malaria, gastroenteritis, tuberculosis, and of course the variety of viral epidemic diseases including Covid-19, a robust public health infrastructure is needed for the surveillance and monitoring of such diseases. Without such a public health infrastructure, it is impossible to

interrupt the cycle of transmission of communicable diseases.

In Kerala, where the public health infrastructure is relatively more robust compared to other states, we saw how the deadly Nipah virus could be contained. Privatisation of healthcare across India, and the resulting weakening of public health infrastructure has inevitably weakened the ability to predict and prevent communicable diseases.

### **Covid-19 Care For All: An Immediate Charter of Demands**

#### **Expanding Medical Infrastructure:**

- Provide mobile RT-PCR testing Centres be operationalized in all villages/slums for free Covid testing of all residents.

- Equip primary health centres, community medical centres, and sub-divisional hospitals with sufficient electricity, water, oxygen cylinders; flow-meters; oxygen masks; oximeters; and oxygen-ambulances. A minimum of 100 ventilators, and expanded capacity for general and ICU beds must be ensured at District hospitals. Upgrading lower-level health structures from PHCs to Community Health Centres to referral hospitals and District hospitals will reduce pressure on city hospitals and save lives.

- Set up local isolation and Covid-care centres equipped with sufficient oxygen

- Fill vacant posts for doctors and other health workers.

- During the height of the Covid crisis, so-called “jhola chhap” (quack) doctors were found to be providing basic diagnostic care and advice to mild patients in rural areas, and identifying more severe cases needing hospitalisation. This system should be harnessed in future, providing training and guidelines to the informal practitioners so that they can form a Barefoot Doctors network.

- Central government/ State governments must take over all private medical facilities/hospitals under governmental control till the pandemic lasts, and must provide free treatment of all COVID-19 affected people.

#### **Transparency and Cooperation:**

- Adopt transparency in all aspects of fight against the pandemic and share all data in public domain: this is a crucial requirement for the policy formulation, research and control of the pandemic. All information and data pertaining to administration, availability of the medical infrastructure and research

& development must be shared with citizens, social organisations involved in running help centres, and scientific data and facts and research outcomes including corona genome sequencing etc. should be shared in real time with Indian and world scientific community in appropriate forums.

- The Central and state governments should guarantee that all-party meetings are organized regularly on Central, State as well as District level. Such District level co-ordination and understanding can prove very useful in coping with the Covid-19 crisis. A system of regular State to Block level meetings should be developed between the administration, political parties and social organizations, so that we can all face this difficult challenge together.

#### **Universal Free Vaccination For All:**

- The Central Government must ensure free supply of COVID-19 vaccine to the State Governments as per the Communicable Diseases Control Programme of the Government of India. COVID-19 vaccine must be given from all government and private medical colleges and hospitals, health centres, private hospitals, nursing homes, community centres, all types of offices and workplaces and also organise special camps at free of cost.

- The Central Government should procure more vaccines from the international community/ markets to satisfy the domestic demand in order to ensure vaccination to all citizens in a time bound framework.

- Indian government must strengthen its efforts in WTO for waiver of TRIPS bindings on

covid-19 vaccines, other lifesaving drugs and medical equipment.

#### **Home Care:**

- Mandatorily provide free of cost thermometers, oximeters, and medicines for COVID-19 patients in home quarantine.

#### **Oxygen:**

- Transparent and needs-based oxygen distribution by the Centre must be ensured.

- In every city, the occupancy and availability of beds in the hospitals, the latest situation regarding oxygen supply should be published in bulletin form at regular intervals of 4-5 hours.

- Details of the planning and progress report of building oxygen plant in the government hospitals must be published in public domain.

- Uninterrupted availability of oxygen cylinders, ventilators, masks, life-saving drugs, hospital beds should not be compromised showing financial crisis or administrative failures.

#### **Ensure Testing, Tracing & Isolation to Stop the Spread:**

- Emphasis should be laid on testing, tracing, treatment and social awareness. Without proper testing we will never know the actual gravity of the situation which may lead us to another dangerous wave of the killer pandemic. This scenario will leave an immense uninterrupted space for the viral spread.

- The government should regularly consult various political parties and social and voluntary organizations for discussions on this and expand this at the District /block level.

- Widespread testing and tracing is the key factor for containing the spread of the pandemic. This is



not being done adequately in spite of the governmental acceptance of the fact. Mostly symptomatic patients are going for self-testing while large number of populations remains untested in absence of governmental initiative for testing people in far places and in economically weaker sections, particularly in rural India.

- Testing and tracing can not be done in large populations without a centralised coordinated effort which should extend up to lower levels. Hence we can not leave this to concerned state governments only.

- There is need to expand RT-PCR testing at District and block levels. Hence, it is necessary to increase the number of testing centres so that infected persons can be identified, isolated and treated timely and further infection can be prevented. Without involving local governance structures up to Panchayat levels this task cannot be achieved.

- Medical teams should be sent forthwith to all villages to do house to house Covid testing.

- Special arrangements should be made for testing and isolation of migrant workers returning to their home states.

Respect and Care for the Health, Sanitation, and Crematorium/Graveyard Workers:

- Priority vaccination, safety gear and PPE kits, health check-ups must be provided to all workers of these categories including daily thermal screening, a master health check-up, regular health check once a month.

- Government must identify workers who are suffering from co-morbidities and ensure that they are provided sick leave with pay.

- Government must ensure that workers and their families are provided complete medical treatment, in the event of being tested positive.

- Government must ensure that all workers of these categories, and their family members are covered under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana and are entitled to compensation of Rs. 50 Lakhs if they lose their life due to COVID-19.

- Workers above 45 years of age must be recused from work, with payment of full salary and benefits.

- Institutional quarantine facility for isolation must be provided for those workers who require it

- Regularise the services of all the workers in cemeteries and crematoriums, irrespective of whether the burial grounds or crematorium are managed by the government or a private trust. Ensure minimum wages, overtime, and risk allowance.

### **Ensure Full Funding of Fight against Covid-19:**

- At least 10% of the central budget should be allocated to the health sector.

- Covid tax should be imposed on all corporate organizations.

- A tax of minimum 2 % should be levied on the wealth of Ultra-rich having equal to or more than 5000 crores in wealth/assets.

- Strict measures must be taken to stop the exorbitant cost charged by the Private hospitals to treat Covid patients.

- A large number of Covid victims are poor. Therefore, compensation of Rs 10 lakhs each to the families of the deceased

victims, and 6 months' rations and employment should be arranged.

### **Treatment of non-Covid patients Must Continue:**

- Treatment of non-Covid patients should not be obstructed under any circumstances. Additional doctors and health workers should be arranged for this.

- Special measures should be taken for the non-Covid chronic patients who need immediate attention and care, like diabetics, cardiac patients and those who need kidney dialysis etc.

### **Food Security for the Needy:**

- Food and nutrition is an essential component of health. Due to the pandemic the poor are gradually beginning to face a food crisis. Therefore, work should be generated in MNREGA and work should be arranged on the same lines in cities also.

- All the poor including migrant workers should be given Rs 10000 subsistence allowance for the next 3 months as well as 6 months' free rations.

- All items of daily needs should be made available through PDS at affordable rates.

- Workers engaged in work at marriages and other functions have been badly affected by the pandemic. Alternative work and subsistence amount for them should also be arranged.

## **Healthcare For All: People's Charter**

### **The State of India's Healthcare Today:**

- India's total healthcare spending (out-of-pocket and public), at 3.6% of GDP, as per OECD, is way lower than that of other countries. Of this, public (government) spending stands at

a mere 1.28%. India spends the least among BRICS countries: Brazil spends the most (9.2%), followed by South Africa (8.1%), Russia (5.3%), China (5%). Patients bear 61% of health expenditure: what patients pay out from their pockets is close to double of what the Centre and State governments spend on public healthcare in India.

- India currently has just 0.55 beds per 1000 population. 12 states, which together account for close to 70% of the total population in India, lie below this national level figure: Bihar, Jharkhand, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Maharashtra, Odisha, Assam and Manipur. Bihar has an acute shortage of government hospital beds with just 0.11 beds available per 1000 population.

- There is an acute shortage of ICU beds, oxygen-beds, and ventilator-beds. India has only 3.63 public ICU beds per 100,000 population and the per capita availability of ICU beds varies tremendously both between and within states. For instance in Madhya Pradesh, out of the 50 districts, as many as 30 districts had no ICU facility in 2015, and more than two-thirds of the facilities were concentrated in just four districts. MP had only 2.5 ICU beds per 100,000 population, and 83% of these were in the private sector and almost 9 out of 10 facilities were of low quality, implying that they either lack sophisticated equipment, such as non-invasive ventilator, facility for ABG etc., or qualified medical doctor.

