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SPECIAL FEATURE

**BADLO
BIHAR
NYAY
YATRA**

बिहार के लिए
बदलो बिहार न्याय यात्रा

2024, मगध जोन
माले, बिहार

The UP Administration is Acting Like BJP's Musclemen!

Arjun Lal, an elected Zila Parishad member and a prominent CPIML leader in Sitapur district, is facing persecution for his courageous leadership in the struggles of Dalits and poor villagers in his constituency. Previously, he has been implicated in numerous false charges, including being booked under the draconian Goonda Act. Now, the district magistrate of Sitapur has issued him a Zila-badar (externment) notice. Another CPIML leader, Comrade Ramdaras, a veteran CPIML and AIKM leader from Lakhimpur Kheri, is also facing persecution and remains imprisoned.

On October 8, 2024, CPIML held protests across Uttar Pradesh against the continued police repression and demanded the revocation of the externment order against Comrade Arjun Lal and the release of Comrade

Ramdaras. A CPIML delegation, including AIARLA national president and Bihar MLA Satyadev Ram, UP party secretary Sudhakar Yadav, and central committee member Shriram Chaudhary, met with the District Magistrate of Sitapur to demand the immediate revocation of the externment notice against Arjun Lal.

Arjun Lal, a member of the CPIML UP state committee, comes from a Dalit, landless family and is known for his unwavering commitment to the struggles of poor villagers. In 2022, members of the upper-caste Rajput community launched an attack on a Dalit basti. When Arjun Lal went to the Hargaon police station to lodge a complaint, he, along with other Dalits, was beaten up by the police. Instead of filing an FIR for the attack on Dalits, a false case was lodged against Arjun Lal, and he was sent to jail. Again, on September

21, 2024, the same police station filed a report against Arjun Lal, which became the basis for his externment from the district. The police action against Comrade Arjun Lal is an act of retaliation by feudal elements, backed by the police administration, attempting to silence growing movements for the rights of marginalized communities. Last year, he was falsely accused and jailed, and now the administration is further attempting to suppress him through a fabricated 'Goonda Act' case.

In Lakhimpur Kheri, a march led by AIPWA State President Krishna Adhikari demanded the release of farmer leader Comrade Ramdaras, who has been jailed on false charges since September 19, 2024. In Sitapur, a rally was held at the district headquarters. Similar protests were held in Prayagraj, Ballia, Gorakhpur, Deoria, Maharajganj, Azamgarh, Mau, Varanasi, Sonbhadra, Mirzapur, and several other districts. CPIML leaders pledged to intensify the struggle against state repression in Uttar Pradesh.

Samsung India Workers' 37-Day Strike: A Battle for Union Rights

Desikan KG

The recent struggle at Samsung India's plant in Sriperumbudur, Chennai, where the Samsung India Workers Union (SIWU), affiliated with CITU, undertook a 37-day strike demanding union registration and recognition, has drawn significant attention.

The DMK-led state government violated legal norms by delaying the union registration process, which should have been completed within 45 days. Meanwhile, the multinational corporation Samsung refused to acknowledge the union, despite 1,550 out of 1,723 workers supporting the strike, which lasted from September 9, 2024, to October 16. The government responded with repression, dismantling protest

tents, and arresting union leaders in an attempt to threaten workers and break the strike. Even the state secretaries of CPI and CPIM, both alliance partners of the ruling DMK, were arrested, alongside CPIML state secretary Comrade Asaithambi, for holding protests in solidarity with the workers.

Samsung's globally notorious anti-worker stance played out here, as the company opposed unionization under the pretext of rejecting "outside" leaders, despite overwhelming support from the workforce. This behavior constitutes unfair labor practices prohibited by law, yet the state government sided with the company. On the other hand, the BJP expressed concern for protecting its "ease of doing business" rather than

addressing workers' rights.

This struggle underscores the urgent need for specific legislation ensuring trade union recognition and exposes the hurdles workers face even in forming unions. Instead the mandate of the Modi government's Labour Codes, even before coming into force, have worsened the situation, animating bureaucrats to dilute existing labour laws in implementation, and emboldening corporate-state collusion. Though the 37-day strike forced Samsung to attend a tripartite meeting and resulted in minor concessions, the major demands remain unaddressed. The labor official instructed the management to provide a written response to the union's Charter of Demands. While the union has paused the strike, it is prepared to resume the struggle if the company fails to protect workers' rights and their right to organise.

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Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra: The Tasks Ahead



The Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra (Transform Bihar, Secure Justice), a simultaneous campaign of padyatras or people's marches crisscrossing the state of Bihar from October 16 to 26, will be remembered as one of the most vibrant mass initiatives undertaken by the CPI(ML) in Bihar in recent decades. The idea of a march took shape in early October and in just ten days the party got ready to launch not one or two but some two dozen marches covering at least thirty of Bihar's thirty-eight districts. And over the next ten days nearly five thousand party activists and supporters, including elected representatives and members of party committees on various levels, marched through some three thousand kilometres of district roads and state and national highways across the state. The yatras finally culminated in a grand mass convention at the historic Miller School ground of Patna.

In the course of this yatra, the marchers addressed at least a thousand public meetings attended by tens of thousands of people from all walks of life. In today's climate of glamorous road shows and capital-intensive politics, the yatra became a live model of labour-intensive people's politics - politics of the people, for the people and by the people. In terms of sheer scale of participation and mass outreach, the campaign became remarkably successful in striking a chord with diverse sections of aggrieved and deprived people. Landless poor families threatened with eviction in the name of land survey, low-income households reeling under inflated electricity bills and pre-paid metres, dalits and minorities facing feudal-communal violence, women scheme workers fighting for basic rights and living wages, teenage students concerned about the state of government schools in Bihar - all could readily identify with the theme of the yatra.

The ground for the yatra had been laid by the 'Haq Do, Vaada Nibhao' (Give Our Due, Keep Your Words) campaign around the three key demands of delivery of two lakh rupees financial assistance to each of the ninety-five lakh poorest households surviving on a monthly income of six thousand rupees or less, five decimal land to every landless household and pucca

houses for all. These are promises made repeatedly by the so-called 'double engine' dispensation headed by Narendra Modi in Delhi and Nitish Kumar in Patna, but for millions of Bihar's deprived and oppressed poor these promises have turned into a cruel saga of betrayal. Between August and September, lakhs of people demonstrated in some two hundred blocks against this continued betrayal and neglect of the most basic demands of the toiling people of Bihar.

To add insult to injury, the Nitish Kumar government inflicted two additional blows, firstly by launching a 'land survey' which threatens to evict Bihar's landless poor from whatever gains they had made through decades of land struggle since the days of abolition of landlordism and presumably create a land bank for corporate land-grab, and secondly, by imposing pre-paid metres which are literally robbing low-income households and threatening to deprive them of their right to electricity. The yatra therefore demanded a halt on the land survey till the regularisation of the land in the possession of the poor and fulfilment of the government promise of five decimal land for every landless family and withdrawal of the pre-paid metre scheme and making provision for two hundred units of free electricity per month for the poor and for Bihar's farmers. These demands struck a deep chord with broad sections of common people.

Bihar is clearly in a phase of political transition. A generation shift is underway from the era of Nitish Kumar, Lalu Prasad, Ram Vilas Paswan and Sushil Modi and a new generation is coming to the fore across the political spectrum. The BJP which has been ruling Bihar from

behind for the last two decades is now desperate to exploit this growing political vacuum to capture power on its own and inflict a 'bulldozer raj' on Bihar like it has done under Yogi Adityanath in neighbouring Uttar Pradesh. It was not just a coincidence that the Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra had to contend with the so-called Hindu Swabhimani Yatra of Giriraj Singh which made a brazen mockery of the Constitution to foment anti-Muslim hate and violence in the districts of eastern Bihar. In answer to young Bihar's demand for more and better schools, Giriraj only had trishuls (tridents) to offer. The two yatras thus projected two contrasting visions for the future of Bihar.

The call 'Badlo Bihar' of course rings a deeper note for it highlights the agenda of transformation of Bihar than a mere transition or change of guard. Contrary to the narrative being sought to be set by the likes of Prashant Kishor and of course the BJP, Bihar is not looking for restoration of the old feudal order with some pseudo-modern appearance. What Bihar demands is fulfillment of the long-neglected fundamental needs as well as the growing aspirations of the people to which successive governments have only paid lip services. From the iconic slogan of roti-kapda-makaan (food, clothing and shelter) to items of basic infrastructure like bijli-pani-sadak (electricity, water and roads) and much-neglected rights like education, health and employment, a backward state like Bihar which is being exploited as a captive export zone for cheap labour is crying out to break free from the shackles of poverty, economic backwardness and social oppression.

The women of Bihar - from the midday meal workers who receive a paltry

fifty-five rupees a day for only ten months in a year, to ASHA activists who risked their own lives to save and serve Bihar during the Covid19 pandemic only to find Nitish Kumar renege on the agreement to pay a monthly incentive of 2,500 rupees and now the Jeevika cadre who were instrumental in enrolling millions of women of Bihar in the network of Self Help Groups being asked to survive by collecting contributions from the SHGs - have been among the worst victims of betrayal in the two decades of NDA rule in Bihar. The same can be said about the dalit-bahujan communities of Bihar who continue to find themselves subjected to the worst forms of social discrimination and feudal violence, and the youth of Bihar who still have to migrate to other states for higher education and jobs. And if the Giriraj Singhs can have their way Bihar will turn into a laboratory of anti-Muslim hate and violence.

Backed by the 'Haq Do, Vaada Nibhao' campaign, the Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra has brought the agenda of social transformation and comprehensive justice to the fore. The yatra has shown us glimpses of the potential of collective assertion of Bihar's poor, women and youth that must now be harnessed in full to turn Badlo Bihar into a clarion call for a sustained movement of the people. The growing vacuum in Bihar politics must not be allowed to be exploited by anti-Constitution forces and regressive ideas to push Bihar back. It is for the inheritors of Bihar's vibrant communist and socialist traditions to take the lead and carve the way forward to take Bihar ahead on the road to a life of dignity, rights and justice for all, holding high the banner of social equality and communal harmony. ■

Messages from J&K and Haryana Elections

▲ DIPANKAR BHATTACHARYA

Results of the Haryana election have surprised all political observers and defied almost all field reports and opinion and exit polls. For the third consecutive time, the BJP has succeeded in winning Haryana, this time even bettering its 2014 and 2019 records and also the most recent 2024 Lok Sabha elections performance. The Congress has called the results 'counter-intuitive' and 'unacceptable' and raised several serious issues with the Election Commission, questioning various irregularities and complaining of administrative manipulation. The Jammu and Kashmir outcome of course turned out to be more on predicted lines with the NC-INC alliance just crossing the halfway mark. But it is the loss in Haryana which will definitely go down as yet another missed opportunity for the Congress. Coupled with the poor Congress performance in Jammu, the Haryana defeat will once again be seen as a sign of the continuing vulnerability of the Congress in an independent bipolar contest against the BJP in North India.

While the discussion in the media will obviously focus on the Haryana outcome, J&K should merit no less attention. The intensified assault on the constitutionally enshrined structure of parliamentary democracy and federal framework had begun with the demolition of Jammu and Kashmir's constitutional status. A state was overnight bifurcated into two union territories and amidst complete internet shutdown almost

the entire opposition was subjected to incarceration or house arrest. With democracy in suspension, major changes in the electoral map were carried out through delimitation. The number of seats in J&K was raised from 83 to 90, six of these seven added seats being in Jammu, bringing Jammu with 43 seats almost at par with the valley with 47 seats. This was in brazen contrast to the population share of the two regions - 43.6% for Jammu as compared to 56.4% for the valley. The SC/ST categories were also reconstituted to accommodate more sections and create favourable constituencies for the BJP. On top of it, the LG was given the discretionary power to nominate as many as five MLAs.

The J&K outcome must be seen against this backdrop of fascist assault and sinister subversion. Indeed, as far as the Kashmir valley is concerned the vote must be seen as an emphatic protest vote to teach not just the BJP but even its erstwhile ally PDP a lesson and defeat the BJP-sponsored strategy of fragmentation of the anti-BJP vote. The anger against the snatching of statehood has certainly not been limited to the valley. We can see deep disenchantment in Ladakh - both in Leh and Kargil - which became manifest yet again in the climate march from Leh to Delhi coinciding with the J&K elections. A more energetic and determined campaign in Jammu could possibly channelise the discontent in Jammu too against the BJP's divisive anti-federal agenda, but the Congress

clearly lacked that kind of effort or organisation. On the contrary, the Congress showed little concern for electoral ethics when it fielded Chaudhary Lal Singh, the infamous defender of the accused in the brutal rape and murder of Asifa, first in the LS elections from Udhampur and then yet again from the Basholi segment in the Assembly elections.

In Haryana, the Congress was expected to win the elections riding on ten years of accumulated anti-incumbency of the BJP government and especially the palpable mass anger in Haryana against the farm laws, Agnipath scheme in the Army and the treatment meted out to women wrestlers. This anti-incumbency was surely real, as the BJP first replaced the highly unpopular CM Manoharlal Khattar with Nayab Singh Saini before the Lok Sabha elections, denied tickets to a few ministers and as many as eight ministers and the Speaker lost the Assembly elections. But the Lok Sabha elections were indications enough that anti-incumbency was not a sufficient factor for a decisive victory over the BJP. By bringing in Nayab Saini as the CM, the BJP had not only defused the anti-incumbency factor but also consolidated the OBC constituency and widened the social fault line against the traditional Jat domination in the state. The BJP succeeded in saving five of the ten LS seats from Haryana which translated into BJP lead over 44 Assembly seats, ahead of the Congress lead in 42 seats with the AAP, an ally of the Congress in

the LS elections leading in the remaining 4 segments.

The Congress did not seem to have drawn sufficient lessons from the Lok Sabha election experience. As a result, the Congress failed yet again to cross the halfway mark in spite of an 11% increase in vote share (from 28.08 percent to 39.09 percent) and an improvement in seat tally from 31 to 37. The BJP strategy of combining aggressive anti-Muslim hate campaign with non-Jat SC-OBC polarisation once again managed to keep the anti-incumbency factor in check. Nayab Singh Saini's blatant defence of cow vigilantism and the targeted announcement of SC/ST sub-quota following the Supreme Court's controversial sub-classification verdict was an unmistakable sign of the BJP strategy. In spite of having a Dalit state president (who incidentally lost in these Assembly elections) and a prominent Dalit parliamentarian in Kumari Selja, the Congress failed to effectively counter the BJP's SC-OBC outreach. The 28 seats in Haryana's OBC-dominated Ahirwal region (Gurgaon, Rewari, Faridabad and Bhiwani-Mahendergarh LS seats) bordering Rajasthan sealed the fate of the Congress even as the party had forged ahead in the remaining 62 seats of Haryana.

The BJP will definitely try to use the unexpected gains made in Haryana to bolster its campaign in the forthcoming Assembly elections in Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Delhi and Bihar. But the 2024 Lok Sabha elections clearly showed that the BJP's stunning victories in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh in the late 2023 Assembly elections did not stop it from suffering major electoral blows in states like Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan only a few months later. The forces of people's movements and parties of the INDIA bloc must earnestly prepare to give the Modi government and the Sangh brigade a decisive rebuff in the next round of Assembly elections in Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Delhi and Bihar. ■

The Quest for Justice

▲ CLIFTON D' ROZARIO

In a historic judgment on 21st October, 2024, the Sessions Court has convicted 101 persons in a 10-year old caste atrocity case in Marakumbi village, in Koppal district of Karnataka. The Court has ordered life imprisonment to 98 dominant caste persons for offences punishable under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 and five years' imprisonment to the remaining 3 persons. The bare facts of this gruesome atrocity is that on 28th August 2014, the convicted persons, allegedly angered by a squabble between youth from the dominant caste and Dalit community, at a theatre in the nearby town of Gangavathi earlier in the day, gathered in the centre of Marakumbi village, and barged into Dalit houses, hurled casteist abuses, physically assaulted at least 36 Dalit men and women, burnt down 5 houses and damaged several more. The social reality leading to this day though paints a picture of a dominant caste indignation at a Dalit assertion in the village.

Marakumbi is a small caste-segregated village located in Gangavathi taluk of Koppal district in Karnataka. This district, along with the other backward districts of Bidar, Yadgir, Raichur, Kalaburagi, Ballari and Vijayanagara in the northern part of Karnataka constitute, what is known as the Kalyana Karnataka region of the state. This is considered the state's most backward regions with the Nanjundappa Committee revealing that these districts are most deprived and rank lowest on socio-economic and human development indices. It is this backwardness of the region that led to it receiving special status in the form of Article 371-J that was introduced in the Constitution in 2021. This mandated special provisions for Kalyana Karnataka, including establishment of a separate development board for the region, ensuring equitable opportunities and facilities for the region's people in public employment, reservation of seats in educational institutions and state government posts. Even so the region remains backward, with the conditions of Dalits and other socially and economically oppressed communities being even more abysmal.

Koppal district, as most districts in this region, is notorious for its deeply divided caste divided communities, and the institutionalizing of caste segregation and atrocities in the quotidian. Dalits live in, what-is-called a "keri", a separate locality outside the "main" village. This spatial caste segregation is adhered to strictly. This is not the sole entrenched manifestation of caste in the village. Dalits are not permitted to enter into the hotel in the village; it has a separate enclosure meant only for them. Plastic cups are used to serve coffee/tea, and there are two jugs for serving water, one reserved for Dalits. Dalits are not allowed into the village temple, but are "allowed" to stand outside for worship, though this too

is occasionally denied as per the whims and fancies of the dominant communities. Dalit boys and men are not entertained in the village barber shop who reserves his services only for the dominant communities. Dalits are not allowed into the houses of the dominant castes. The touch of Dalits is still not allowed by sections of the dominant caste communities. There has been some amount of easing on these fronts, but it is only on the face of it. These are just some of the obvious ways in which caste manifests itself in, and determines, everyday social realities and practices. Any transgression of the caste law is met with collective persecution and social ostracism. Marakumbi village was no exception to this caste law.

With education, and the growth of political consciousness under the influence of Dalit and Left organisations, the younger generation of Dalits, these practices began to be questioned. The dominant castes would have nothing to do with this and attacks on Dalit youths in the village became a regular feature. The events that transpired on 28th August 2014, was one of the most vicious retaliations by the dominant castes of Marakumbi village. Despite this heinous crime that was meant to spread horror and fear amongst Dalits, the collective strength of the Dalit community in the village, backed by the Dalit and Left organisations, ensured that a criminal case was registered followed by proper investigation and prosecution in court.

Coming to the judgment, it is interesting to note that the Sessions Judge, Mr. C. Chandrashekar, begins the judgment with an apt quote of Marian Anderson, the great African American opera singer who

demonstrated her resilience to discrimination. She is most often recalled for her brave and stirring performance from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1939, after she was refused, because of the colour of her skin, a performance at the Constitution Hall in Washington D.C. Incidentally, the quote that Judge Mr. C. Chandrashekar refers to is one of her replies in an interview with Tara Ali Baig at All India Radio, New Delhi on her visit to India in 1957. In this interview, Baig refers to her performance at Lincoln Memorial in 1939 and questions around “racial prejudice”, to which Marian Anderson responded: “It is so true that no matter how big a nation is, it is no stronger than its weakest people. And as long as you keep a person down some part of you has to be down there to hold them down. So that means you cannot soar as you might otherwise.”

Saying so, the Court goes into an in-depth appreciation of the evidence of 38 witnesses and the various documentary proof brought on record, and rightly concludes that the oral evidence of the witnesses are reliable to convict the dominant caste persons. The Court takes special note that the persons examined in court were eye-witnesses who had themselves been injured and their testimonies are corroborated by the medical evidence that was brought on record. Incidentally, the wound certificates of 36 Dalit victims was brought on record detailing the extent of injuries they had sustained in the caste mob attack.

We must recognise that the dominant caste accused and their caste well-wishers tried every trick in the book – threats, intimidations and inducements – to dissuade the Dalit community in Marakumbi from

pursuing the case. In particular, the witnesses listed in the chargesheet of this case, were targeted. In fact, one key witness, Veeresh Marakumbi, was murdered on 10th July 2015. Despite this, they stood unflinchingly in their quest for justice, neither bowing to fear nor falling for inducements, and instead deposed bravely and honestly to bring home the guilt of the dominant caste accused. Only three witnesses – Gangadharaiah Swamy, his wife, Mahanthamma and another witness Devaraj, turned hostile. Ironically, Gangadharaiah Swamy and his wife were attacked during this violence since he was considered to be a “well-wisher of the oppressed people in the village”. The Court, however has disregarded this, stating that “despite 2-3 witnesses turning hostile, there is sufficient material on record that they were also injured in the violence and were treated in the Gangavathi Hospital but for certain reasons, intimidation or inducement, they have not supported the case”. The fact that the other Dalit witnesses did not succumb to the same, stands testimony to their strength and determination. We cannot lose sight of the fact that this is one of the few cases where dominant caste persons have been convicted in a caste atrocity case, given that the normal conviction rate in caste atrocity cases hovers around 7% in Karnataka, whereas the conviction rate for other penal offences is above 50%.

Caste related violence, indignations and oppression are an everyday affair, not just in Koppal district, but across the State. As per the National Crime Records Bureau, the state of Karnataka recorded 1,398 cases under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of

Atrocities) Act, 1989 in the year 2020, which increased to 1673 in 2021 and 1977 cases in 2022. These are just the figures of registered cases. The daily crimes of untouchability, segregation and caste violence most often go unchallenged, unreported and unrecorded.

In this context, we recall a remarkable statement made by the Sessions Judge while passing this conviction order: "... a lack of implementation of Legislation and Caste Bias within the justice systems largely leave victims without protection.". No doubt, the constitutional promises to caste-oppressed communities of equality, justice, liberty, fraternity and the abolition of untouchability, remain unfulfilled by a combination of the lack of political and bureaucratic will (that has rendered toothless the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989), and caste blindness, and sometimes sheer caste prejudices, of Courts (that have reduced hopes of justice from the judiciary).

In this regard, this judgment must indeed serve as a wake-up call to all casteist forces. To the state and caste proponents. To those who celebrate and enforce caste and untouchability. One of the essential and radical steps in the democratization of society and the struggle for equality, is the annihilation of caste. Any programme towards annihilation of caste entails waging a relentless struggle against the ideological and economic underpinnings of caste – a struggle against Manuvada and its material basis. Indeed, the struggle against caste oppression has to be a part and parcel of every struggle. This epic struggle of the Dalit community in Marukambi village has demonstrated the possibilities of the collective struggle of Dalit, Left and progressive forces in achieving this. ■

RG Kar Movement: The Battle for Gender Justice & Workplace Safety

▲ MADHURIMA BAKSHI

The Justice for RG Kar protest sparked after the horrific rape and murder of an on duty female trainee doctor in RG Kar Medical College & Hospital, Kolkata on August 9th, soon turned into a historic mass movement. The administrative efforts to cover up the heinous crime and blaming the victim for the assaults inflicted on her not only unveiled the utter lack of workplace safety, but also the deep-rooted rape culture and long standing corruption and syndicate-raj prevailing within the public healthcare system of the state. In the intervening night of August 14th, thousands of women and gender minorities from different backgrounds across the state (and even outside the state) marched through the cities, towns and villages with the call of 'Reclaim the Night' reasserting their demands of gender justice, equal rights, freedom & safety. The culture of belittling women's voices and roles in every social sphere was challenged by the sea of women thronging over the streets. The protests gradually intensified in the months of August, September and October, and the battle for justice soon surfaced all over as one of the remarkable citizens' protests in the history of recent times. Junior doctors and women across the sections played crucial role with everyday marches, human chains, demonstrations, gatherings raising crucial questions on workplace security, rotten health administration and deep-seated patriarchal norms of the society. Amidst the festivities in the month of October, the citizens' protest into their festival echoing 'revolution is the festival of the oppressed'!

The Justice for RG Kar movement added a greater dimension to the demand of justice from a broader perspective. Successive efforts have been made to inculcate consciousness regarding the need for structural changes to ensure equality and the right to live with dignity. The movement upheld women's agency and rejected any form of protectionism, control, surveillance and restrictions imposed in the name of 'safety', which further narrow down the presence of women in public spaces and strengthen discrimination. In solidarity with the junior doctors' movement, citizens held the administration accountable and advocated for strengthening the anti-sexual harassment committees, effective implementation of PoSH Act, infrastructural changes and reforms for corruption-free system in both the organized and unorganized sectors. The movement consciously rejected fascist forces like BJP, who are ideologically anti-women and misogynist. Everyone has witnessed the role of their leaders and ministers in the Gujarat riots, Kathua, Unnao, Hathras, or the incidents of wrestlers and Bilkis Bano. Presently, CBI has submitted a charge-sheet against the primary accused, a civic volunteer, Sanjay Rai, in the case being heard in Sealdah Court. The investigation is also being supervised as a

part of suo moto case registered by the Supreme Court.

The forum of junior doctors, including the residents and interns, West Bengal Junior Doctors' Front (WBJDF) continued a 42 days cease-work together with a long sit-in protest in front of the administrative building of Health Department 'Swasthyo Bhawan' on 5 specific demands which was initially withdrawn after multiple negotiations with the Chief Minister and state officials. On September 21st, junior doctors resumed partial duties after assurances that their other demands be met at the earliest.

Within 10 days of resuming work, multiple incidences of assault on doctors and nurses and the absolute lack of any specific directives or concrete efforts from the state government, pushed the junior doctors to intensify the battle with an indefinite hunger strike (fast unto death) from October 5th, seeking the implementation of their 10-point charter focusing on justice and reforms in health system to prevent any such heinous crime in the future. A group of 7 doctors started a hunger strike at Esplanade, the centre of the city, while another 2 doctors did so in North Bengal Medical College. More than 50 senior doctors of RG Kar and more than 70 senior doctors from several government colleges across the State tendered mass resignation in solidarity with the junior doctors as the government refused to deliver any concrete commitment. However, they continued to work during the period to prevent any crisis in the public healthcare system.

Apart from the demand of justice for the RG Kar victim and the removal of State Health Secretary NS Nigam, the junior doctors specifically demanded a centralised referral system with implementation of a bed vacancy monitoring system for all hospitals and medical colleges. They demanded formation of task forces that would include among others elected junior doctor representatives, to ensure provisions for CCTVs as and where required, on-call rooms, washrooms, ICCs and immediate filling of all vacant positions of doctors and healthcare workers along with appointment of adequate numbers of male and female police personnel, in place of the civic volunteers. Junior doctors held the Health Department accountable for the administrative failures and corruption and demanded formation of investigative committees and a state-level inquiry committee to examine the rampant corruption within the West Bengal Medical Council and the West Bengal Health Recruitment Board, aiming to abolish the "threat culture" indulged in by vested interests. To ensure democratic representation of all stakeholders, they also demanded immediate student council elections in all

medical colleges, with recognition of RDAs (resident doctors association) and elected student and junior doctor representation in all decision-making bodies.

During the entire hunger strike movement, thousands of citizens have poured onto the streets in solidarity with the just demands. Huge gatherings near the Esplanade protest site, solidarity hunger strikes, decentralised and centralised protest marches and demonstrations have become a daily routine to encourage the spirit of resistance. The horrific incident at RG Kar also cast a pall over the festival celebrations. Several clubs throughout West Bengal rejected the state government's festival grant. The typical festive celebrations were subdued due to collective anger and outrage and the citizens were determined to take the battle one step forward. Meanwhile, 9 student protestors were arrested for raising the 'we want justice' slogan in a puja pandal, denied bail and taken into police custody. Eventually, the High Court sanctioned their bail in an emergency hearing held two days after this arrest. A failed meeting between junior doctors and representatives of the state government held at Swasthya Bhawan on October 10th deepened the outrage further. Six fasting junior doctors had to be hospitalised following severe deterioration of their health parameters, while the insensitive government continued to be apathetic.