- There is a deficit of 1,240 Primary Health Centres (PHC), 273 Community Health

Centres (CHC) and 6,503 Sub Centres (SC) in the tribal areas of the country, according to a report presented by the Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment in 2019. This deficit is highest in Madhya Pradesh (381 PHCs), Jharkhand (228 PHCs) and Rajasthan (225 PHCs). 22.4 per cent of the sanctioned posts of nursing staff at PHCs and CHCs and 27.6 per cent of the sanctioned posts of doctors at PHCs in the tribal areas are vacant. The committee found that the highest shortfall of doctors at PHCs is in the tribal areas of Chhattisgarh (235), Madhya Pradesh (124) and Odisha (90).

***Let Covid-19 be a wake-up call – let us demand that at least now, the Government must heed this call and prioritise public healthcare for all.***

### **We demand:**

- Make the right to healthcare a justiciable right through the enactment of appropriate legislation. Such a legislation should ensure universal and free access to good quality and comprehensive health care including the entire range of primary, secondary and tertiary services for the entire population of India.

- Abolish user fees in all government hospitals

- Develop a time-bound, district-wise road map to meet the shortfall in physical health infrastructure all over India.

- Equip Primary Health Centres - PHCs to provide experienced emergency care, and to prevent maternal and natal/neonatal mortality.

- Fill all the vacant posts of medical officers, specialist doctors,

nurses, ANMs, pharmacists, radiographers and other frontline health workers at various government hospitals and health programmes within a stipulated time. Make appointments through permanent recruitments, not short-term contractual appointments.

- Recognise ASHAs, anganwadi workers as Government employees and regularised.

- Institute a protocol and comprehensive measures for ensuring the safety of all health, sanitation and relief workers during Covid-19 and other disasters and epidemics, providing safety gear to all.

- A participatory system of community-based monitoring, grievance redressal and planning needs to be implemented to ensure that people can access appropriate health services as their right, seek effective action on complaints, and have a strong voice for improved functioning of health services.

- Open fully staffed and equipped Urban Primary Health Centres at every 30000 population in towns and cities. Appoint USHA (Urban Social Health Activists) on the pattern of ASHA in each Urban PHC to ensure effective linkages between the community and the health facility. In addition, set up mohalla clinics in urban bastis and slums in all towns and cities.

- Stop all forms of privatization of Public Health Services, eliminate Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) which weaken public health services

- Universalise ICDS programme and expand it to cover under-3 children through community based management of malnutrition and day-care programmes. ■

# Notes From The CPIML Covid Help Teams

(All over India, CPIML comrades have been helping to organise help for Covid-affected persons and communities, in a variety of ways. Here are reports from some of our comrades involved in the relief work.)

## #SOSDelhi

### AICCTU-CPIML Help Desk

 SUCHETA DE



**T**he deadly Covid second wave of April-May 2021 hit Delhi very badly after the first wave receded last December. According to official data, the infection rate this time was as high as 28,395 new cases each day in mid April. And the death rate was as high as 448 deaths each day in early May. May us not forget the fact that official Covid data hugely underreports the actual number of cases and deaths.

The fact that the latest wave was deadliest than all last waves shows how unprepared the Modi

government is to deal with the Pandemic despite the fact that it had one year to set its priorities right. They found time to tighten their control over Delhi government through LG, but they did not consider it necessary to prepare the city for facing the Pandemic in last one year. The role of the AAP run Delhi government in letting so many people die cannot be neglected as well.

**No Oxygen, No Bed, No Medicine: The Horror of April-May in Delhi**

As soon as the latest wave hit

Delhi, the unpreparedness of the city's health infrastructure became evident to the entire world. The cry for oxygen for breathless Covid patients emerged from each and every neighbourhood of Delhi. Hundreds of people were dying within few days due to lack of oxygen supply. Even hospitals were sending out SOS messages for supply for oxygen cylinders. Several people died in the city's well known hospitals because they could not be provided with oxygen support. A black market of oxygen cylinders started operating while people were dying in need of oxygen. A 10-20

Litre Cylinder costed around Rs 40-50 thousand rupees when the pandemic reached its peak this time. Timely preparedness on part of the AAP Government in Delhi in arranging enough Cryogenic tankers and their transport to ensure oxygen supply for medical use could have saved many lives.

The collapse of health infrastructure made the city's population utterly helpless in the face of infection upsurge. Finding a hospital bed with oxygen became nearly impossible for the patients; harder still to find an ICU bed. The Delhi Government's Corona App seldom offered updated information about availability of beds. Even when beds were reported available in the dashboard, getting a bed became another struggle as several hospitals denied availability when asked by attendants of patients. Attendants helping Covid patients had to stand in queues for hours to get medicines prescribed by doctors.

### **Student-Youth-Workers Started Covid Help Desk in Delhi on 20th April**

As soon as the city started feeling the heat of the pandemic, AICCTU, AISA and CPIML activists started preparing for providing help to people struggling to survive the medical emergency. Several of our own activists fell ill, many lost their closest kin. We lost Comrade Om Prakash Sharma, veteran AICCTU activist and CPIML member in the pandemic. Setting up a help desk was the need of the hour.

The Help Desk provided verified information on Oxygen, medicine and hospital bed availability. Our activists, especially from Jamia Millia Islamia, helped in refilling of Oxygen. Waiting for hours to

procure medicine, ensuring a hospital bed by standing in queue, moving around the city to verify sources of Oxygen refilling and helping patient to get Oxygen in time - these were the main activities our volunteers were engaged in initially.

An important initiative of the help desk has been to start free auto ambulance service in the city. Two autos with Oxygen cylinders are made available from AICCTU to transport patients to hospitals. The auto ambulance service has helped many patients in need till now.

**Struggle for Food, Wages and Access to Health Care- Delhi's Workers Are Worst Hit Section of the Pandemic**

While the city was struggling for Oxygen, the extreme vulnerability of the workers and residents of slums to survive the Corona wave became clear. Most of the informal workers and street vendors lost their jobs as soon as lockdown was announced in mid April. They were left without money, food or medical care by the government.

Delhi experienced the painful journey of the migrant workers leaving the city in hunger and insecurity last year. Millions of migrant and informal workers had to experience hunger due to inaccessibility to Public Distribution System. One year has passed since then. But still the workers and slum residents do not have access to ration card and PDS.

The situation of sanitation and health workers are especially vulnerable. They are the ones who are carrying the burden of the City's fight against Corona. But they are the ones who have been denied basic rights and dignity of

workers. Most of the sanitation workers of Delhi have not got regular wages in last one year. They have been made to work without payment. They do not have access to health facilities as public health infrastructure are in the shatters. From testing for Corona to access to food, medicine, oxygen and hospital bed, everything is kept far away from them. Needless to say that most of the sanitation workers are from Dalit community and one of the most discriminated in this battle for survival in Pandemic.

### **Reaching Out to Workers and Slum Residents with Ration and Mask/Sanitiser**

While our battle to ensure rights of the workers continue, our help desk is reaching out to hundreds of workers in distress with ration kits and mask/sanitiser. Activists from working class background themselves are taking initiative to arrange help. A significant section of progressive civil society have reached out to help our initiative financially. The solidarity of people with each other in such time of distress generates comfort and hope to fight for what residents of Delhi truly deserve.

***While we aspire to continue our help desk as long as possible and needed, we also feel the need to raise voice to ensure our rights. We demand***

- Free, universal and speedy vaccination to all residents of Delhi. The central government must immediately ensure that vaccines are available in enough amount to ensure vaccination throughout the day in each public school, hospital, dispensary and mohalla clinics. The Delhi government must arrange for vaccination centres for slums that do not have access to existing

public infrastructure. The repeated halting of the vaccination program must be dealt with immediately with enough supply.

- Ensure nutritious and proper food to every resident of the city. Ensure free ration to anyone who demands. Start process of

providing ration cards to every one who does not have it yet.

- Provide masks, sanitiser and PPE kits to sanitation, health and essentials services workers. Include masks and sanitiser as components to be given via Public Distribution System. Control

prices of these essential safety commodities.

- Stop retrenchment of informal workers.

- Stop silencing those who demand their right. □

## CPIML MLA Vinod Singh's Exemplary Work in Jharkhand



CPIML MLA from Bagodar in Jharkhand Vinod Kumar Singh has been tirelessly working to protect people from Covid-19, not only in his own constituency Bagodar but across the Giridih District and in other parts of Jharkhand as well.

Anticipating the danger of a 2nd wave of Covid, Bagodar MLA Vinod Kumar Singh used his MLA fund as well as people's contributions to build resources in the Community Health Centre at Bagodar and Birni which had very limited resources.

As a result, Bagodar CHC is today treating the maximum number of Covid patients after the District Hospital. It is worth noting that Comrade Vinod, with the people's cooperation, was the first to equip the Bagodar Government Hospital with jumbo oxygen cylinders so that patients should not suffer for lack of oxygen. Very soon people contributed dozens of cylinders to the Bagodar CHC. He also equipped a 10-bed ward with an oxygen pipe line from his

MLA fund, and ten more beds were provided with oxygen pipe line from people's contributions. Responding to the MLA's appeal, people also contributed dozens of jumbo cylinders, ACs, water coolers, electric coolers, geysers, PPE kits, oxygen masks etc to the Bagodar CHC. The Birni PHC was provided with over half a dozen jumbo cylinders; in addition, 10 beds were equipped with oxygen from the MLA fund.

Moreover, after the death of

a young man due to Covid at the Bagodar PHC when his own family stood aside out of fear, Vinod Singh and his comrades arranged wood and had the last rites performed. Vinod Singh also regularly inspected the Covid ward of a private clinic in Saria. At such a time when even family members are afraid to participate in the last rites of a Covid victim, Vinod Singh went to Bagodar, Adwara, Pathaldiha and many rural areas to give courage to the victims' families by showing respect at the victim's funeral.

20 jumbo cylinders were arranged for the Community Health Centres at Bagodar and Birni with citizens' contributions through Comrade Vinod Singh's initiative. Vinod Singh's successful arrangement of oxygen through people's contribution has earned him the love and respect of common people in this horrific pandemic. On the one hand he arranged more than 18 jumbo oxygen cylinders with the common people's cooperation while he also promptly connected 10 beds each at Bagodar CHC and Birni CHC to oxygen pipe lines through his MLA fund so that Covid patients get an uninterrupted and adequate supply of oxygen. Similarly, he arranged 30 oxygen

beds within one month in Bagodar constituency. As a result of his efforts Covid patients will not suffer for lack of oxygen.

To ease things a little for sorrowing families, MLA Vinod Singh also arranged hearses for carrying dead bodies of Covid victims for the last rites. He also arranged drivers for the hearses and also put phone numbers of drivers in the public domain so that the families do not face any difficulties.

It is due to Vinod Singh's remarkable initiatives that Covid patients in Bagodar constituency are getting the most dignified and effective treatment in the District. Patients from nearby areas are also coming here to get treated.

While the CPIML MLA is constantly striving to strengthen the Health Centres, the other MLAs and MPs of the District are conspicuous by their absence, and people are showing their anger against this. BJP State President and Jharkhand's first Chief Minister Babulal Marandi has vanished from the neighbouring Rajdhanwar constituency.

No other people's representative in the District is coming forward in this critical situation when CPIML.

MLA Vinod Singh submitted a letter to DDC recommending Rs 10 lakhs from his MLA fund to be spent on oxygen and other medical facilities for Covid patients at the Sadar Hospital. People are appreciating and respecting Vinod Singh for caring about the Sadar Hospital which is outside his constituency.

Seeing Covid entrench itself in the rural areas and the absence of testing on a war footing, Vinod Singh formed health workers' teams and ensured Covid testing for hundreds of villagers in Bagodar's Beko, Dorio, Mahuri and other villages.

MLA Vinod Singh along with the Giridih District administration has started a Covid-19 awareness campaign in villages in Bagodar constituency. An ambulance was also arranged for this which was flagged off by Vinod Singh in the presence of health workers. The CSC COVID Care van will reach villages for creating awareness as well as for Covid testing.

Comrade Vinod Singh has played an exemplary role as a communist people's representative during the pandemic, from arranging essential medical equipment to giving solace and courage to the suffering and sorrowing people. ■

## Patna Covid Help Centre

The Covid Help Centre organized by CPIML-AISA-RYA at Chhajjubagh in Patna started food and medicine services for the needy from 28 April 2021. The demand for food and medicine has increased hugely along with demands for beds and oxygen.

The Help Centre also has doctors who are giving advice and consultation. They include Dr PNP Pal, Dr Satyajit, Dr Aleem Akhtar and Dr Prakash. The Help Centre has also received calls with serious complaints about some private hospitals, like discharging the patient saying that they have run out

of oxygen. In some cases this has resulted in the death of the patient.

Teams to assist the Covid Help Centre are visiting NMCH, PMCH and Patna AIMS and giving regular feedback to the Help Centre.

As part of the relief campaign being organized by the Covid Help



Centre run by CPIML-AISA-RYA, rations were distributed to 150 poor families struggling with lockdown-induced hunger and joblessness in Patna's Ramakrishna Nagar Thana (Bhupatinagar Manjhi Tola), Eastern Lohanipur in Kadamkuan Thana (Mahmudichak) and Western

Lohanipur (Buddha Smriti footpath), and many other colonies, as well as among rickshaw pullers, street vendors and other informal sector workers .

Each ration packet contains 5 kg rice, 2 kg atta, 1 kg dal, 2 kg

potatoes, 1 kg onions, 1 kg salt, 1 soap, and 3 masks. Beaten rice (chivda) and jaggery packets are also being distributed among footpath vendors. The Covid Help Centre is getting every kind of help from many social activists and civil society. □

## Covid Crisis: Protests across Uttar Pradesh against Yogi Government's Failure and Lies

**C**PIML organized statewide protests across Uttar Pradesh on 25 April against the government's failure to curb Covid deaths. The protests were held between 12 noon and 1 pm at houses, party offices and work places while observing Covid protocol. Protesters held placards with slogans and demands, posted pictures and videos on social media, and memorandums were

sent via email from many Districts to the government.

The main issues and demands raised through the protests were: Modi-Yogi governments' accountability for deaths due to shortage of ambulances, beds, oxygen and ventilators; demand for guarantee of availability of ambulances, beds, ICUs, oxygen, ventilators, medicines and

injections; demand to curb black-marketing of oxygen, Remdesivir and other life-saving drugs; free Covid treatment for all at government and private hospitals; increase Covid testing and ensure quick results; Covid treatment at District and Block level hospitals; free Covid vaccination for all; government should bear cost of vaccination and Covid treatment at private hospitals; ensure safe return

of migrant workers and Rs 10000 per month subsistence allowance for 3 months and free rations for 6 months; generate work in MNREGA and provide work on similar lines for urban poor also.

The criminal negligence by the Modi-Yogi governments in handling the second wave of Covid is unforgivable. If they had used the last one year to arrange beds, oxygen etc, the current dance of death could have been avoided. In some hospitals there are ventilators but no technicians to operate them. The Yogi government learnt nothing from the horrific experience of oxygen shortage deaths at BRD Medical College in Gorakhpur. Uttar Pradesh has become Shamsan (Crematorium) Pradesh due to the humongous criminal negligence of Yogi-Modi. Yogi must take responsibility and resign from the post of Chief Minister.



The protests were held across Uttar Pradesh at Lucknow, Prayagraj, Banaras, Gorakhpur, Ghazipur, Azamgarh, Kanpur, Mathura, Sonbhadra, and other Districts. CPIML State Secretary Sudhakar Yadav said

that scientists have warned that Corona infection will be even worse in the month of May and the government should course correct and give priority to saving human lives instead of winning votes and elections. □

## Some Notes From West Bengal Relief Work

(Brief reports from some of our young comrades summarising the kind of work they have been doing.)