After enduring 16 days of hunger strike for better working conditions and infrastructure improvements in the healthcare sector, protesting junior doctors were invited to a meeting with the Chief Minister on October 21st. A team of 17 doctors took part in a two-hour-long meeting with Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and other officials and discussed their demands to ensure justice and safety and uproot corruption and 'threat culture' from health system. After receiving some assurance of specific directives and remedial measures on election of student bodies, taskforces, enquiry committee etc. by the state government, the hunger strike was withdrawn on request of the citizens and the parents of RG Kar victim. While calling off the hunger strike and with a resolve to carry forward the struggle further, the doctors expressed their extreme disappointment regarding the intentions and intimidating tone of the state government during the entire period.

The RG Kar Medical College rape and murder case have highlighted the need to reassess the status of implementation of the PoSH Act and grievance committees. While the crime took place inside hospital premises, it is not just about the safety for doctors and health workers.

The question arises, how exactly will equal rights and safety be ensured in organised (public and private) and unorganised workplaces? The women and queer individuals taking part in the movement in huge numbers have repeatedly shared their experience about highly insensitive police, administration and authorities while reporting any sexual harassment faced in personal and public spaces, including workplaces. There is a constant fear from political leaders, goons, and even close relatives when making complaints against someone in power or somebody from the family. The situation of the marginalised genders is even worse. In the patriarchal family and society, they are constantly subjected to harassment, ridicule, physical and mental abuse. The time has come to stand up against the institutional inaction and demand systemic changes and accountability to address and prevent any form of sexual harassment. No more silencing or blaming the survivors, no more impunity to the perpetrators close to the power!

On one hand, 24-hour affordable public transport and accessible public toilets, creches, restrooms, hostels and safe rooms for women and people from oppressed gender identities are needed. On the other hand, special initiatives are needed to increase sensitization within the police administration and ensure equal participation of all gender identities at all levels of the force. Gender equality lessons should be introduced in school curriculum. The Women's Commission should be restructured and made functional, taking inputs from progressive women's organisations and gender activists. Thousands of women working as ASHA, anganwadi or mid-day meal workers, bereft of government recognition or social security, are constantly subjected to discrimination and sexual harassment. A holistic 'gender audit' is needed to bring out the true picture of women's participation in every workplace, including in unorganised sectors. What is the wage gap between women and men, how effectual the recommendations of the Justice Verma Commission have proved to be, how many crimes have been reported against women and how many of them have received justice, what is the status of Nirbhaya Fund, how women and marginalised people are treated in the police stations, how effective are the women's helpline numbers or 'one stop crisis centers' in the districts, what is the status of fast track courts, what is the status of Internal Complaint Committees (ICC) in workplaces and Local Complaint Committees (LCC) at district or block level – the government must bring the detailed audit report on these and similar other issues into daylight and take actions accordingly upon regular survey and assessment. If these issues are not addressed, justice will not be served to the large number of women who have been leading this movement to assert their desire for a just and egalitarian system. Let us march towards a society free from violence, discrimination and exploitation, for rights to justice, equality, dignity and freedom without fear! ■

The Union Government's Stance on Marital Rape: Defending Violence in Marriage

▲ MAITREYI KRISHNAN

The Supreme Court is presently hearing a challenge to the exception of marital rape in the definition of what constitutes 'rape'. India is one of the few countries that does not criminalise marital rape. The relevant section on 'Rape' both in the Indian Penal Code and, now, in the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita provides an exception to the offence of rape - "Sexual intercourse or sexual acts by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under eighteen years of age, is not rape."

This exception to rape found in the Indian Penal Code, is often traced to what is called Hale's principle - referring to a statement made by a British jurist Matthew Hale, who said "but the husband cannot be guilty of a rape committed by himself upon his lawful wife, for by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract the wife hath given up herself in this kind unto her husband, which she cannot retract."

Home Minister Amit Shah, while introducing the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, had said that these three new criminal laws represented the decolonisation of laws and to give first priority to crimes against women and children. However, as is now known to most, the new laws retain majority of the colonial laws and only builds on its draconian intent in the form of the few newly added provisions. Unsurprisingly, this exception in rape law under the IPC, continues as in the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita.

This exception to marital rape was challenged first before the Delhi High Court, which gave a

split verdict, with one of the judges striking it down as unconstitutional and the other judge upholding it. Both the judges granted leave to appeal to the Supreme Court, where it is now being heard.

The Union Government has filed its reply before the Supreme Court, and has taken the stand that there is a need to provide this exception as “in an institution of marriage” there is a continued expectation “to have reasonable sexual access of one from the other”.

It states that “these obligations and expectations” constitutes a sufficient basis “to distinguish qualitatively between an incident of non-consensual sex within the marital sphere” from those of a stranger “who seeks sexual congress”.

While making the minimal concession that these expectations do not entitle the husband to coerce his wife into sex against her will, it dilutes the very concept of consent itself by stating that the idea of consent “would vary in case of a marital relationship when compared to any other relationship outside the institution of marriage.” Such a stand where the concept of consent loses its meaning within a marriage can only be understood as being, effectively, a reiteration of the Hale’s principle.

The Government’s stance, by prioritising “preserving the institution of marriage,” demeans a woman’s right to autonomy and bodily integrity. The government thus views marriage as extinguishing the autonomy of the woman over her own body, and treating her as chattel over which the husband has absolute rights. The loss of a woman’s right to bodily integrity is treated as collateral

damage that it deems necessary to safeguard the institution of marriage. Any understanding of equality would have to acknowledge that any “institution”, if based on the sexual violence of one person against another, must and should not need preserving but being reviewed in ways that foster greater equality. The Government’s stance, however, only reaffirms its disregard of the idea of equality.

In 2007, the UN Committee of the Elimination of Discrimination against Women recommended that India should “widen the definition of rape in its Penal Code to reflect the realities of sexual abuse experienced by women and to remove the exception of marital rape from the definition of rape...” The National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-21) found that among married women aged 18-49 who have ever experienced sexual violence, 83 per cent report their current husband and 13 per cent report a former husband as the perpetrator.

The Justice Verma Committee Report not only recommended the removal of the exception for marital rape but also proposed that amendments to the law should make clear that the relationship between the accused and the complainant is irrelevant to the inquiry into whether the complainant consented to the sexual activity. The Committee recognised that even where marital rape is acknowledged as a crime, there is a risk that judges might view it as less serious than other forms of rape, leading to more lenient sentences. It recommended that, similar to reforms implemented in South Africa, the law must explicitly provide that marital relationship should not be regarded as a mitigating factor justifying a lower sentences for rape.

The stand of the Union Government should not be surprising given that this is a Government that believes in the Manusmriti, which places the woman in an inferior position and mandates that “A virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, freely indulges his lust, and is devoid of any good qualities”. The same forces of Brahminical patriarchy opposed the Hindu Code Bill, in the name of tradition.

At this juncture, it would be essential to recall Dr. Ambedkar’s words, spoken in the context of the Hindu Code Bill. “To leave inequality between class and class, between sex and sex which is the soul of Hindu society untouched and to go on passing legislation relating to economic problems is to make a farce of our Constitution and to build a palace on a dung heap”

The Supreme Court is now put to the test - will it follow constitutional morality and uphold the promise of equality guaranteed under the Constitution or fall into the trap of perpetuating inequality and institutionalising violence in the name of tradition and preserving the “institution” of marriage. ■



An End to State-Sanctioned Caste Discrimination in Prisons?

▲ CLIFTON D' ROZARIO

An extremely significant recent judgement of the Supreme Court has exposed, and discarded, the state's encoding of caste into the law governing India's prisons. This case is another confirmation that caste is an inescapable Indian reality, manifesting in every realm of social life, even in prisons. This judgement, running into 148 pages, is crucial not merely for its directions to do away with caste-based discrimination in prisons. But it is relevant far beyond the jurisprudence concerning Article 17 and other aspects that ought to inform judicial approaches to caste and caste-based issues.

In 1978, Jst. Krishna Iyer, had described India's prisons in the following words: "A prison is a sound-proof planet, walled from view and visits regulated, and so, rights of prisoners are hardly visible, checking is more difficult and the official position of the repository of power inspires little credibility where the victims can be political protesters, unpopular figures, minority champions or artless folk who might fail to propitiate arrogant power of minor minions". Almost 50 years later, even as the jurisprudence around the rights of prison inmates has developed greater rights for them, the journalist Sukanya Shantha, approached the Supreme Court with this public interest litigation highlighting the lived realities of caste oppressed sections in prisons, which she

documented in a detailed article titled "From Segregation to Labour, Manu's Caste Law Governs the Indian Prison System"

What has come to light is the systematic and meticulous manner in which caste-based segregation was enforced in prison manuals/rules of various states and in practice, as impugned in this public interest litigation. For instance, the Kerala Prison Rules 1958 and more recent ones, including the Uttar Pradesh Jail Manual, 2022 and the Rajasthan Prisons Rules, 2022, all of which, contained explicit provisions sanctioning caste discrimination in prisons, including rules for who should cook and who should sweep, caste-based division of manual labour, segregation of barracks on caste lines and blatant discrimination of prison inmates belonging to denotified tribes. The Supreme Court has declared these provisions unconstitutional, and directed the States/Union Territories to revise their Prison Manuals/Rules accordingly. Many of these prison manuals trace their provenance to pre-colonial scriptures and colonial laws, which the Court also observed.

On discrimination under Article 15

Article 15 of the Constitution imposes an enforceable obligation on the State to not discriminate against citizens on any of several grounds, including religion, sex and caste. In interpreting

Article 15, the Court confirms that discriminatory laws have no place in our democracy. The Court has culled out certain anti-discrimination principles emerging under Article 15(1) as follows: Firstly, that discrimination can be either direct or indirect, or both. Second, facially neutral laws may have an adverse impact on certain social groups that are marginalised. Thirdly, stereotypes can further discriminate against a marginalised social group. Fourth, that the State is under a positive obligation to prevent discrimination against a marginalised social group. Importantly it is recognised that discriminatory laws based on stereotypes and causing harm or disadvantage against a social group, directly or indirectly, are not permissible under the constitutional scheme.

Of salient relevance to these times, the Court recognises that discrimination, in history, has led to the genocide of certain communities. This coupled with the Court's conclusion that if the State itself discriminates against a citizen under any of the mentioned grounds, "then it is discrimination of the highest form", bears enormous implications for these times where religious majoritarianism and crony capitalism institutionalises subordination and discrimination of religious minorities and the working class, and are fast eroding at the nascent democracy that this country was.

On the broader struggle to dismantle caste discrimination

The Court notes that, throughout history, "the oppressive nature of the caste structure has denied to those disadvantaged castes the fundamentals of human dignity, human self-respect and even

some of the attributes of the human personality”.

This is particularly of relevance, given the other recent judgement of the Supreme Court in the caste sub-classification case, where one of the Jst. Pankaj Mittal has denied the very existence of caste in primitive India while arguing that caste was just a “categorisation of the people according to their profession, talent, qualities and nature.” Without even referring to the above said view of Jst Mittal, the Supreme Court has debunked his theory by holding as follows:

The history of India has witnessed centuries of discrimination towards the oppressed castes. Violence, discrimination, oppression, hatred, contempt, and humiliation, towards these communities were the norm... This bias manifested in numerous ways, including exclusion from social, economic, and political opportunities. The caste system ensured that the oppressed castes remained marginalised and deprived of their basic rights and dignity.

The Supreme Court, relying on Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, concludes that castes were “self-enclosed units”, which could not be changed, and was assigned to individuals at birth, with each caste linked to a specific profession, and all castes organised into a hierarchical structure and summarises the ways in which the caste system permeated itself:

First, it was based on a hierarchy of four caste-based groupings, where the Shudras occupied the lowest level. Second, the castes outside these four groupings were treated as “untouchables”. Third, the caste system controlled the sexuality or agency of women to maintain

the sanctity of caste. Fourth, the caste structure considered certain castes and tribal communities as professional criminals. Fifth, penal sanctions were imposed on those who violated the “law of caste”.

Interestingly the Supreme Court while considering the institutional caste discrimination in prisons, locates this judgement in the fight against caste-based discrimination, while acknowledging that this “is not a battle that can be won overnight” since “it requires sustained effort, dedication, and the willingness to confront and challenge societal norms that perpetuate inequality”. The Court emphatically holds that this judgement is the Court’s “contribution to the ongoing struggle to dismantle caste-based discrimination”.

Article 17 and its prohibition of untouchability

The Court also delves into the letter and spirit of Article 17 of the Constitution, which abolishes the abhorrent practice of untouchability in any form and mandates that the enforcement of any disability arising out of untouchability shall be a punishable offence.

Untouchability as an integral facet of caste has had the effect of dehumanising Dalits and keeping the Dalits away from the mainstream of the society, coming as it does with severe disabilities, restrictions, conditions and prohibitions on Dalits. Caste could only function through the deliberate and ongoing dehumanisation of all the people though. Writing about race, James Baldwin, reminds us that, “Our dehumanisation of the Negro then is indivisible from our dehumanisation

of ourselves: the loss of our own identity is the price we pay for our annulment of his.”

The Supreme Court reminds that the thrust of Article 17 “is to liberate the society from blind and ritualistic adherence and traditional beliefs which lost all legal or moral base”. In effect thus, Article 17 is an endeavour to regain humanity in society. It “strikes at the heart of the caste system, which manifests in discriminatory practices based on the notions of purity and pollution”.

Article 21: Of Life and Dignity of prison inmates

The rights of prison inmates has been the subject of attention of several judgments of the Supreme Court, as such, it is settled law. This judgement traces this jurisprudence and concludes that:

Thus, the jurisprudence which emerges on the rights of prisoners under Article 21 is that even the incarcerated have inherent dignity. They are to be treated humanely and without cruelty. Police officers and prison officials cannot take any disproportionate measures against prisoners. The prison system must be considerate of the physical and mental health of prisoners. For instance, if a prisoner suffers from a disability, adequate steps have to be taken to ensure their dignity and to offer support.

The Court has elaborated on the concept of “dignity” in this context to hold that dignity forms a part of the basic structure of the Constitution, and that dignity is the “core” which “unites the fundamental rights because the fundamental rights seek to achieve for each individual

the dignity of existence". As such, it is held, human dignity is a constitutional value and a constitutional goal, adding that:

The right to live with dignity extends even to the incarcerated. Not providing dignity to prisoners is a relic of the colonisers and pre-colonial mechanisms, where oppressive systems were designed to dehumanise and degrade those under the control of the State. Authoritarian regimes of the pre-constitutional era saw prisons not only as places of confinement but as tools of domination. This Court, focusing on the changed legal framework brought out by the Constitution, has recognised that even prisoners are entitled to the right to dignity.