Name	Org	Area	Quote
Abhijan/ Pratik	CPIML, Boka Buro (Cultural Org)	Jadavpur Dhakuria, Kolkata	Along with arranging beds, vaccination and delivering oxygen cylinders, medicine and other essentials in vast locality of Jadavpur, Dhakuria, Garia, Ranikuthi, Kaba, Haltu, Garfa, we have also organized a telemedicine facility with help of 7 renowned doctors. As pandemic has resulted serious crisis in the blood banks, we also organized a blood donation camp in this period.
Abhijit	AISA	Behala	When Govt and administration have failed to respond, we as responsible citizens of society have come forward to stand by our people. We are running sanitization drives, delivering essentials at doorsteps and coordinating essential Covid related information among people in Behala.
Amitabho	AISA	Bally-Belur	We are getting distress calls even at midnight. There is immense crisis of oxygen and beds in hospitals. We are trying to help people beyond all our limitations. Govt must arrange vaccines and safety gears for Covid volunteers.
Ayan	AISA	Belgharia	We need to be more sensitive towards Covid patients and their families as they are facing huge social stigma. We are providing oxygen and hospital leads, sanitizing the locality and also delivering medicine, food and essentials to them.
Subhankar	AISA	Bankura	We are running a Covid Help Desk in Bankura district. People in villages hardly have any access to online information related to hospitals, RT PCR tests, vaccines or oxygen. We are trying to reach out to them as much as we can. We also witnessed black marketing of oxygen and essential medicines amidst this crisis period.
Ranajoy	AISA	Konnagar- Uttarpara	People are suffering due to inadequate beds in government hospitals and exorbitant charge posed by private hospitals. There is also a shortage of oxygen supply. Govt must look into these matters.
Soumi	CPIML, AIPWA	Baghajatin	Our helpline numbers get calls 24X7 mostly asking for hospital and oxygen leads. We have been able to resolve some of the cases while failed in few which is truly disheartening.
Srinjoy	AISA	North Kolkata	Covid volunteers Team is running a helpdesk in North Kolkata by providing oxygen or hospital leads and delivering essentials. It's time to build and strengthen social solidarity to overcome this crisis period.
Afshan	AISA	Metiabruz- Khidderpur	We have made a database of resources like ambulance, oxygen leads, refilling of cylinders, hospitals and availability of beds, ICU facilities, vaccination centers etc. we are verifying all the numbers and updating the list at a regular interval to provide authentic and useful information to the affected families without any delay.
Subhradip	AISA	Barrackpur to Kanchrapara	Local and State General Hospitals in this vast region from Barrackpur to Kanchrapara lack advanced facilities for Covid treatment. Only two safe homes are running in this hugely populated area. We have received numerous distress calls from people looking for oxygen, beds, medicines and meals.

# West Bengal Verdict and After: Lessons for the Left

 DIPANKAR BHATTACHARYA

**O**f the five states that went to the polls in March and April, it was West Bengal which attracted the maximum attention. Here was a state where the BJP had recorded a spectacular rise in 2019 winning 18 out of 42 LS seats and bagging a vote share of 40%. From an election schedule meticulously designed to benefit the BJP, stretched over a month and as many as eight phases, to an armoury complete with captive central agencies, central forces, and massive money- and media-power, conditions were nearly tailor-made for the BJP to conquer Bengal. But it turned out to be so near, yet so far for the party. From the high point of 2019, the vote share dropped marginally by 2% and the seat tally could not exceed 77.

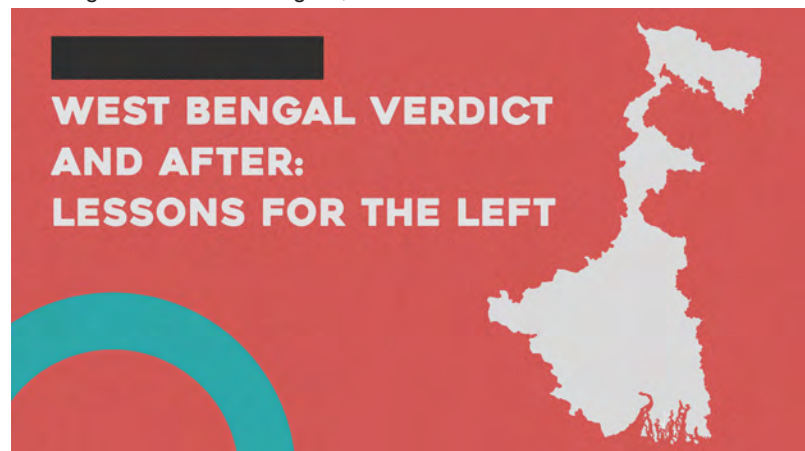
Compared to the 121 assembly seats where the BJP led in 2019, this was a significant fall, but a great leap compared to the 2016 results of the party – nearly fourfold jump in vote share (10.16% to 38.1%) and twenty-five times increase in seat tally (from 3 to 77). What is more ominous is that the BJP has now emerged as virtually the only opposition within the Assembly. The party will obviously relish this ‘new balance’ in West Bengal’s legislative arena, try and consolidate this position and use it to sharpen communal polarisation in the state. It has already sought to rubbish the verdict as a ‘Muslim veto’ and unleashed a virulent and concerted campaign to overturn it, with the Governor, Union Home

Ministry and central agencies working in tandem with the Sangh-BJP brigade on the ground.

To return to the election results, the prospects of the BJP depended essentially on its twin strategy of identity-based social engineering and anti-Muslim polarisation, the latter drawing on the former and cementing it within an over-arching framework. On both these counts, the BJP did achieve considerable success, but not enough to give it the kind of decisive edge it had hoped to secure. The TMC managed to stop the BJP with a vote margin of nearly 10% which meant a seat tally nearly three times larger than that of the BJP. The BJP swept the four northernmost districts of Darjeeling, Coochbehar, Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri, won a big majority of seats in the western districts of Purulia and Bankura with significant Adivasi population and half the seats in the Bangladesh bordering districts of Nadia and South Dinajpur. In the rest of West Bengal, especially in the greater Kolkata region, the

TMC swept the elections.

Unlike many other parties, the TMC was alert enough to read the writing on the wall and did some course-correction and damage-control. This mass outreach in the face of growing anti-incumbency helped the party to check the BJP’s inroads in many areas. The traffic of TMC turncoats to the BJP also helped the TMC to shed considerable baggage and transfer part of the anti-incumbency to the BJP. Of the dozen-odd TMC MLAs who had changed sides and contested on BJP tickets, only two managed to win and that includes the narrow and controversial victory won by Suvendu Adhikari in Nandigram. Rather than increasing its vote share by triggering defection in the TMC, the BJP actually managed to achieve a net decline of 2%. The TMC on the other hand managed to increase its vote share by nearly 5%, clearly attracting significant sections of non-TMC voters who voted for TMC to ensure the BJP’s defeat. Contributing to this consolidation of anti-BJP votes was



a concerted anti-fascist campaign that began with the CPI(ML)'s clear identification of the BJP as the main target immediately after the Bihar elections and the crystallisation of a #NoVoteToBJP buzz across the state.

The third camp comprising the CPI(M) and its old Left Front allies, the Congress and the newly launched Indian Secular Front finished a distant third with a combined vote share of around 10% and just one seat, which was won not by the CPI(M) or the Congress, but by the debutant ISF (which actually fought in the name of a Bihar-based party called Rashtriya Secular Majlis Party). The combine, named the Sanjukta Morcha or United Front, had projected itself as the alternative and political future of West Bengal. Inscribed on the backdrop of the stage at the combine's February 28 Brigade Parade Ground rally was the declaration: Amrai Bikolpo, Amrai Dharmonirkpeksho, Amrai Bhubisshot (we alone are the alternative, we alone are secular, we alone are the future). At the least, the combine had promised to make the contests triangular in West Bengal, but that hardly became the case, with the Morcha candidates losing their deposits in about 90% of the seats.

Before the elections, when we had raised the issue of identifying the BJP as the number one target and emphasised the primacy of foiling the BJP's bid to conquer Bengal, the CPI(M) argued that it was an Assembly election and that politics in the state revolved around the people's anger against the TMC misrule. 'Defeat the TMC to defeat the BJP', ran the CPI(M) call which only conveyed the idea that defeating the TMC was the immediate goal. As the elections

approached this idea of presumed unity and equivalence between the BJP and the TMC led to the formulation of a fictitious hybrid entity by lumping the BJP and the TMC together. It was called 'Bijemool' and the party's election campaign harped endlessly on this imaginary target. Even when questions were raised about what the party's approach would be in the event of a hung assembly, the party never said it would consider how best to keep the BJP out of power. Let the BJP and TMC join hands and form the government, was the party's flippant reply.

In keeping with its idea of projecting a 'viable alternative', the CPI(M) formed a new and expanded electoral alliance, with the newly launched ISF being highlighted as the 'game changer'. The February 28 Brigade rally almost became a launching event for the new party. The CPI(M) endorsed the new party as a platform of social justice and bahujan assertion in the context of West Bengal, accommodating it as the third biggest party in the alliance. It should be noted that the ISF was earlier in discussion with the TMC and also the AIMIM. The Congress refused to own the alliance with the ISF and the latter ended up fielding a number of candidates against the Congress.