Caste and occupation

The caste system rigidly assigns certain tasks to specific communities based on birth, with the lowest castes, being relegated to tasks considered impure or unclean, such as manual scavenging, cleaning, and other forms of physical labour. The Court, in examining the constitutionality of the provisions in the Rules/Manuals regarding allocation of labour within the prison, examines the caste system's assignment of tasks to communities based on birth and notes that convicts from communities lower in the caste hierarchy were expected to continue with their customary occupations in prison i.e. "the caste hierarchy outside the prison was replicated within the prison".

Importantly the Court notes that:

In line with their overall approach, the colonial administrators linked caste with prison administration of labour, food, and treatment of prisoners.

They emboldened the occupational hierarchy with legal policy and imported the vice of caste-based allocation of labour into the prison, due to pressure from the oppressor castes.

With Independence, and the adoption of the Constitution, what ought to have followed was that the rules for prison management of labour, food, and treatment of prisoners, would eschew caste. On the contrary, these post-Independence prison manuals/rules, largely adopted the colonial philosophy and have shockingly remained in practice till date.

For instance, the Uttar Pradesh Jail Manual, 2022, mandated that a convict sentenced to simple imprisonment shall not be called upon to perform duties of a degrading or menial character unless he belongs to a class or community accustomed to perform such duties. The West Bengal Jail Code Rules for Superintendence and Management of Jail in West Bengal, 1967 mandated that sweepers should be chosen from the Mether or Hari caste, also from the Chandal or other castes, if by the custom of the district they perform similar work when free, or from any caste if the prisoner volunteers to do the work. Further it stated that food shall be cooked and carried to the cells by prisoner-cooks of suitable caste. It also provided that the sweepers should be chosen from the Mether or Hari caste, also from the Chandal or other castes, if by the custom of the district they perform similar work when free.

The Court has set aside these and other provisions holding that "by assigning cleaning and sweeping work to the marginalised castes, while allowing the high castes to do cooking, the Manuals directly

discriminate". It further concludes that:

The persistence of such associations in official documents like the Manuals/Rules normalises the idea that these tasks are somehow natural for marginalised communities, reinforcing harmful societal hierarchies. By assigning specific types of work to marginalised castes based on their supposed "customary" roles, the Manuals perpetuate the stereotype that people from these communities are either incapable of or unfit for more skilled, dignified, or intellectual work.

Discrimination of denotified tribes

The legal encoding of caste-based stereotypes into the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which were progressively made even more draconian through subsequent amendments and the Criminal Tribes Act of 1911 which replaced the 1871 Act, is another example of colonial legislation accommodating and institutionalising caste.

The provisions of this law were based on a stereotype which considered several marginalised communities as born criminals. Besides subjecting them to heightened surveillance, it declared them as "born criminals" and assumed an addiction to a life of crime. It enforced "forced nomadism" by taking away their right to settle in a place. Though the Act was repealed in 1952, these "criminal tribes" became "denotified criminal tribes". However, the discrimination did not end there and has continued, also to be replicated in prison manuals/rules in independent India.

For instance Rule 404 of the West Bengal Manual provides that a

convict overseer may be appointed to be a night guard provided that “he does not belong to any class that may have a strong natural tendency to escape, such as men of wandering tribes” while the Madhya Pradesh Manual permits the classification of habitual and non-habitual criminals, where habitual criminals are described as someone who “is by habit member of a gang of dacoits, or of thieves or a dealer in slaves or in stolen property”, even if no previous conviction has been proved. Striking down all such provisions, the Court notes that when such stereotypes become a part of the legal framework, they legitimise discrimination against these communities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the Court has ruled that caste-based discrimination in prisons is illegal, it will remain to be seen how far this ruling is implemented in practice. Caste-based discrimination has a long

history that requires dismantling at every scale, from the space of the prison to wider society. Importantly, the Court has emphatically reiterated that the failure to provide dignity to prisoners is a “relic of the colonisers and pre-colonial mechanisms, where oppressive systems were designed to dehumanise and degrade those under the control of the State”. Stating so, the Court upholds the right of prison inmates to be treated humanely and without cruelty, cautioning that “police officers and prison officials cannot take any disproportionate measures against prisoners”, and must “be considerate of the physical and mental health of prisoners”.

It should be added that this sounds ironic, given that officially there are 2000 prison inmates deaths annually due to various reasons, particularly the neglect of State. Also ironic is that this judgement comes at a time when scores of political prisoners languish in jail surviving the harshest face of the state. The decade-long

brutal incarceration and neglect in prison killed Prof. G. N. Saibaba. Just as it killed Kanchan Nanaware, Stan Swamy, Pandu Norate and scores of unknown others. A fascist regime hellbent on crushing any dissent, has designed a system to indefinitely hold political dissenters behind bars, cloaking this inhumanity with the facade of legality using draconian laws and deploying pliable so-called law and order agencies at its whim and fancies. Also inescapable is the fact that the majority of the prison inmates are Dalits, Adivasis and from other socially backward communities languishing in jail, mostly as undertrials, unable to escape the carceral system.

In this situation, this judgement is a silver lining, and must serve as an impetus to reorient the understanding of custodial discrimination, violence and death not merely as a consequence of police brutality, but also the brutality of incarceration marked by negligence and callous treatment while in prison custody. ■

CPIML Extends Solidarity to Sonam Wangchuk and His Comrades

Ladakh, nestled high in the freezing Himalayas, has been facing a lot of heat for a while. The people of Ladakh are fighting an uphill battle to save their identity and their culture, and to protect the delicate ecology of this region from tourists and resource-sharks.

In 2019, the union government under Narendra Modi abolished Article 370 of the Constitution, which had given special status to Jammu and

Kashmir. Furthering the politics of polarization and minority hatred was the sole purpose behind the move. At that time, prominent activists of Ladakh like Sonam Wangchuk were under the illusion that the abolition of Article 370 could open the way for Ladakh’s betterment by ending the decades-long neglect.

Soon it became clear that the abrogation of Article 370 has not only destroyed Jammu and Kashmir’s autonomy and statehood, but it has

also laid the foundation for Ladakh’s destruction. The union government’s “integration” plan has led to an unprecedented tourist influx. During the tourist season, the local people are getting outnumbered by visitors. Large quantities of land have been taken over to build military infrastructure. The union government is all set to systematically exploit the natural resources in this area.

The abrogation of Article 370 reduced Ladakh to the status of a Union Territory without a legislature. The ongoing troubles have led Sonam Wangchuk and his comrades to prioritize the demand for political representation.

Sonam Wangchuk led a foot march from Leh to New Delhi, starting on September 1. The protesters were marching to Delhi to demand environmental and constitutional rights for Ladakh, including its inclusion under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

On September 30, Wangchuk and his supporters were detained by Delhi Police at the Singhu border. They wished to visit Wangchuk tweeted, "As we are approaching Delhi, it appears we are not being escorted, we are being detained." The government stopped them from visiting RajGhat on 2 October. CPI-ML and Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) leader Comrade Prem Singh, along with comrades of Local Committees, met the detained protestors on the following day and expressed their solidarity.

On October 6, Wangchuk began an indefinite fast at Ladakh Bhawan in Delhi, demanding the inclusion of Ladakh under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The police constantly harassed him and his comrades and prevented people from expressing solidarity. Despite the barriers, On October 9, Com.

Dipankar Bhattacharya, along with Comrades Purushottam Sharma and N Balaji visited him and extended support Ladakh's demands.

Com. Dipankar said that Sonam is on hunger strike for the last four days, but since we were not allowed to visit him, he came outside of the gate and we talked across the LoC! From Ladakh to Delhi, this is the state of democracy in India today!

"Their demands are simple and straightforward. Five years of UT status have convinced them that there can be no real democracy, dignity and development for the people of Ladakh till they get separate statehood along with Sixth Schedule status to protect the tribal population and the delicate Himalayan ecology, much like the North-Eastern states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura," Com. Dipankar added.

Later, an AISA-AIPWA team which included AIPWA Delhi President Shweta Raj and JNUSU President Dhananjay, visited him again and expressed their solidarity.

After 15 days, he ended his fast on October 21, 2024, following a letter

from the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) assuring him that talks on Ladakh's demands would resume on December 3, 2024. The struggle shall continue, he said, till their demands are met.

A protest was also organized by AISA and other Ladakhi students in solidarity with Wangchuk, where more than 70 protestors, including students from different universities and organisations including Ladakh Students' Union and AISA were detained on October 21.

CPIML stands with Ladakh's fight for political representation and democratic rights and against the environmentally destructive capitalist predatory model of development. A federal framework ensuring real respect for India's diversity and giving real powers for self-management to India's indigenous people is the need of the hour for India to march ahead in the 21st Century to achieve comprehensive justice that includes climate and gender justice with the constitutional commitment of social, economic and political justice. ■

Rage against police brutality on Adivasi protestors in Hasdeo!

CPIML unequivocally condemns the recent police brutality against Adivasi protestors in Hasdeo, who had gathered to prevent the cutting of approximately 5,000 trees in the vicinity of six villages to facilitate Adani's mining operations.

The violent suppression of their

voices, including the deployment of around 400 police personnel to intimidate peaceful protestors, is a violation of their fundamental rights and reflects the alarming trend of state power being used to protect corporate interests over the welfare of local communities.

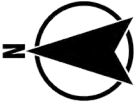
The ongoing devastation of the

Hasdeo forests for coal mining is not just an attack on the environment; it is a direct assault on the identity and rights of the Adivasi people. Tribal communities have lived in harmony with these forests for centuries, relying on medicinal plants and other forest resources for their livelihoods. Yet, they now face eviction to facilitate corporate operations. This reckless pursuit of profit, driven by the BJP government's policies, disregards the voices of the very communities that have protected these lands for generations. ■



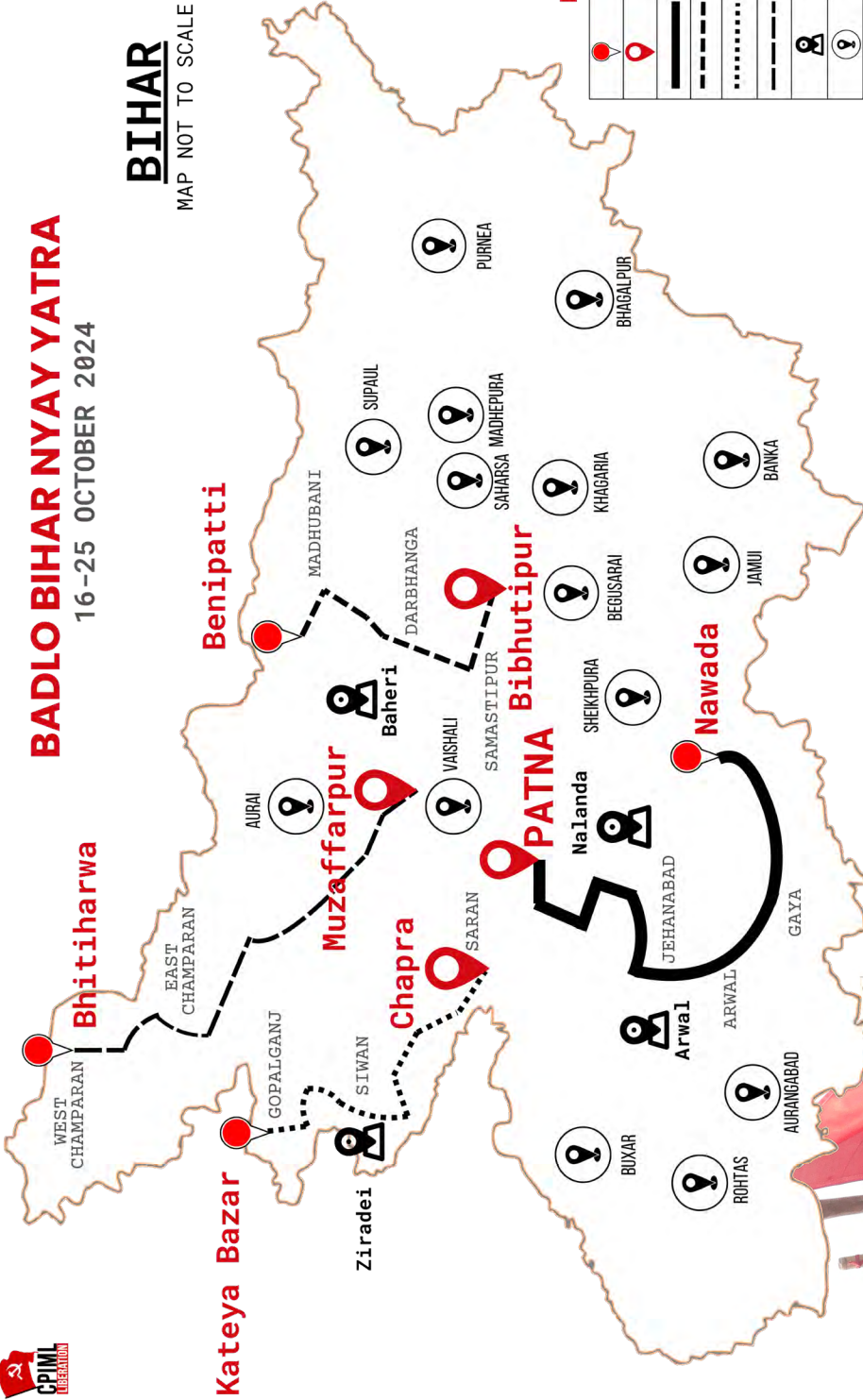
BADLO BIHAR NYAY YATRA

16-25 OCTOBER 2024



BIHAR

MAP NOT TO SCALE



MAP LEGEND

| | |
|--|-------------------|
| | STARTING POINT |
| | ENDING POINT |
| | MAGADH ZONE |
| | MITHILA ZONE |
| | SARAN ZONE |
| | TIRHUT ZONE |
| | AUXILIARY YATRAS |
| | AREA/BLOCK YATRAS |





Magadh Zone Yatra.



70-year-old Raghnath Das from Singhatiya Village in Wazirganj.



The yatra witnessed massive participation of women. Women laborers from Musahar tolas and Dalit bastis, along with ASHAs, Mid-day meal workers, Jeevika Didis, and other scheme workers, joined the yatra at various points. (Right) Soni and Smriti, young schoolgirls, decided to walk along after seeing the yatra, as its demands resonated with their everyday struggles.



Saran Zone Yatra.



Sanjay Manjhi of Chiraili village of Tekari block who lost his hands while trying to save his head from the sword of feudal power.



Tirhut Zone Yatra.



Lalita Devi, wife of Sajjan Manjhi, a daily wage laborer who was murdered for simply asking for his wages of Rs. 100, joined the march in Gaya and also participated in the October 27 convention in Patna.



Mithila Zone Yatra.



Jan Samvad (public meetings) and street corner meeting were a crucial component of the yatra.



The yatra concluded on October 26 in Patna by paying tributes to Comrade Ram Naresh Ram. Floral tributes were also offered to the martyrs of the freedom movement and various leaders who championed the struggle for social justice. The yatra further paid homage to Prof. GN Saibaba and called for the release of all political prisoners.



Barefoot or in wheelchairs, people joined the Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra, in the fight for justice and dignity.



The Badlo Bihar Nyay Sammelan, a mass convention, was organized on October 27 at Miller School grounds in Patna.

Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra

A Rallying Cry for Justice and Dignity

In the distance, 70-year-old Raghunath Das saw red flags marching and heard slogans for a just Bihar. Barefoot, he sprang from his field and ran, heart pounding. He knew it was the padyatra taken out by CPI(ML) Liberation, and he had to reach them to tell what was happening in his village – Singhatiya. Just as he reached the marchers, he looked for CPIML General Secretary Comrade Dipankar Bhattacharya and informed him that the land mafia in his village were trying to take away the lands of the poor which were granted to them under bhoodan. Tears welled up in his tired eyes, his voice cracking with emotion. In that moment, Raghunath wasn't just speaking for himself, but for generations of the landless, the oppressed – the forgotten of Bihar.

He said to the yatra leaders, “For me, the red flags of this march are not just political symbols—they are a beacon of hope. They represent the fight for my land and the dignity of my people.” This was the epitome of the Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra [Transform Bihar Justice March] that was taken out by CPIML on pro-people issues across the state, which became the symbol of hope for every marginalised and poor household.

Dalit, Muslims, poor, women, share croppers, workers, and others reached the yatra in solidarity with the issues raised and to share their woes and concerns about what was happening to them. There is widespread anger among people against Nitish-Modi double-engine government that has turned a blind eye to people's suffering.

“What began as a yatra has transformed into a people's movement,” declared Comrade Dipankar in his address to the media in Jehanabad.

The people are demanding justice, dignity, and an end to violence and state neglect. CPIML's Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra embodies this call, marching toward a new, just Bihar.

This was no ordinary march—it was a journey on foot through the heart of Bihar, meant to listen to the marginalised and poor, to bring their struggles to the forefront. From villages like Singhatiya, where Raghunath Das cried out for justice, to countless others, the people themselves led the way. They came with their pain, their frustration—raising issues of crumbling infrastructure, the brutal atrocities against Dalits and women, and the livelihood that was being stolen from workers.

The yatra became a platform for the unheard. Their demands were clear: they wanted CPIML to be their voice, to stand firm against every injustice, every atrocity, and to fight for their right to live with dignity.

Traversing Across Bihar, on Foot

The Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra was taken out in four zones of the state – the Magadh Zone, Mithila Zone, Saran Zone and Tirhut Zone – and also had auxiliary yatras in Ziradei, Baheri, Arwal and Nalanda, while area/block level yatras were held in Buxar, Purnea, Vaishali, Begusarai, Bhagalpur, Jamui, Sheikhpura, Banka, Rohtas, Khagaria, Saharsa, Madhepura, Supaul, Aurai, Aurangabad and many others (for more details refer to the map on Page 17). Across Bihar, nearly 5,000 marchers walked across 29 districts of the state, listening to the people, extending our support to them and receiving solidarity. The yatra, the clarion call for a new and just Bihar,

culminated on 26 October in Patna, and a mass convention was organised on 27 October.

Magadh Zone

The Magadh Zone yatra, was flagged off on 16th October from Krishnanagar village of Nawada district. This village, on September 18th, witnessed a case of atrocity against Dalit families, when the land mafia burnt down 32 houses belonging to Manjhi and Ravidas communities. This march was led by Comrade Dipankar Bhattacharya and Politburo member Amar, who started the march after paying floral tributes at the statues of Dr. BR Ambedkar, Loknayak Jai Prakash Narayan and senior leader of Indian People's Front (IPF) Surendra Singh. CPIML MLAs Mahanand Singh, Gopal Ravidas and Rambali Singh Yadav and MLC Shashi Yadav were also part of this contingent, along with hundreds of party activists and supporters.

A mass meeting was addressed by Comrade Dipankar in Ambedkar Park in Nawada, before proceeding towards Hisua. He said that the people of Bihar reject the ongoing model of governance of Nitish-BJP regime and that CPIML's march across Bihar is to raise major issues of the people of the state with the determination to transform Bihar into a state where justice will not be elusive to the poorest. The Constitution of India, as handed over to us by Dr. Ambedkar, promises equality to all, and non-discrimination, be it religion, caste or language. The Preamble of our Constitution also ensures social and economic justice for every citizen. We strive for a Bihar which will guarantee our constitutional rights and end discrimination, he said.

The demands raised, including

the roll-back of smart metres and land survey, delivering on the promise of Rs. 2 lakh financial assistance to low-income households, 5 decimal land for the landless, pucca houses for all poor households, justice for those who were met with caste atrocity and gender violence, expansion of caste reservations based on the socioeconomic survey conducted, special status for Bihar, financial relief for those in distress due to unprecedented floods, recognition of scheme workers, etc., struck a chord with everyone who witnessed the yatra. Not only an overwhelming number of them joined in at every village, but chimed in with the slogans as the yatra passed through their bazaars.

On Day 2, JNUSU President Dhananjay joined the yatra and on the way interacted with students-youth (see the report on Page 26).

The Magadh Zone's yatra covered a total of 250 km on foot and passed through Nawada, Gaya, and Jehanabad, to reach Patna on October 26th. The auxiliary yatras taken out in Nalanda and Arwal also joined the Magadh Zone yatra at Arwal and Jehanabad, respectively. En route in Gaya, a delegation of midday meal workers' union welcomed the yatra at the Falgu river and joined in the march. A large public gathering was organised at Gandhi Maidan, wherein a big contingent of Jeevika and ASHA workers congratulated the party on the initiative and for raising their demands and giving voice to their struggles as part of the yatra.

After the jansamvad, Lalita Devi, wife of Sajjan Manjhi, joined in support of the cause undertaken by the yatra. Sajjan, a daily wage labourer, was murdered for simply asking for his wages of Rs. 100—an act of defiance that cost him his life. His brutal killing sent shockwaves through his community, laying bare the violent feudal structures that still dominate many parts of Bihar.

In the wake of her husband's murder, Lalita Devi, was left devastated but determined. When the Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra reached her village, she did not hesitate to join. Carrying the weight of her loss, she walked at the forefront of the procession, her head held high, a red flag in her hands. "My husband was killed for demanding what was rightfully his," she said, her voice strong despite the sorrow. "I march with this yatra because I believe in its call for justice—not just for him, but for all those like him." The tragic story of Sajjan Manjhi has come to symbolise the struggle of thousands of Dalit laborers across Bihar.

Thereafter, a delegation from Insaaf Manch also joined the yatra at Dhaniya Bagicha to speak about the threat of eviction they are facing from the railways. Students of AYUSH spoke about their concerns, and school children talked about the state of government schools in Bihar to the marchers. Students from Central University of South Bihar discussed their issues with JNUSU president Comrade Dhananjay, who is a native of Gaya.

Similarly, the North Koel Canal Sangharsh Morcha, a farmers' group demanding clean water supply among other rights, welcomed the yatra in Panchanpur. The following day when the yatra reached Chiraili village of Tekari block, the villagers, along with Sanjay Manjhi's family welcomed the yatra. On June 5, 2024 when the whole country was immersed in discussing the 2024 poll outcome, Narendra Modi was celebrating the escape from losing his throne and Jitan Ram Manjhi was collecting his victory certificate for Gaya (SC) Lok Sabha constituency, Sanjay Manjhi was trying to save his land from being taken over by powerful feudal forces. That's when he lost his hands while trying to save his head from the sword of feudal power. One hand was chopped off and a finger

on the other hand sustained severe injuries, including the loss of a finger. Comrade Rambali Yadav, CPI(ML) MLA from Ghosi, Jehanabad had led a fact-finding team to Chiraili and brought to the fore the reality of eviction of Dalits behind this brutal feudal violence. Some of the accused have been arrested, but Sanjay Manjhi is yet to get any effective compensation. He is still awaiting justice and some compensation and income support that will enable him to sustain his family.

At Manikpur on October 20th, the Mou Sangharsh Morcha, a platform fighting for the formation of a block covering Mou and a cluster of 10 panchayats, welcomed the yatra. At the public meeting in Jehanabad, ambulance drivers, who have not received wages for four months, residents of a Dalit village who have been waiting for a connecting road, ASHA and jeevika workers who are fighting against the apathetic government for their rights, farmers, rural labourers, shop keepers of the local market and passers-by extended their support to the yatra. And just as the yatra left from Jehanabad towards Nadaul, two school girls – Soni and Smriti – who watched the yatra at a distance just as their school closed for the day, joined in. Their curiosity and courage led them to join us, and for the next few kilometers, until we reached Gopalpur for a lunch break, they marched alongside us, raising full-throated slogans. It was the first time these young girls had ever participated in a protest or raised slogans, but their energy invigorated the entire group. Soni and Smriti's spontaneous decision to join the yatra reminded us of the potential of the younger generation to lead the way toward democracy, progress, and justice. Their presence was a beacon of hope, showing that the future belongs to those who dare to stand up for what is right. The Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra has been remarkable

not only for its message but also for the unity across generations it has fostered. Elderly villagers who have endured years of suffering walked side by side with young students whose energy and passion ignite new hope.

The yatra was truly representative of the people's aspirations in Bihar, became a beacon of hope to fight for a bright future, while taking inspiration from the martyrdom of the leaders who waged struggles for a better Bihar - be it Dashrath Manjhi, Virendra Vidrohi, Jagadev Prasad, Kailash Ram, Bhuin Ram, Jagannath Mishra, Shyam Vihari Benipuri.

Mithila Zone

The Mithila yatra began from Benipatti with a garlanding of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's statue by Polit Bureau member Dharendra Jha, Central Committee member Manju Prakash, Darbhanga District Secretary Vaidyanath Yadav, Madhubani District Secretary Dhruv Narayan Karn, AISA National General Secretary Prasenjit Kumar, Insaf Manch State Vice President Neyaz Ahmed, Abhishek Kumar, Pappu Khan, Rani Singh, Shanichari Devi, Ashok Paswan, Madan Chand Jha, Mayank, Lokesh Raj, Deepak Yaduvanshi, Surendra Prasad Singh, member of the Samastipur District Committee, along with leaders of mass organisations from three districts. Benipatti has emerged as a significant center for the communist movement in Bihar. On January 4, 1947, during a land struggle against Andhri Mahant, zamindar forces attacked a gathering where Bhogendra Jha was injured. To protect him, Palatu Yadav and Sant Khatwe were martyred.

Following this, a padyatra (march on foot) of over 200 people began with decorated four-wheel vehicles, flags, banners, and festoons. The padyatris paid tribute to Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia's statue in Benipatti Nagar Panchayat. The march passed through Sarisav and

reached the village of Dhakjari, home of a prominent CPI leader, Rajkumar Purve. His statue was also garlanded here.

On Day 3 of the yatra, discussions were held criticising government negligence on the closure of Rayam Sugar Mill with over 200 farmers and labourers. CPI(ML) Legislative Party Leader Mahboob Alam said that the governments of Delhi and Patna are disconnected from the ground reality, and vowed to raise the issues of closed industries in the assembly. The padyatra engaged with landless Dom families and others facing exclusion from housing and ration benefits. Many expressed interest in joining CPI(ML) as the march progressed through several villages.

On October 20, Day 5 of the yatra, the march began from the party office in Laheriasarai and reached Polo Maidan, where the grand and vibrant Mithila Vikas Sammelan (Mithila Development Conference) was held. The auxiliary yatra from Baheri joined the conference after garlanding Karpoori Thakur's statue. The march reached Bibhutipur on October 23. Throughout the eight-day journey, thousands of comrades participated, with numerous assemblies and public dialogues that transformed the padyatra into a movement. About 35 comrades remained steadfast from start to finish, while many more joined at various points along the route. The unwavering spirit of women and the enthusiasm of student youth were the padyatra's main strengths. Notably, three comrades nearing 70 years old sustained their participation, while several women traveled long distances with children. Leaders affiliated with the Insaf Manch made a significant presence throughout the journey. The involvement of intellectuals and leaders from the RJD provided support in various forms, significantly strengthening the party's presence and expansion in Madhubani, Darbhanga, and Samastipur.

Saran Zone

The "Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra" - Saran Zone commenced on October 16 from Kateya Bazaar at 10:30 AM. The journey began with a warm welcome in Sohariya, Bhare, and Hussepur, where people greeted the procession with drums and music. The yatra was led by Satyadev Ram, Amarjeet Kushwaha, Sohila Gupta, Indrajit Chaurasia, Hansnath Ram, Ravindra Singh, Jitendra Paswan, Mukesh Kushwaha, and Amarnath Yadav. Additionally, several district committee members from Gopalganj and Siwan participated.

During its course, the yatra passed through Nautan Bazaar, Mairwa Station, Darouli block, Aandar Bazaar, Rasulpur, Daudpur and reached Chhapra Railway Station on October 23, covering a distance of 184 kilometres.