A close look at the new party's performance shows that its top twenty seats, where it has polled votes in above 10,000 range, are almost all seats that the CPI(M) and its LF allies had contested in 2016. While the Left candidates had polled 1,223,871 votes from these constituencies in 2016, the ISF/RSMP has polled 757,979 votes. Only in two constituencies of South 24 Parganas (Bhangar, the seat where its candidate eventually won, and Canning East where its

candidate finished second), did it manage to improve upon the votes polled by the Left candidates in 2016. In other words, we can say that the ISF/RSMP has effectively occupied the Left space in these constituencies rather than making any inroads in the TMC base.

Ironically, it is the BJP which feels let down by the ISF performance. Much of the BJP's electoral calculations were based on the division in Muslim votes that the ISF and hence the Sanjukta Morcha would be able to achieve. This did not materialise. The debutant ISF could make only limited inroads riding primarily on the CPI(M)/Left support, the MIM failed to make any impact and the Congress too lost much of its traditional Muslim support in the districts of Murshidabad, Malda and North and South Dinajpur to the TMC, giving the TMC an unprecedented overall edge. The BJP of course took advantage of the prominence given to the ISF in the Sanjukta Morcha to propagate its own plank of anti-Muslim polarisation, dashing the CPI(M)'s hope of regaining its own lost ground.

There is now a stark change in the post-poll explanation offered by the CPI(M). The party now accepts that it was an anti-BJP vote in West Bengal and the TMC swept the polls because the electorate found it more viable. Why did the party fail to assess it before the elections and position itself accordingly as a determined anti-BJP force? TMC has been in power in West Bengal for ten years now. If it has successfully managed to overcome the natural accumulation of anti-incumbency, this should be attributed primarily to its anti-BJP political stance and the influence of its welfare schemes. The CPI(M) narrative, which increasingly sounds

like rhetorical phrase-mongering that hardly convinces even its own ranks, rubbishes both these points of TMC strength. It constantly harps on presumed collusion or 'match-fixing' between the BJP and TMC and trashes the welfare schemes as theft.

It is absurd to expect the TMC to show the ideological conviction and consistency that one would associate with the communists in the battle against the RSS; it is equally absurd to pit the welfare schemes against the agenda of substantive socio-economic development and transformation. The CPI(M)'s own narrative while in power used to revolve around fighting for more power to the state and giving relief to the people, and in its own way TMC too is focusing on the twin planks of federalism and populism. By trying to rubbish the TMC government just as a gang of thieves and goons, the CPI(M) has just ensured its own failure as an effective opposition party whose job is to offer a credible alternative while holding the government to account.

This failure does not stem only from the CPI(M)'s grudging refusal to accept the reality that it is now out of power and can only rebuild itself the hard way of people's movement and opposition politics. In fact, it reflects a framework that led to the CPI(M)'s exit from power after three decades of uninterrupted rule. In 2004 the Congress had returned to power and the UPA was formed. That was also the Left's best electoral performance in the parliamentary arena. The two factors that had propelled the ouster of the NDA government of the Vajpayee-

Advani era were the Gujarat genocide and the cruel contrast between the BJP propaganda of 'India Shining' and the grim reality of farmer suicides and starvation deaths. The Congress got the message and even while following the essential neo-liberal direction of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation, it focused on the corrective complement of 'human face' and safety net and brought in a set of welfare legislations. The CPI(M) in West Bengal instead chose to focus on land acquisition, SEZs and big investment.

2006 had been the CPI(M)'s biggest ever victory in West Bengal. How the scale of that victory fuelled a combination of theoretical absurdity and behavioural arrogance and precipitated a rapid and massive decline will remain a lesson for the Left for years to come. The spontaneous protests at Singur had alerted seasoned leaders and intellectuals of CPI(M). Jyoti Basu had wondered aloud if the Kisan Sabha leaders were all asleep. Ashok Mitra had very persuasively argued against the ill-advised Singur model, suggesting alternative sources and ways of investment and employment generation. But all these ideas were arrogantly brushed aside with lectures on Luddites and Narodniks. Nandigram had brought to the fore the question of democracy and dialogue, but it was answered with threats of 'Dumdum Dawai' (the popular 1960s slogan of action against hoarders and profiteers) or disdainful sneers of 'Amra 235, ora 35' (we are 235, they are only 35).

The demand for restoration of democracy was what had brought

the Left Front to power in 1977. Land redistribution and Operation Barga, however partial, had cemented that power with a big rural social alliance. Institutionalisation of elected panchayats and close ties with the people had expanded and sustained that alliance. In the wake of Singur and Nandigram, all those gains were frittered away, the alliance started breaking on the ground, the support of the rural poor and democratic intelligentsia that had sustained the Left for three decades in power started shrinking. This election campaign showed that after fifteen years, the CPI(M) still remains cocooned in the smug arrogance and insensitivity of the Singur-Nandigram period. The party continues to chide the people for being 'mised' on Singur-Nandigram much like the BJP is now blaming the people for committing a big blunder by not voting the BJP to power.

With the 'Singur model of development' had come the absurd slogan: 'agriculture is our foundation, industry is our future', the slogan that the CPI(M) repeated this time as well. Today farmers, workers and jobless youth across the country are questioning the corporate model of 'development' and are responding to the reality of agrarian crisis and deindustrialisation and job loss through powerful movements; privatisation is becoming a social concern, and resisting it a social need and agenda beyond the confines of trade unions; and the demand for secure and dignified employment is growing hand in hand with the demand for realisation of 'health for all' and 'education for all' not as lofty goals but real rights.

The same Hooghly district, where the CPI(M) wanted to showcase Singur as a symbol of an 'industrial future' had a significant 'industrial past'. Apart from jute, paper, chemical and engineering industry, the district had two major automobile related units – the Hind Motor factory of the Birla group which used to turn out Ambassador cars and the Dunlop tyre factory at Sahaganj, both of which have long closed down. Meanwhile, the Nano car is no longer available in the market and the Tata group itself has abandoned it as a flawed idea! It is time the younger generations of CPI(M) cadre were helped to come out of the obsessive 'Singur syndrome' as the missed bus that must be boarded to secure industrialisation and employment generation in West Bengal.

While the elections are over and West Bengal has given an emphatic verdict against the aggressive BJP bid to conquer power by hook or by crook, the Sangh-BJP aggression has only intensified in the post-poll situation. From the fake propaganda of anti-Hindu violence and collapse of law and order in West Bengal to the brazenly partisan use of CBI in the Narada case, the BJP is running a relentless campaign of destabilisation, with the Governor himself leading the charge in open collaboration with BJP leaders in the state. The Left in West Bengal will have to see through this game plan and boldly oppose this sinister BJP ploy to overturn the verdict and capture power through the backdoor.

Apart from the tactical challenge

of foiling the fascist design even while holding the state government to account for all its omissions and commissions, there is a deeper and more fundamental challenge for the Left at this juncture. The RSS has made deep inroads in West Bengal. The TMC may well claim that the BJP's seat tally would have been much lower if the Election Commission had not been so biased in favour of the BJP. But it will be a huge folly to underestimate the BJP's massive vote share in 2019 and 2021 elections and to miss the huge RSS role in this enormous electoral expansion and social consolidation. The historic relevance of the Left at this juncture lies in countering the RSS through sustained ideological and socio-cultural work and renewed intensification of everyday work among, and close ties with, various deprived sections of the people.

If we take a close look at the pre-election build-up, campaign and eventual outcome of the West Bengal elections, we can identify a few elements that have blunted the edge of the Sangh-BJP campaign of communal polarisation. Class still remains a powerful bulwark against communal divide. Even though class consciousness and cohesion have been much weakened in recent times, the element of class mobilisation against the pro-rich pro-corporate character and policies of the BJP remains a major rallying point.

Women, across age groups and educational profiles, have been vocal against the pronounced misogyny of the BJP, whether represented by Dilip Ghosh's

tasteless remarks and threats, Modi's catcalls against Mamata Banerjee or Yogi Adityanath's espousal of the UP model of anti-love draconian measures like the so-called 'anti-Romeo squads' and legislation against inter-faith marriages. The resilience of Bengal's progressive and inclusive legacy and vibrance of cultural protests have also played a key role as has the deep popular influence of communist ideology and the remarkable historical legacy of the freedom movement in West Bengal. These components need to be properly cultivated and harnessed to counter the toxic influence of the Sangh-BJP brigade and deepen and widen the popular resistance against fascism.