Tirhut Zone

The Tirhut Zone yatra, traversing through West Champaran, East Champaran and Muzaffarpur districts. It covered a total distance of 236 kilometers from October 16 to October 25, 2024. The march began on October 16 from the historic Bhitiharwa Ashram in the Gonaha block, with participants gathering at 9:30 AM. Prior to the commencement, a tribute was paid at 8 AM to Mahatma Gandhi's statue, attended by CPI(ML) Central Committee member and Sikta MLA Veerendra Prasad Gupta, Saroj Chaube (General Secretary of the Mid-day meal Workers Union), along with hundreds of others including RJD leaders.

As the march progressed, a street meeting was organised at Bhathoda market, and further tributes were made at the statues of Shaheed Bhagat Singh and Abdul Hamid in Naraktia Ganj. Throughout the march, numerous public dialogues and street meetings were held, particularly in Dalit and marginalised communities. Significant participation from women and local leaders emphasised pressing issues

such as housing, income certificates, and violence against vulnerable groups.

The march concluded on October 25 at Jubba Sahni Park in Muzaffarpur, culminating in a day filled with street meetings and tributes, reinforcing the momentum of the movement.

The Demands

“Smart meter bade lootere dada”... a song that was played as the padyatra nuzzled through villages and town bazaars... was not only catchy, but struck a rhythm with the deep rooted dissonance that the people of Bihar have been feeling against the double engine government.

Whether it is the blood-sucking smart meter that has made electricity exponentially expensive, or the land survey being carried out that is resulting in mass eviction of the poor and Dalit bastis being arsoned, the common people felt that it was their inner voices that the padyatra was resounding.

The Nitish Kumar-led Bihar Government is conducting a land survey to allegedly maintain transparent land records and to remove “encroachment” on government lands. While the poor have not been able to get their land records in order due to government apathy, the government has taken up the land survey, which aims to make records transparent and to remove so-called encroachments from government lands. Which means that the poor will be evicted from the lands they have been tilling for several decades and generations, and on which they have built their homes. The arson of Dalit basti in Nawada, Raghunath Das's plea to save his village's lands, are all symptomatic of the land survey which is being conducted, and the rejection of the same by the poor and Dalit families in Bihar. They have realised the toll that the land survey will take on their lives

and livelihoods. It is in this context that the yatra sought five decimal land for the landless and pucca houses for the poor be fulfilled, until which time, the land survey shall not be undertaken.

For the past two years, smart meters have been installed through force, coercion and deception in every household across Bihar. Electricity bills are coming in thousands, even for the poor and heavy penalty is being levied upon non-payment of the bills, including imprisonment. The electricity bills generated for an entire month are now being generated for a week due to the smart meter! Threat of cutting off connections upon not paying the bills is like a sword hanging over the necks of common people. Prepaid system is being brought in, which will spell doom for the poor. Therefore, the yatra sought that the government must instead look at subsidising electricity bills for all.

As per its own survey, the Bihar Government found 94,33,312 families who are earning less than Rs. 6,000/- monthly income and under the ‘Laghu Uddham Yojana’, announced Rs. 2 lakh for such families. Only 40,000 families have received the first installment of the amount, and it is estimated that it will take 236 years for all the families to receive the entire amount! However, the government's move to reduce the amount to Rs. 72,000, non-issuance of the income certificates of below Rs. 72,000 income and seeking applications online has become a cruel joke. Moreover, important livelihood activities like animal husbandry are not included in the list of small enterprises issued by the government. Therefore, the CPIML called for a state-wide movement on unconditional issuance of income certificates for less than Rs. 72,000 to poor families, collecting applications offline, inclusion of animal husbandry in the list of small enterprises, housing, land and pucca houses for the poor.

Preceding the Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra, the ‘Haq Do Vada Nibhao’ campaign was undertaken at every block level, demanding that requisite documents to avail this compensation be provided. In continuation of this campaign, the yatra took up the issue to ensure economic safeguards for the poor households in Bihar.

While the socioeconomic survey was a massive reality check in Bihar, the subsequent announcement for increased reservation and financial assistance and the sizable recruitment of teachers indicated a welcome direction. However, in reality, atrocities against Dalits have also increased manifold. The unbridled feudal and caste forces who once oppressed the toiling masses, seem to have made a comeback as we have seen in the case of Nawada. Bakraur and Bodh Gaya also witnessed atrocities against Dalits. Raj Kumar Manjhi of Imamganj in Gaya was killed for opposing sexual harassment of the women from Dalit community. The daughters of a Manjhi family in Imamganj were raped, while in Fatehpur a Dalit girl was raped by a BJP leader. Sunil Chandravanshi, a leader of CPIML who was fighting for rights of Dalits was also killed recently. While they all await justice for the crimes they suffered, the implementation of the socioeconomic survey in the form of expansion of reservation to 65% would also go a long way in the betterment of Bihar.

Bihar is among the last few states in sustainable development. The report has only re-affirmed the socio-economic survey, which exposed the truth of poverty, migration and homelessness, as also the vicious cycle of under-development in Bihar. This is despite Bihar being ruled by the ‘double engine’ government for a long time. Therefore, a comprehensive policy and special status for Bihar is essential. The yatra called upon the people to demand a special status

for Bihar from the Central and State Governments.

It was not only the concerns and issues that people in Bihar faced that was foregrounded the yatra, but placards demanding justice for Prof. GN Sai Baba, whose recent death left all democracy lovers shattered, and to free all political prisoners, which echoed throughout the yatra. This made the yatra not only Bihar-centric, but that which would resonate with the country's toiling masses and struggles for democracy.

Badlo Bihar Nyay Sammelan

The 10-day long Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra saw the culmination in the Badlo Bihar Nyay Sammelan that was organised in the Miller High School Grounds in Patna on October 27, 2024. Comrade Meena Tiwari, who chaired the convention, said that the Nitish Kumar Government has spelled destruction in Bihar and the yatra aimed to challenge the consistent attacks against the toiling masses of Bihar and to raise our voice in unison for justice.

Addressing the convention, CPIML General Secretary Comrade Dipankar criticised the BJP-led Union Government and Nitish Kumar-led Bihar Government of being apathetic towards the people and their welfare. "When a dam breached in Bihar, Nitish Kumar was strategising for the 2025 elections in Patna. The land survey rolled out by his government aims to dispossess the poor from their lands and to create land banks for the corporates. Those residing on government lands must be given ownership documents before conducting any such survey," he said and added that smart meters is a symbol of loot of people's money and corruption. He further said that the death of 70 people in Siwan after consuming illicit liquor highlights the disinterest of the JD(U) ruled government to put an end to liquor

mafia. "The Nyay Yatra transformed into a people's movement, as the demands it raised against the land survey and the smart meters resonated with them, which garnered strong solidarity," he said.

The Convention passed a 12-Point Resolution as follows:

1. Over the past three months, CPI(ML) undertook the "Haq Do, Vada Nibhao" as an extension of which, the Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra was organised between October 16th and 25th, 2024. The convention expressed solidarity with all the issues raised during the yatra.

2. The convention demanded that the government fulfil its promise to guarantee Rs. 2,00,000, 5 decimal land and pucca houses for all people. It calls for a physical survey of all poor settlements and the regularisation of Dalit and poor communities, including Musahar, Dom, Mehtar, Halkhor, Nat, and Bakho, and to provide documents for land. The convention demanded that the land survey in the state be halted until land documents for all people are properly issued.

3. In cases of violence against Dalits, poor, women, and minorities the convention demanded speedy trials be conducted in every incident of caste atrocity, and District Magistrates and Superintendents of Police be held accountable.

4. There is an intense public opposition to the prepaid smart meter system in the state. If the government does not withdraw this anti-people, anti-poor scheme within a month, a Bihar Bandh will be called by the public. The convention also demanded that electricity rates be halved and that 200 units of electricity be provided free of charge for agricultural work and to poor households.

5. The government make immediate arrangements to provide relief for flood victims. It calls for compensation of Rs. 50,000 per acre of crop loss to farmers and adequate flood damage

compensation for all affected people. Given the recurring flood issue, the convention demands studies and reviews of all river water projects and a permanent solution for the disaster.

6. The government stop meting out injustice against scheme workers in the state and guarantee fair wages/allowances for over one million scheme workers (Jeevika didis, ASHA, Anganwadi workers, midday meal workers, rural nurses, MGNREGA labourers, sanitation workers, etc.) as per the new wage rates announced by the central government. The convention demands the government meet the demands of Jeevika workers and resolve their ongoing strike in the state.

7. The expansion of reservation in Bihar be included in the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution, a national caste census be conducted, and Bihar be granted special status without further delay.

8. The closed mills, including those for sugar, jute, paper, and yarn, be re-opened, and a comprehensive action plan be made for establishing a chain of agriculture-based industries.

9. Instead of granting Bihar special status and a special package for poverty eradication, the state has been subjected to divisive politics. BJP MP and Minister Giriraj Singh is distributing trishul during his visits to the state. The convention, while upholding Bihar's shared cultural heritage, calls on the people to completely reject Giriraj Singh's visits and the BJP's hateful campaign.

10. The convention expressed sincere gratitude to those who supported, joined, and assisted in the Yatra.

11. During the Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra, people from various places, submitted hundreds of petitions and demand letters. The convention resolved to take all necessary steps to address these demands.

12. The convention called upon the people of Bihar to support INDIA Alliance candidates in the by-elections in Tarari, Ramgarh, Imamganj and Belaganj assembly seats.

A New Dawn for Bihar

In the heart of rural Bihar, where the land bears witness to generations of struggle and the air is thick with untold hardships, the Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra has left an indelible mark. This 10-day-long padyatra (foot-march), under the vibrant red flags of CPIML, has evolved into a powerful movement. Each step taken in this march resonates with a fierce resolve, symbolising the unwavering determination of the people to reclaim their rights and forge a brighter future.

The Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra has been defined by solidarity across generations, elderly villagers with young activists bound together by a common purpose: to reclaim their rights and confront the enduring legacies of feudal oppression, caste violence, and state neglect. This powerful show of unity infuses the yatra with an unparalleled energy as it traverses the state, sowing the seeds of hope along the way.

This march was not merely a journey across the terrain of Bihar; it was a profound odyssey through the lives and struggles of its people. Among the many stories that have emerged from this journey, a few stand out as profound symbols of the movement's core. These stories, like that of Raghunath Das, Sajjan Manjhi, Sanjay Manjhi, brought to life the suffering and resilience of Bihar's most marginalised communities.

The Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra is more than just a journey; it is a symbol of hope, defiance, and the unwavering will to fight for justice. With every step, every voice raised, and every red flag unfurled, the Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra has sown the seeds of a new dawn in Bihar. ■

Students-Youth Plagued by Apathy of Bihar Govt

▲ DHANANJAY

With several demands seeking a better and just Bihar, the Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra was undertaken across several zones in the state. While the yatra struck a chord with the common people, students and youth felt a special connection with the initiative of CPIML, as it concerns their future, which they feel has been put at stake by the Nitish Kumar-led State Government. On the one hand we know that quality of education is considered a crucial parameter for assessing the level of development of a society, a region, a village or a caste group; on the other hand, we witness a blanket rejection of concerns related to education by the current Government of Bihar. We have to understand the way in which the sitting Government of Bihar has been indifferent towards the worsening quality of education.

This is precisely what was echoed in the voices of the youth, both young men and women students when Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra crossed through the Magadh region. When the yatra halted at night in Lodipur, Tekari, I interacted with the primary school students of the Government School. Harsh Kumar, a bright student, retorted to my questions about the quality of education by saying that teachers worked like contractors. "Often, they come only to mark their attendance and leave without paying any heed to the school curriculum or classroom teaching," he said. He also mentioned the appalling quality of the mid-day meals, remarking that when they complain to the officials about worms being found in the cooked rice, they shun their concerns and ask them to simply pick out the worm before consuming the food. When asked whether they have computers in school, they responded that they do but are not functional. The state of affairs of education in Bihar is not the burden of teachers alone, but that of the state government which has not taken any cognizance to the crumbling structures of all three levels of education, i.e., primary, secondary and higher education. What we need to take note of and question, is the intention, or the lack thereof, of the Nitish Kumar Government. While teacher absenteeism must be taken into account, several other infrastructural lapses which demotivate students must be addressed. There are teachers who are committed and do their jobs honestly, and are committed to impart rational, critical and scientific education in schools.

While the Nitish Government has failed to provide for the people of Bihar, despite the empty promises made, the same goes for the education system in the state. Why is the Jal-Nal scheme, which promises potable tap water, not implemented in schools? Why do students still have to rely on the age-old hand pumps for drinking water? It is only very recently that some schools got an electric submersible water supply system installed. And then there is the persistent problem of low enrolment and drop-out rates of students, which is apparent when many students are openly accepting that they do not attend school. We can already sense the gravity of the situation going by the 2023 survey conducted by the Jan Jagran Shakti Sangathan that

focussed on the state of primary education in Bihar. This survey, which sampled 81 Government and primary and upper primary schools in Bihar, found that the pupil attendance stood abysmally low at a meagre 20% on the day of the survey. It was seen that the students from poor and marginalised backgrounds had low attendance, which was due to the lack of infrastructure and other academic issues in schools. None of the schools met all the norms of Right to Education, including pupil to teacher ratio (one teacher per 30 students). It was seen that this ratio was met by only 5% of the upper primary school and 30% of the primary schools. When the survey was conducted, it was seen that only 58% of the teaching workforce was on duty. Despite the DBT (direct benefit transfer) scheme for students, the educational needs of children are not met as the poor economic state of the families compel them to choose between either using the amount for subsistence or school related provisions; often forced to go with the former. Poor quality of mid-day meals is another factor causing low attendance. Provision of mid-day meal was an incentivising factor for many underprivileged students to attend schools. Further 9% of the schools of the total sample size, shockingly, happen to have no building! COVID had a significant negative impact on an already substandard state of education. Teachers reported that students in classes between 1-5 had forgotten their basic reading and writing by the time the schools reopened. Thus, a lot needs to be done in terms of both policy and implementation level changes with respect to the state of Government schools of Bihar; towards which the current Government has turned a complete blind eye.