The elections and the deepening Covid crisis have clearly shown that it is absurd to try and delink politics in non-BJP ruled states from the overwhelming national context and to treat the BJP as a secondary factor simply because it is not in local power. This lesson is all the more pertinent for a major state like West Bengal. Even as the BJP seeks to destabilise West Bengal through its vicious politics of vendetta, central aggression and communal polarisation, the Left should ensure that West Bengal becomes a major theatre in the battle against the utterly callous and incompetent Modi government and the stunning defeat of the Modi-Shah duo in West Bengal should be taken as an inspiring message to energise the anti-fascist resistance and opposition initiatives on the national plane. ■

# Tamil Nadu Assembly Election Results 2021: Unambiguous Rejection of the BJP

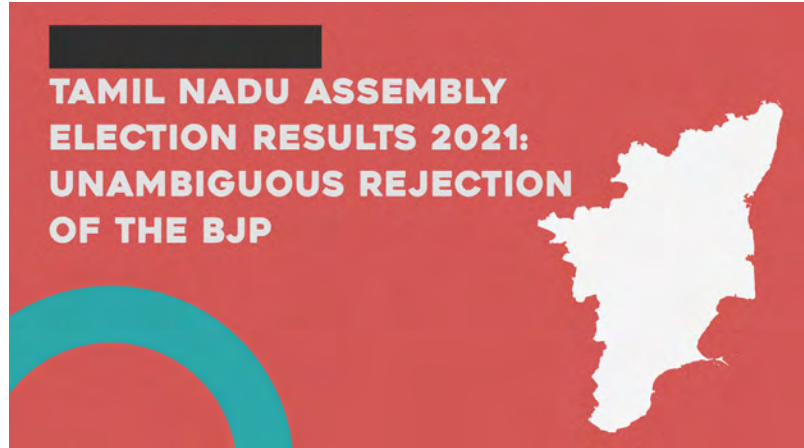


**T**he results of Tamil Nadu assembly elections indicate a decisive rejection of the BJP and its alliance partners by the people of Tamil Nadu. Despite not being a huge wave or sweep compared to the Lok Sabha elections in 2019 where DMK alliance won almost all seats but for one which went to AIADMK, it is definitely a mandate against what people identified and rejected as the all-pervading omnipotent presence of BJP in remote controlling the state government through AIADMK.

At the same time, it is also a caution to DMK to respect the essence of the people's mandate. The mandate was also a continuation of people's struggles against imposition of Hindi, NEP, NEET, agrarian crisis, increasing domination of the centre and gradual snatching away of rights of the state and its autonomy in various ways.

In spite of being five cornered contests in all constituencies, practically, it was only a bipolar contest between DMK and ADMK alliances. It was amply reflected in vote percentage as well. ADMK did not fare as badly as was expected, since there was not much anti-incumbency: rather ADMK paid the cost of its alliance with BJP and the Modi government.

Analysing these election results as a summation of caste arithmetic, as some observers are doing, is completely wrong. The political stratification of society was much more visible. The much trumpeted 'social engineering' of ADMK



turned into an utter failure and boomeranged. ADMK announced 10.5 percent compartmental reservation for Vanniyars, an MBC caste, claimed to be represented by PMK, as an election tactics of social engineering, at the fag end of its rule. Election results display that the tactics did not yield any desired effect. Even PMK could only win 5 seats out of 23 it contested. Likewise, clubbing together of 7 sub-castes of Dalits and naming them as 'Devendra Kula Velalars' under the ploy of elevating their status also has not yielded any positive result for BJP except in a few constituencies. The election results have punctured the myth that Devendra Kula Velalars are entirely with the BJP-RSS. The BJP cleverly stayed away from the demand of delisting Devendra Kula Velalars from SC list and also dumped Krishnaswamy, a Dalit leader, who articulated the same, by easing him out from the ADMK alliance. Only in regions like the west, Kongu Velalars (OBC), who are basically the regional power elite, like Kulaks

and neo-rich, have backed ADMK more for its economic reasons of dominance in the region. It is quite natural that the Kongu elite lobby considered ADMK to be its natural ally for their local domination and power than the DMK.

BJP could win four seats riding on AIADMKs influence – two seats in western part and another two seats in southern part of Tamil Nadu. The anti-BJP mandate is obvious also from the fact that all known leaders of BJP, including its state president L Murugan, national secretary H Raja, former IPS Annamalai and former cine actress, Khushbu, had to face a humiliating defeat. BJP's own candidates hesitated in displaying photos of Modi-Shah duo in their campaign. At least, more than 100 DMK candidates invited Modi to their constituency, through tweets, to campaign for their opponents so that their winning margin can be increased. Instead of being star campaigners, Modi and Shah turned into a laughing stock in Tamil Nadu. Ironically, BJP

won same number of seats in 2001 in alliance with DMK then and in alliance with AIADMK now, after 20 years. In the last two decades, BJP tried its level best to emerge as a force to reckon with by contesting independently in all or majority seats but to no avail.

There are two parties that target the progressive aspects of Tamil Nadu and thoughts of Periyar and claim to dream of a Tamil Nadu without Dravidian parties and its values. BJP in the state, from the very beginning, aimed to destroy progressive values by making everything controversial. BJP's opposition was from communal and obscurantist point of view while Seeman variety of politics, that claimed to challenge the thoughts of Periyar, was from a Tamil nationalist point of view. Seeman pitted Dravidian politics against Tamil nationalist politics and blamed Dravidianism articulated by Periyar to be responsible for the rise of non-Tamil Chief Ministers to the seats of power. Both hailed Hitler from their own point of view. This was the reason why a section of political observers saw the Seeman variety of politics as being closer to BJP's.

Seeman has not come up with any alternative strategy, perspective or plan for Tamil Nadu and its development. But it is commonly believed that he secured votes of young people of the state.

It is in this backdrop, it becomes a matter of concern that Seeman's Naam Thamizhar Katchi (NTK) emerged as a distant third force in this elections in 2021. The party could not win any seat despite polling 10,000 – 15,000 votes on an average in majority of constituencies. Unlike the popular belief, around 30 lakhs votes, 6.7 percent of votes, secured by NTK may not strictly of voters who subscribe to Tamil nationalism. It may also be said that Seeman was the beneficiary, in this particular election, of the emerging thirst or quest for a third force in the politics of Tamil Nadu. There are debates that the rise of Seeman and NTK also represent a revivalist and reactionary vis-à-vis liberal and progressive aspect of the politics of Tamil nationalism in the state. The future shape of NTK and its politics needs time for evaluation.

Other forces like AMMK of TTV

Dinakaran, a protegee of Sasikala, despite not being able to win any seat, is considered to be a spoilsport for ADMK, at least in 20 constituencies. Kamal Hasan, the only leader of MNM also lost to BJP in Coimbatore South with a margin of around 1500 votes. Makkal Needhi Maiyam (MNM) is poised for a disintegration as many members of leading core, disillusioned, are deserting the party one by one, after elections.

In the specific post-poll political situation of the state, oppositional space, particularly Left oppositional space, appears to be open. Erstwhile opposition forces have either turned into a ruling party or partners of the ruling party now. We have to wait and see if they, including the Left, will play the role of opposition or the role of a partner of the ruling party in the coming days. Only the ADMK-BJP alliance on the one hand and Seeman's NTK on the other, both representing right wing, are poised to play the role of opposition. The revolutionary left should prepare itself for playing the role of Left opposition in the state. □

## Puducherry: BJP-led Government is Waiting in the Wings



S BALASUBRAMANIAM

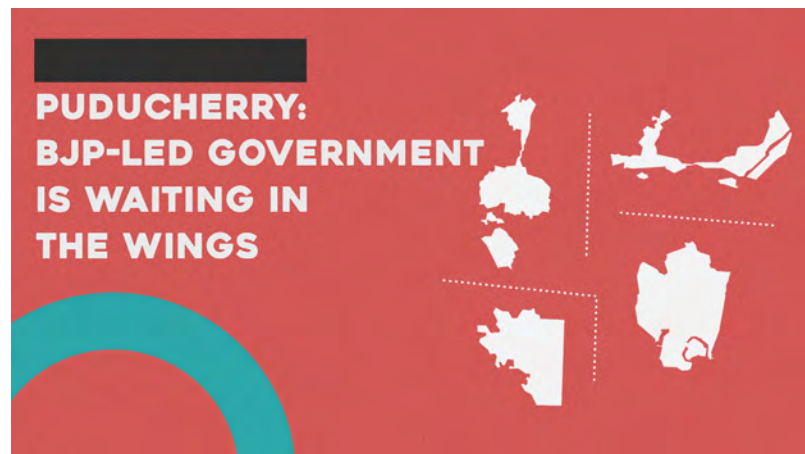
**T**he BJP's main game plan is to capture the power in Puducherry by hook or crook so as to make it a backyard of entry into South India other than Karnataka. It also appears to have succeeded in it. Now, the BJP is all set to run the Puducherry government either by having,

to begin with, a combination of Rangaswamy as CM and BJP as Deputy CM or to directly take over the state very soon. It is only a matter of time. Unlike Bihar where it could only cut down the size of Nitish, the BJP could finish off its alliance partner ADMK in Puducherry.

The Congress, the incumbent party in power till the other day, was not allowed to perform while in power by erecting road blocks using the office of Lt Governor, Kiran Bedi and is now reduced to two seats in the wake of huge and unimaginable anti-incumbency factor. It was the anti-incumbency

wave against the Congress that benefited BJP-NR Congress alliance to win majority in the state and not out of any positive choice. NR Congress led by Rangaswamy and the present Chief Minister has won 10 seats while BJP, DMK and independents secured 6 seats each in a 30-member assembly. The strength is further increased to 33 by nominating three MLAs, with voting right awarded by the SC recently, who are BJP leaders.

Independents are mainly dissidents of BJP and NR Congress. One of the independents, who defeated Rangaswamy in Yenam constituency, has already thrown his weight behind the BJP. Even



before the new Chief Minister began his functions as CM (delayed because of Covid infection), the BJP has raised its tally to 10 (6 elected + 3 nominated + 1 independent) so as

to stand equal to NR Congress' 10. The day is not far when BJP could outnumber NR Congress through horse trading, and install its own CM and capture power. □

## Results of Assam Assembly Election And Aftermath



**B**JP's politics of communal polarization paid off in Assam, with the BJP-led alliance getting 75 seats and being re-elected with a comfortable majority. Though they got 10 seats less than in the last elections, they have been able to expand and

consolidate their influence in the Tea Tribe and Adivasi-dominant areas, all Tribal areas, main stream Assamese people, and also got majority of votes among Hindu Bengali, Nepali, and Hindi speaking people.

This time BJP did not ally with BPF

(Bodoland People's Front), instead allying with the newly-formed UPPL (United People's Party Liberal), a party in the Bodoland area. In 2016, BPF won all 12 seats of Bodoland. This time they got only 4 seats, getting primarily non-Bodo, particularly Muslim votes. The UPPL got 6 seats and BJP won 2 seats. For the first time BJP penetrated in the Bodoland area by successfully polarizing Muslims and non Muslims. Out of 37 Tea community dominant constituencies, the BJP alliance got 34 seats, whereas in 2016 they got only 22 seats.

The BJP launched its communal campaign by declaring that the elections of 2021 in Assam were a "War of Civilization", to save Assam from invasion of "Mughals".





Explaining this main poll plank, Himanta Biswa Sharma (now the new CM) said that Muslims are Mughals, and “Mughal” (i.e Muslim) civilization is the main threat to Assamese culture and civilization. They also widely propagated that they would implement the CAA (against which Assam had witnessed a huge mass agitation till last year) and will re-verify NRC: decisions they had already taken in their last term.

The BJP concentrated their attack on AIUDF and its president Badruddin Ajmal, using Islamophobic slurs. BJP said that AIUDF is a communal party, a party of “Miyas” Muslims and scare-mongered that if the BJP was defeated, Badruddin would become CM, which would mean that “Miyas will capture power.”

Even the newly formed party AJP (Assam Jatiya Parishad) and the Akhil Gogoi led RD (Raizor Dal) also targeted AIUDF and described it as a “communal” party and asked Opposition parties to distance themselves from AIUDF. Later, RD criticised the “Mahajut” (Opposition alliance) for accepting

AIUDF as one of the components of the alliance. So these regional parties succumbed in the face of the BJP’s campaign - instead they ended up helping to foster a climate for communal polarisation.

The Mahajut comprised Congress, AIUDF, CPI, CPIM, CPI (ML) and BPF. Congress and AIUDF slightly increased their tally from 2016 election; both were increased by 3 seats. It is significant that Akhil Gogoi won from jail and contested independently. This time the strength of opposition within the Assembly increased; among 126 Assembly, the number of Opposition MLAs is 50 which is more than it was in 2016.

The main difference between the last Sarbananda Sonowal government and the present one is that Himanta Biswa Sharma has concentrated power in his hands. He enjoyed massive support from not only BJP but other allies. The inevitable uptick in authoritarianism is already visible: before taking oath he suddenly transferred bureaucrats in his favour and appointed IPS officers, including one SP who was charged with Child Sexual Assault

against a young Karbi girl.

The new government will try to expand and consolidate the gains of their election-time communal hatred. The Government’s NRC coordinator appealed to the Supreme Court for 100% reverification of NRC. The last BJP government had appealed to the SC for 20% reverification in border districts and 10% in other districts. This move is nothing but to terrorize Muslim people and exclude them from the citizenship register.

The new government forcefully evicted Muslim families in Sootea of Sonitpur district by labelling them as Bangladeshi encroachers; in spite of the fact that these people have their names in the 1951 NRC as well as in the present NRC.

The CPIML will work, in tandem with other Left and opposition forces, to take up people’s struggles, and mobilise people of Assam to recognise and reject the BJP’s communal politics. □

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# Praful Patel’s Fascist Assault on Lakshadweep

 AISHIK SAHA

**T**he recent events in the union territory of Lakshadweep are a matter of deep concern. All signs point towards a deeply disturbing plot that is unfolding on this archipelago in the Indian Ocean under the administration of Praful Patel, the former home minister of Gujarat, who took over after the

former administrator Dineshwar Sharma passed away from lung disease.

Let us take a look at the actions of the administrator’s actions in Lakshadweep for context since his appointment in December 2020. The UT had largely kept at bay the deathly COVID outbreak that ravaged the world and

Indian mainland for over a year, but registered a sharp rise in cases as the administrator eased restrictions allowing outsiders into the archipelago. Around 5000 COVID cases have been registered in the UT since, where not a single case had been reported earlier.

The government’s own NCRB data had demonstrated that not a

single case of murder had been reported on the islands and is one of the lowest crime zones in India. The government has however stated its intention of imposing the 'Goonda Act', which allows for the imprisonment of citizens without trial. This clearly shows that the government plans to start violence in a place, which has largely been peaceful so far. Fake propaganda has been circulating since March 2020 that claimed that arms and drugs were being smuggled from Lakshadweep to Kerala and were intercepted by the Indian Navy. Fact-checking sites have however exposed that the images used were from an Al Jazeera report from the Pacific . Moreover the intercepted vessels were not bound for Kerala but rather en route from Pakistan to Sri Lanka. The interception also happened 90 nautical miles away from Lakshadweep coasts (territorial waters are usually considered limited at 12 nautical miles according to UNCLOS).

Among the authoritarian pieces of legislation being considered by the administration is the Draft Lakshadweep Development Authority Regulation 2021 (LDAR) — which gives the administrator powers to grab land, remove or relocate islanders from their property, for town planning or any developmental activity.

Another is the Prevention of Anti-Social Activities Act (PASA), introduced in January 2021, under which a person can be detained without any public disclosure for a period of up to one year. Yet another is the Draft Panchayat Notification, which disqualifies a person with more than two children from being a member, and curtails the powers of the Panchayat by vesting areas like education, healthcare, fisheries and animal husbandry, all in the central administrator alone.

Serious assaults on the island's dietary democracy include the Draft Lakshadweep Animal Preservation Regulation which is a draconian beef ban law, as well as the move to take non-vegetarian food of school lunches: in a place where seafood is a basic means of sustenance!

Recently nurses who had gone on strike on the island with a demand for minimum wages were



arrested without even being heard. Those who had protested the NRC, NPR, and CAA have also been arrested. The administration has dismissed hundreds of contract and casual workers employed by government offices; terminated mid-day meal workers, physical education teachers; closed down 38 Anganwadis; stopped freight transit through Beypore port in Kerala to cut traditional ties with the state; demolished the temporary sheds built by fishermen to store their nets and equipments, with permission from the previous administration in a place where fishing is the main source of income; proposed the widening of roads in a manner in which many homes and buildings will have to be demolished, despite the fact that the low population of the islands mean that the necessity of transportation is quite low. Clearly the agenda is to snatch the democratic rights of the people of Lakshadweep and ensure that corporate plunder of the islands can continue unabated.