I was invited by the students of the Central University of South Bihar. And during that interaction I was told how the students feel alienated in their journeys of higher education. They lamented about their voicelessness, contrasting themselves with the students of JNU who through its student body – the JNUSU – have a way of having their issues, concerns and aspirations heard. “Any infrastructural or disciplinary qualms be it the lack of a 24/7 functioning library or curfew timings in the hostel get the consideration of the administration because the students can organise meetings, stage demonstrations and protest against any unfavourable development in the university”, they said. We know that restrictions on the students of higher education in the name of safety is also an impediment to quality education. There is a quote in Sanskrit – Sa vidya ya vimuktaye – which translates to “where there is education, there is freedom”. Speaking of impediments further, while the expectations from Central University of South Bihar were to change the course of higher education, with emphasis on the promise of rational and scientific education, what we witness is a Sangh endorsed appointments in faculty which is rampant in the University. Can we promise our youth a quality education with such right-wing ideology peddling faculties and our university spaces becoming an RSS “intellectuals” presidio? The night we stayed near South Bihar Central University, the students of that university had organised a public meeting in Dharamshala village. In this meeting, issues such as exclusion of Bahujan students from education and NEP were to be discussed. But, they had to be on the watch, as surveillance on students and initiating action against them like proctorial enquiry for organising gatherings and talks

would have negative repercussions on them. Students have not been able to voice their concerns in regard to the issues they face. I was also informed that there were very serious concerns of blade and needle being found in the hostel food, or casteism at different centres, etc., go unaddressed as there is no instituted student-oriented organisation like the JNUSU for complaint, redressal and betterment of students.

And most importantly, the problem of migrating students for quality education still weighs heavily on the development of Bihar. Students still are desperate to move out of Bihar and go to cities like Delhi where they trust that the quality of education is exponentially better. South Bihar is known as the land of the enlightened one – Lord Buddha. How unfortunate it is that students of this region encounter such grave challenges for some of the basic and rightful provisions when it comes to quality education. And as JNUSU president I was pained to hear about such experiences of the students of Central University of South Bihar. Generally speaking, the problem which remains and ones that stood out for me in the course of my participation in Badlo Bihar Nyay Yatra was the systematic exclusion of students from marginalised and Bahujan backgrounds of Bihar from quality education.

This yatra is an attempt to cover the entire state and take note of the living condition of citizens of Bihar, issues concerning education is one aspect of it. The yatra is a ray of hope highlighting several issues; the issue of quality education and especially the voices of students resonated with me the most. ■

Comrade AK Roy's Vision and its Relevance Today

▲ AKASH BHATTACHARYA

Revolution is never a negative politics. It is not the politics of the opposition, but the politics of the alternative. It is not the politics of merely a new party, it is the politics of a new class.

- Comrade A.K. Roy, in *Birsa to Lenin: A New Dalit Revolution*

The merger of the Marxist Coordination Committee (MCC) with CPI-ML (Liberation) is a good time to revisit the legacy of Comrade AK Roy – the founder and arguably the tallest leader of the MCC. Those of us involved in building a Left democratic politics, to fight both the Hindutva/corporate regime and to overturn the inadequacies of pre-Hindutva liberal democracy, have a lot to learn from the life and vision of Comrade Roy.

Much has been written about his commitment, simplicity, and dedication. But what political tendency did he represent? And what possibilities does his stream of the Left hold for building a new democratic India?

The influence of Marxism on Indian society and politics extends beyond the leading Communist parties. Throughout the twentieth century, activists, lawyers, judges, intellectuals, writers, artists, and even bureaucrats, have held strong Marxist leanings, although not all of them were officially affiliated to the Communist parties. Some of them have worked closely with fraternal democratic streams – Dalit Bahujan Adivasi movements, women's movements, environmental movements, movements for self-determination, among others. In the process, the

so-called "independent" Marxists, have enriched these streams, as well as widened the import of Marxism in the Indian context. Their work, in turn, have significantly influenced the work of Communist Parties.

AK Roy and Shankar Guha Niyogi are two of the tallest names in the list of "independent" Left political leaders. Both Roy and Niyogi peaked as leaders in the 1970s and 80s – a time of fresh churnings in the Left movement. Both dug deep in their chosen terrains – the former in the Chhota Nagpur region of the then Bihar and the later in the Chhattisgarh region of the then Madhya Pradesh. Both masterfully used their locations to experiment and throw up fresh possibilities for the Left and for Indian democracy.

Roy and Niyogi brought together class-based and identity-oriented politics and pioneered the movements for separate statehood for Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh respectively. Both challenged unequal development and internal colonialism, and established these as key elements of a Left-democratic transformative agenda. They gave a powerful social and political orientation to economic struggles, especially the trade-union movement, and set glorious examples of continuous grassroots work.

AK Roy also led the way in bringing peoples' voices into the Parliament through his stints in Bihar Vidhan Sabha and Lok Sabha. Notably, his three stints in the Lok Sabha, materialized without the electoral backing of any mainstream political party. It was largely a product of MCC's organizational work in the complicated coal mafia-infested terrain of Dhanbad. In the Parliament, Roy voiced the needs of the Dalit, Adivasi and working people of Chhota Nagpur, who were victims of economic exploitation, social discrimination, unequal development and internal colonization.

Roy emphasized that casteism, inequality, the state's centralizing tendencies, class inequality, are core questions in our national democratic project. At the same time, struggles against these are unlikely to succeed unless underpinned by a systemic challenge to feudalism, capitalism and imperialism. The current generation of CPI-ML leaders are not only trying to strengthen their own practice along these lines, but also trying to integrate these into the larger anti-fascist / democratic agenda. Coming in this context, the CPI-ML / MCC merger is a convergence from below of two democratic currents.

Each of Roy's major interventions holds out valuable lessons for building a Left-democratic alternative in Indian politics. A co-founder of the Jharkhand movement, Roy strongly supported regional autonomy – not for the enrichment of the regional feudal and big business interests, but for the empowerment of the people. For Jharkhand, this of course means that fighting communal-corporate interests must be an integral part of the Jharkhand identity. Extended to the national plane, this implies that the demand for federalism must

be underpinned by a vision of pro-people regional development.

Roy's efforts towards class-based organizing involved a unique combination of economic struggles, social initiatives, and political awareness. MCC's activities had a strong trade union base but it was not limited to union work. It extended to community organizing and a range of grassroots initiatives. Parallel to Shankar Guha Niyogi and the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM), Roy and MCC's work presents a comprehensive approach to class-based organizing: much needed in times of increasing contractualization of work, and a migratory and precarious working class.

Organizing among Dalits and Adivasis, Roy realized the significance of a social revolution, parallel to attempts to capture political power, and wanted Marxists to spearhead it. His emphasis on social transformation alongside political transformation places Roy firmly in continuity with the Phule-Ambedkar tradition. Social initiatives are indeed of great importance at a time when Hindutva/corporate culture has infiltrated Indian society deeply enough to hold sway despite a few electoral defeats of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP).

Never comfortable with the pigeonholing of Indian society into neat categories, Roy believed that feudalism, capitalism and colonialism all existed in Indian society in varying proportions. At a time when we are trying to understand the structure of the Hindutva/corporate state and its location as a sub-imperial power in the United States-Israel axis, Roy insights are well-taken.

Above all, it is Roy's open-mindedness and ideological clarity that enabled him to build an "independent" organization that believed in and practiced Left-democratic solidarity right from the start. This approach has played a key role in enabling the merger. Roy is no longer around to teach us how it is done, but his legacy is a lesson in itself.

Independent Left initiatives have always had a depth of practice, but today they must join hands with Left parties to build a powerful Left democratic alternative. Left parties must also be willing to integrate a wide range of democratic tendencies in order to better consolidate the Left voice on the national and international planes. Perhaps the CPI-ML / MCC merger will pave the way for more of such convergences from below. That will be the best tribute to Comrade Roy's life and work. ■

The Pretense of Normalcy in Jammu and Kashmir

▲ SAIYED ISHFAQ

"Normalcy, normalcy. It sounds obscene when one realises it is built on seventy thousand corpses. The peace of the graveyard, the normalcy of death gives way to."

- Agha Shahid Ali

Voting in Desperation

Ever since the abrogation of Article 370 and 35-A in 2019, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led government of India and the mainstream media have gone to great lengths to justify the move. It's in the best interests of the Kashmiris, claims the patronising politicians and opinion-makers – saviours of the allegedly infantile Kashmiri Muslims swayed by Pakistan, Islamists and militants. The recently concluded Assembly elections are being projected as a decisive milestone in the return to normalcy.

The BJP got a substantial number of seats (27 out of 90, all of which were in Jammu and none in Kashmir), allowing its leaders to claim that the state had accepted both the abrogation and the party which spearheaded it. The actual story is different. Given the amount of power the union government has accumulated in the state since 2019, the BJP's electoral defeat is a statement of rejection by the people, especially of Kashmir. The National Conference (NC) – Congress coalition, headed by Omar Abdullah – formed the government with 49 seats.

The entry of the traditional "separatists" – the Jamaat-e-Islami – into the electoral fold buttressed the government's normalcy claims. Their electoral performance was muted and uneventful. For their supporters, this was a desperate move to prevent complete annihilation of their political voice rather than a meaningful move towards national integration. The elections indeed witnessed a decent participation. 63.88% of the people voted. This was the highest turnout since 1987 (74.9%), which was also the last time that Jamaat-e-Islami participated in the elections.

The so-called free and fair polls hid a deeper reality.

For a lot of people, participation in these polls were not optional. It was almost compulsory in order to avert the suspicious gaze of the Union government, and to ensure that their political opinion at least counted for something despite severely curtailed powers of the Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) Assembly.

Curtailed Powers of the Assembly

The Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019 had stripped the state of a political voice by converting Jammu and Kashmir into a union territory (with legislature) and Ladakh into one without a legislature. With severely curtailed powers, the elected Assembly of J&K is barely capable of governing effectively.

The Reorganisation Act of 2019 gave the New Delhi appointed Lieutenant Governor (LG) a much bigger role compared with the Assembly. The LG now has wide-ranging powers over public orders, police, the bureaucracy, the anti-corruption bureau, and in other spheres. There is little check on the discretionary powers of the LG. The LG's predominance over the Assembly has been outlined in two key provisions.

First, Section 32 of the Act, which deals with the extent of legislative power of the Assembly, states that "subject to the provisions of this Act, the Legislative Assembly may make laws for the whole or any part of the Union territory of Jammu and Kashmir with respect to any of the matters enumerated in the State List except the subjects mentioned at entries 1 and 2, namely "Public Order" and "Police" respectively or the Concurrent List in the Seventh Schedule to the Constitution of India in so far as any such matter is applicable in relation to the Union

territories." States, on the other hand, can legislate on subjects in the Concurrent List, to the extent that such a law is not repugnant or contrary to the central law on the issue.

Second, Section 36, which deals with special provisions as to financial Bills. This provision states that a Bill or amendment "shall not be introduced into, or moved in, the Legislative Assembly except on the recommendation of the Lieutenant Governor", if such Bill deals with, among other aspects, "the amendment of the law with respect to any financial obligations undertaken or to be undertaken by the Government of the Union territory...". This provision has wide import since virtually every policy decision could create a financial obligation for the Union Territory.

New Political Dynamics

Under such extraordinary circumstances, the elections (to the Lok Sabha earlier in the year and now to the state assembly) have thrown up fresh political dynamics.

In the run up to the Lok Sabha elections, several new parties emerged, e.g. the Democratic Progressive Azad Party (DPAP) led by Ghulam Nabi Azad, and the Apni Party (AP) led by Altaf Bukhari, which split from the Congress and the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) respectively. The People's Conference led by Sajad Lone, along with these parties, were deemed as proxies or the "B teams" of BJP by the people, because of their apparent closeness with the union government and their willingness to form alliances with the BJP.

The chaos and confusion created due to the introduction of these "proxies" filled the air with extreme

mistrust and uncertainty during the Lok Sabha elections. While this initially helped the NC in consolidating its voter base and cadres against a fractured opposition, the sudden and unprecedented candidature of Engineer Sheikh Abdul Rasheed caught the NC and Omar Abdullah unprepared.

As questionable as the sudden rise and social media campaign of Sheikh Abdul Rasheed was, his victory over Omar Abdullah on an important seat was significant. A Kashmiri existing on the margins of mainstream politics and someone who had been in jail because of the charges of separatism represented the emotions on the ground better than an established NC leader and former Chief Minister.

Defeats during the parliamentary elections proved a set-back to many small parties and independent candidates. A rift emerged between the PC and AP which eventually led to a more fragmented performance of these parties. The NC took advantage of the situation to emerge as the single largest force in the state Assembly elections after a period of around 20 years.

While the Assembly elections reflected a mass rejection of the BJP in Muslim dominated Kashmir, it threw up the BJP as an important force in Hindu dominated Jammu. This presents the disturbing possibility of strong religious polarisation and tensions between the two regions. Notably, most of the recent violence has been witnessed in Jammu rather than Kashmir. The people of J&K must guard against the mischievous designs of the BJP to hold sway over Jammu and isolate Kashmir.

The Congress failed to keep the BJP in check in Jammu. The Congress had

contested a total of 32 seats in J&K, out of which it was only able to secure only 6 seats, out of which only 1 was in Jammu. 5 of these 6 seats were from Kashmir, indicating that their victory was a vote in favour of forces against the BJP instead of being a testament to the Congress as such.

A State Under Siege

Those who have bought into the narrative of normalcy surrounding the Assembly elections have mistaken the calm of fear as the peace of tranquillity. In the weeks following the abrogation of Article 370, around 5000 people were arrested in Jammu and Kashmir, according to Home Ministry reports. The actual figures, likely to be much higher, remain unknown. Kashmiri mainstream leaders, including former allies of the BJP have been declared as “separatists” and the agents of Pakistan.

The government claimed that violence has disappeared from the region. Since 2021, there have been 33 militant-related attacks in Jammu, according to official data. In 2024 alone, the region has seen eight

attacks, in which 11 soldiers have been killed and 18 injured. Civilian deaths in Jammu in the first six months of this year were 12, the same number as the whole of 2023.

State repression and surveillance has reached unprecedented levels. People are being regularly imprisoned under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), government employees’ right to protest has been officially scrapped, and the people have been subjected to a prolonged internet blockade and internet monitoring.

The development of Jammu and Kashmir is in fact the development of big corporations. The Jammu and Kashmir Land Allotment Policy (2021-30) has made it easier for the corporates to take over lands in the name of business and development. The ongoing protest by the Kargil Democratic Alliance and the Leh Apex body is a direct response to this takeover by the corporates.