The decision to allow bar licenses on the islands have also been controversial. Once again it is noticeable that he had made no such demands on Gujarat, a dry state, while he was the home minister. It is also clear that the administration is hand-in-gloves with the sand mafia and sea-cucumber harvesters (an activity which is banned in India) as it has prevented locals from stopping such activity . Dairy farms in Lakshadweep have also been closed with the Gujarat based Amul products being promoted .

This is not the first time that

Praful Patel has come under focus for suspected crimes. In February, Dadra and Nagar Haveli MP Mohan Delkar committed suicide, with his suicide note naming Patel among others as responsible for his death. Delkar's son Abhinav, in a complaint to the police, had alleged that his father was being "harassed" by Patel to pay Rs 25 crore or face a false charge under the Prevention of Anti-Social Activities Act. Patel himself has been charged with abetment of suicide by the Adivasi leader with an FIR under SC/ST PoA Act. His appointment itself is suspect as the post of the administrator has traditionally been preserved for IAS or IPS officers.

While Praful Patel has claimed that 'development' is his 'only' agenda, it is clear that the 'development' he talks about is not a people-oriented sustainable development, but a Hindutva-corporate, profit oriented one. Given the island has a 96 percent population of Muslims and has never had any form of communal violence, which exposes the basic lie presented by Hindutva as Muslims being the 'aggressors'. The RSS mouthpiece Organiser has claimed that 'Islamists' are instigating the locals against the administrator and an internet shutdown is looming over the UT. The people of the islands have clearly rejected the pro-corporate 'reforms' being introduced and trended #SaveLakshadweep on Twitter. Indians from all over the country must stand with Lakshadweep. □

# Delhi Police Raids Twitter Office, Modi Govt Clamps Down on Freedom of Speech on the Internet



AISHIK SAHA

The Modi Government is bullying the microblogging platform Twitter again. The Delhi Police Special Cell on the evening of 24th May, raided the office of Twitter in the National Capital in connection with a probe over the alleged 'Congress toolkit', seemingly unaware that the office was closed due to the COVID lockdown. This has led to speculation that this has less to do with the 'investigation' and more to do with sending a message to the company.

Sambit Patra, national spokesperson of BJP, tweeted a screenshot of an alleged 'toolkit' by the Congress. The claim was that the relief work being carried out by the Congress (especially its youth wing) in different parts of the country during the ongoing crisis caused by the pandemic, was a PR stunt. The veracity of the claim was soon disputed by the fact-checking website Alt News, who pointed out that the letterhead of the claimed toolkit was forged. Twitter added a 'Manipulated Media' disclaimer on Patra's tweet soon after.

The Ministry of Electronics and IT, in a letter to Twitter, swung into action in Patra's defence claiming that the tag was an attempt to 'derail and demean' the government's efforts. Following this, the Delhi Police Special Cell sent a note, as a precursor to the raid, to Twitter demanding an explanation for the tag. Previously, Twitter had run afoul with the government, when several international activists including Greta Thunberg tweeted in support of the Kisan Andolan.

Of course whatever is written in the so called 'toolkit' is perfectly within



the purview of the law. The basic instruction is to publicize the work being done by the Youth Congress volunteers and contrast it with the near comatose state of the so-called largest 'volunteer' organisation in India, i.e. the RSS. Perhaps our PM feels that claiming credit for any work done (or not done) is his sole prerogative and feels threatened by the encroachment of his domain.

Twitter, we can recall, marked several tweets of Trump as manipulated media, when he was still President of the USA. In India, when Twitter does this for BJP leader Sambit Patra, the entire Modi Government leaps to attack and raid Twitter as an act of fascist intimidation.

## The Social Media Intermediary Rules

After failing to curb the upsurge of mass protest during the protests against NRC-CAA as well as the Kisan Andolan, through police violence and threats, the BJP has decided to attack social media platforms in order to disrupt the channels of communication for citizens. Ironically Modi's own rise

has been ascribed to the subversive use of social media during the anti-corruption protests against the UPA government.

On February 25, 2021, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) issued the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 (the Intermediaries Rules). The Internet Freedom Foundation has outlined the rules as well as the anti-democratic and unconstitutional implications of the rules. It has also been pointed out that such onerous requirements and red-tape automatically means that any new disruptive challengers in tech will find it nearly impossible to establish themselves. This will be the death of Atmanirbharta (self-reliance) in its real sense.

Rather than making the social media platforms accountable to their users for the use of their personal information, the BJP is looking to control the people and their voices by assuming effective control over social media platforms. □

# OBITUARY

**T**he Covid-19 second wave has cost the CPIML many precious comrades within a very short period – to the virus, and in many cases to the lack of availability of proper medical care.

In Patna, we lost Comrade Arvind Kumar Singh (Rtd. Professor, Commerce College, Patna) to Covid-19; he was a former Member, Central Control Commission, and was associated with the Publication Department of the party and its Hindi organ Lokyudh.

Covid-19 cost us Comrade Ram Pratap Paswan, Secretary of the Sikta Block Committee and Member of the Champaran District Committee, a courageous comrade who was a pillar of the party for decades, standing up to feudal violence.

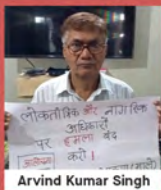
In Gujarat, one of the pillars of the party was snatched away by Covid-19 – Comrade Lakshmanbhai Patanwardia, Member of the Gujarat State Leading Team, CPIML. Other heavy losses to Covid-19 include veteran Comrades Umar Daraz, Phulwarisharif; Jafar Javed, Gopalganj District President of Insaf Manch; Manoj Jha, Block Committee Member, Rahika (Madhubani), and District Vice President, AIKM; Parshuram Singh, Bhojpur District Committee Member and Secretary of Sandesh Block; Prof RN Vyas of Udaipur, Rajasthan; and Pravin Kushwaha, science policy researcher and former JNU student and AISA activist. Com. Tadi Musalamma, who had been active in party activities in Chintaluru village of Andhra Pradesh passed way on May 21, 2021. Comrades who passed away from non-Covid-related causes include Comrade Usha Sharma, District president, AIPWA Bhagalpur; and Comrade Allaudin Shastri, one of the founders of the Party in Pilibhit, Terai Region of Uttar Pradesh.

CPIML comrades were deeply shocked by the untimely death due to Covid-19 of Comrade Ambarish Rai, AIPF leader and social activist working for the right to education and land rights, and a former UP state committee member of the CPIML.

CPIML pays tribute to veteran leader of environment rights movements Sundarlal Bahuguna (94); Prof Dinesh Mohan of IIT who was deeply involved with a range of progressive causes; and Rajkumar Keswani, the journalist who first warned of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. Keswani's warning was not heeded, and he himself survived the disaster albeit with many health issues as a result, and ironically died due to Covid-19 – another avoidable disaster caused by the refusal of the government to heed warnings.

CPIML expresses condolences to people all over the country who have lost loved ones to Covid-19. Let us help and support each other in this time of collective grief and mourning. Let us strive to hold the Government of India and state governments accountable for each of these avoidable deaths. ❑

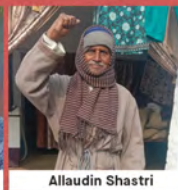
## OBITUARY



Arvind Kumar Singh



Tadi Musalamma



Allaudin Shastri



Ram Pratap Paswan



Parshuram Singh



Prof RN Vyas



Lakshmanbhai Patanwardia



Ambarish Rai



Umar Daraz



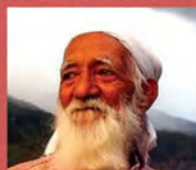
Manoj Jha



Pravin Kushwaha



Usha Sharma



Sundarlal Bahuguna



Dinesh Mohan



Rajkumar Keswani

# I HEARD IT'S GETTING BETTER

- Diksha Bijlani



## I Heard It's Getting Better

- Diksha Bijlani

*Says a colleague at work.  
She means the bodies in the news from India seem fewer.  
I've been productive, stopped sending donation links.*

*In these times, better is just another word for quiet.  
The way I know grief is quiet.  
So much sound when they're breathing their last  
So little when they're gone.  
Death leaves everything quieter.*

*India is better now. The parents have buried their children.  
A man refused vacation days – there is no mother to visit anymore.  
Two best friends both lost a father – grief gets no special attention  
anymore.*

*To cope with death we learned to expect it. It's better now.  
Now we're the ashes the funeral pyre left behind – dark, scattered and  
quiet.*



### Solidarity in the time of pandemic:

'Sanhoti Henshel', a community kitchen run by AISA Covid Volunteers

(Art by Soumi Basu)

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