In Jammu alone 38,000 trees of the Raika Forest were approved for being

chopped off for the construction of a new High Court complex: a recipe for environmental degradation and mass displacement. The “Save Raika Forest” movement began in Jammu in 2021 in response to this, and it has been continuing ever since. Several climate change activists have been repeatedly detained by the government in an attempt to quash the movement.

Unemployment is at its highest in decades (18.3% as per government data, which is more than double the national figure of 8%), although tourism has significantly grown. The growth of tourism has been projected as a marker of “safety” and integration with India, and the government wants to make it the core plank of the region’s economy. This will substantially curtail the region’s economic independence for survival.

Jammu and Kashmir clearly remain a state under siege. Democratic forces must expose this façade of normalcy and listen to the voices of the people of the region – both within the Assembly and outside. ■

Palestine Solidarity Day Observed

On October 7, 2024, as the Israeli genocidal war on Gaza entered its second year, Palestine Solidarity meetings and marches were held across the country expressing their strong solidarity with the people of Palestine and their struggle for Liberation. The Left Parties in India, including CPI(ML) Liberation, CPI(M) and CPI among others had issued a joint statement to observe October 7 as day of solidarity with Palestinians, calling for Immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

In Delhi, the Palestine Solidarity meeting was organised at Jantar Mantar, Delhi, which was joined by CPI(ML) Liberation General Secretary Com. Dipankar and leaders and activists from AICCTU, AIPWA and AISA. Addressing the gathering, Com. Dipankar expressed his solidarity with the people of Palestine against the US backed

Israel’s genocidal war in Gaza. He said the Palestinian Liberation struggle is also our struggle, and we must stand steadfast with the people of Palestine in this struggle against occupation and injustice. He added that by choosing to side with Israel, the Modi government in India has betrayed the anti-colonial legacy of our freedom movement and our country’s long history of solidarity with the struggles for justice and freedom. He also condemned Israel’s bombing and military aggression on Lebanon and said that Israel’s act of using everyday civilian items into tools of war is a threat to everyone and everywhere.

The Israeli attack on Lebanon comes at a time when air in Gaza is still filled with the smell of bombs, blood and death, and not an inch of land in the besieged coastal strip is free from destruction. Gaza had been facing

a yearlong genocidal war by Israel with backing from the United States and other western countries. More than 40,000 people are killed in Gaza as per the official estimates, including women, elderly and children. But with thousands more still missing under the ruins of Gaza, the death toll is estimated to be above 1,25,000 out of the total population of around 2.1 million. Millions are displaced from their land, living under the worst condition imaginable. Occupied West Bank is also facing the grave repressions and violence at hands of Israeli Occupation forces and illegal settlers. Israel has shown that their aim is to dehumanise Palestinians and to carry out ethnic cleansing against the people of Palestine. “Let peace and Palestine prevail by defeating the US-Israel campaign of genocide and colonial occupation. The voice for peace, justice and freedom for Palestinians is also the voice for democracy and independence for Indians. Amplify this voice and oppose the Modi-Adani complicity in the ongoing genocide,” declared Com. Dipankar.

In Bihar, joint marches were organised by Left parties in Patna and other cities. In Patna city, a rally, led by Comrades Shashi Yadav (CPI-ML) and Arun Mishra (CPM) marched from GPO roundabout to Buddha Smriti Park condemning the genocide in Gaza and expressing their solidarity with Palestine. The rally demanded immediate action for peace and justice, rejecting the pro-Israel propaganda being pushed by the RSS-BJP.

Comrades Shashi Yadav speaking at the rally said that with the war, the fascist Israel led by the Netanyahu government, desperate to cling to power, is organising bombings and military aggressions across the region as calls for ceasefire are growing louder and louder in Israel and also across the world. This war isn't about protecting Israel; it's about seizing more land, driving out more people, and erasing the lives and dignity of people of Palestine and Lebanon alike. Their homes, their history, their futures—everything is at stake. She expressed unwavering solidarity with the people of Lebanon and Palestine who are facing Israel's genocidal war. The event saw participation from various democratic and citizens' groups, student organisations, and intellectuals, all rallying for the Palestinian cause, and voicing a firm stand against the global expansion of Israeli-American hegemony.

In Kolkata, a joint rally of Left parties and progressive groups was organised from Esplanade to Ranu Chhaya Mancha. Addressing the protest meeting after the rally, CPIML leader Comrade Jayatu Deshmukh said that calling for an international arms embargo against Israel said that

the Modi government must cut its ties with Israel. He said that Palestine's struggle is for freedom, justice and dignity and this is our struggle too.

In Karnataka, marking the one year of Israel-led genocide against Palestine, hundreds of protestors gathered at Freedom Park in Bengaluru, at a protest organized by Bengaluru for Justice and Peace – a coalition of civil society groups, and which includes AICCTU and AISA. The protestors demanded that the Indian Government and the Karnataka Government immediately cut ties with the Israeli regime to stop being complicit in the genocide of Palestinians. Sachin, Bangalore AISA president addressed the protest and brought attention to how the evil of imperialism is clearly evident in Israel's attacks against Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, and Iran. “Palestinians have paid a heavy human cost in Gaza and the West Bank where countless lives have been lost. Despite this, the Palestinian people continue to resist. It must be noted that despite Congress being in power in Karnataka, pro-Palestine protests are being cracked down upon, with Palestinian flags or even watermelons (a sign of Palestine) being seized if used in such protests. The Bengaluru Police have not only registered FIRs against protestors in the past, but threaten venue owners when any discussion, film-screening, or programme is held indoors..

In Uttarakhand, CPI(ML) organised a protest at Budh Park, Haldwani, to demand solidarity with the Palestinian people and an immediate halt to the Israel's genocide war in Gaza. CPI(ML) leader Comrade Raja Bahuguna condemned the one-year-long Israeli attacks, criticising India's stance under the Modi government, which aligns with Israel and the U.S. imperialist powers. Key demands raised included an end to arms supplies to Israel, Israeli military withdrawal from Gaza and West Bank, and global humanitarian support for Gaza. The event saw participation from various social and political activists.

Palestine Solidarity Day was observed in various other states including Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Assam. In Maharashtra, a Palestine solidarity event was organised on October 8 at Shivaji Mandir Hall, Dadar Mumbai. This event was attended by CPIML leader Comrade Ajit Patil, CPIM Politburo member Comrade Ashok Dhawale, CPI leader Comrade Prakash Reddy, social activist Tushar Gandhi (great-grandson of Mahatma Gandhi), Indio-Palestine Solidarity Forum national coordinator Feroj Mithiborwala, Samajwadi Party leader Meraj Siddiqui and several other democratic and progressive activists. ■

A Surprising Mandate by the Sri Lankan People

▲ DIPANKAR BHATTACHARYA

The outcome of the presidential election in Sri Lanka has sprung a major surprise. Rejecting the two parties or coalitions that have long dominated Sri Lankan politics - the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the United National Party - Sri Lanka has opted for a new choice. Anura Kumara Disanayake, leader of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has won the presidency as a candidate supported by the coalition National People's Power (NPP). The announcement came after the second round of counting of preferential votes - Disanayake, though falling short of the 50% benchmark, was announced the winner way ahead of his rivals. Disanayake polled 42.31 percent of the popular vote while runner-up Sajith Premadasa, head of the opposition alliance Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), secured 32.76 percent and incumbent President Ranil Wickremesinghe finished a distant third with 17.27 percent of the popular vote.

While the rise of the JVP/NPP to the centre of the Sri Lankan election scene may appear rather sudden and spectacular (five years ago Disanayake had polled only a little above 3 percent), the JVP has been a well-known political entity in Sri Lanka for decades. Formed in 1965 as a breakaway communist group by Rohana Wijeweera, the JVP led a failed insurrection to capture power in 1971 leading to the arrest of Wijeweera and other JVP leaders and activists. Wijeweera was released in 1977 and JVP entered the electoral arena. In 1982 Wijeweera polled

4.16 percent vote to finish third in the presidential poll. In 1987 after the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka accord, the JVP which by this time had embraced a virulent anti-Tamil Sinhala chauvinism, launched another organised insurrection, which too failed. After Wijeweera's death, JVP supported the SLFP in 1994, the main opposition party of the time, and in 2004 it joined the UPFA government and supported the war against the LTTE. Though emerging from the Left movement in Sri Lanka, over the years the JVP thus acquired a strong Sinhala chauvinist streak which has become its main driver at certain key junctures.

However, the trigger for the surprising JVP/NPP victory in 2024 came from the popular upheaval known as Argalaya (the struggle) that swept Sri Lanka from March 2022 and evicted the ruling Rajapaksa government and ended its family control over much of the Sri Lankan administration. Acute economic crisis caused by mismanagement and corruption, crony capitalism and external pressures (including pressure from the Modi government to give energy sector contracts to Adani) undermining Sri Lanka's economic sovereignty had landed Sri Lanka in an unsustainable situation. This coupled with the anger against the Rajapaksa family's expanding control over the Sri Lankan economy and administration had made the Rajapaksa brothers Gotabaya and Mahinda extremely unpopular. The Argalaya reflected a deep quest for an alternative and the election result also reflects the

same with Disanayake becoming the beneficiary of this popular quest.

The result however also reflects the fractured state of Sri Lankan society. Disanayake polled very low votes in Tamil and Muslim dominated regions. Otherwise, he could have crossed the 50 percent benchmark in the first round itself. In the second round when second preference votes were counted, it was Premadasa who led over Disanayake. The Disanayake campaign did make a lot of promises to bring about economic recovery, root out corruption and defend Sri Lanka's political and economic sovereignty, but there were no real overtures to win the trust of the Tamil and Muslim minorities. If Disanayake wants to make a really new start in Sri Lanka it cannot be done just on the basis of changes in economic policies, it will also call for some real reconciliation with the minorities and reconciliation can only happen on the basis of acknowledgement of truth, and delivery of justice. The ball is in Disanayake's court.

The changes in Sri Lanka are also an important test for India's foreign policy. In the Modi era, India has become more isolated from almost all neighbouring countries. The SAARC, the main platform for regional cooperation in South Asia has virtually been abandoned. India's increasing strategic proximity and convergence with not just the United States but also Israel has contributed to India's isolation from its neighbouring countries. The distrust is deepened by the Modi government's policy of exerting pressure on these neighbours to secure contracts for Adani and other big corporates. From Australia to Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka to Kenya, it is now well known how Modi has consistently gone out of his way to serve Adani's

interests. If the new regimes in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka cancel the Adani contracts, these are not ‘anti-India moves’ by our eastern and southern neighbours but simply defending their own economic interests.

The Modi government's support to Israel at a time when the Netanyahu regime has been waging a relentless genocide on Palestinians for the last one year and is now escalating the offensive into a war on Lebanon, has also made Indian foreign policy increasingly unpopular in South and West Asia. India must of course insist on the security of minority communities both in Bangladesh and in Sri Lanka where there is a painful history of ethnic cleansing and today the RSS is a growing presence building alliances with Sinhala Buddhist extremists. But there must be no knee-jerk reaction to brand the new regimes as anti-India or pro-China. Indian foreign policy must be geared to working closely with the Dissanayake government in the spirit of genuine bilateralism and regional cooperation.



Prof. G.N. Saibaba: A Democrat Martyred by “Democracy”

Professor GN Saibaba breathed his last at thirty-six past eight in the evening on 12 October 2024. His heart had stopped functioning and doctors were trying desperately to revive him, but it was not to be. Saibaba was 57 years old. He died due to complications arising after the removal of gallstones – a procedure that is seldom life-threatening. But Saibaba did not enter the operation theatre under normal circumstances.

Saibaba's body – 90% disabled – had been further weakened by a decade of unjust imprisonment under extremely harsh and torturous conditions. Unlike fellow political prisoners Father Stan Swamy, Pandu Narote and Jiya Lal, Saibaba did not die in custody. But there can be no doubt that the ravages of imprisonment hastened his death. Before we delve into the details of how the criminal justice system was utilised to brutalise his body, let's recall how the state felt threatened by the mind that his disabled body encased. Saibaba, a former Delhi University professor, was arrested along with five others under Section 18 of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967, alongside other criminal provisions in 2014, for “conspiring to wage war against the government”. His “Maoist links” were also brought up quite often. His real “crime” was that he had openly opposed Operation Green Hunt and other measures, had advocated the causes of Dalits and Adivasis facing state repression, as well as that of suppressed nationalities within India.

Since the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) rise to power in 2014, the list of people – ranging from human rights activists to lawyers, and journalists to students – being persecuted for their fidelity to fighting for democratic and progressive rights, has grown rapidly. Starting from the arrests related to Bhima Koregaon in 2018 and protests against CAA in 2020 to the arrests of activist Teesta Setalvad and journalist Mohammad Zubair, the current regime is bent on imprisoning any person who speaks truth to power and exposes the lies and misdeeds of the powerful. The draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, (UAPA) 1967, under which bail is a rare possibility and jail is the rule, has emerged as the most convenient stratagem to silence such voices. The use of the “Maoist” label has also been quite frequent.

GN Saibaba was arrested just prior to the BJP's rise to power – in May 2014 – in connection with two other arrests in 2013 (Prashant Rahi and Hem Mishra). Their arrests were a sign of creeping authoritarianism in the years prior to the BJP's rise: a process which presaged and facilitated the Hindutva ascendancy. Indeed, while the UAPA has been in force since 1967, the Parliament inserted a chapter dedicated to punishing terrorist activities only in 2004 by way of the UAPA Amendment Act, 2004. The law was passed under the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, which came to power in 2004, and became increasingly more draconian through substantial amendments in 2004, 2008 and 2013. Once imprisoned under UAPA, GN Saibaba's body and mind faced the entire might of the criminal justice system. The state spared no efforts to keep him in prison for as long as possible, and under as brutal conditions as possible.

He was finally freed in March 2024, when the Nagpur Bench of the Bombay High Court once again acquitted G.N. Saibaba and all the other 5 accused (one of whom died from Swine flu during imprisonment), citing “dodgy” evidence and lack of technical regularity during the prosecution. The state tried again to stall his release but was not successful this time.

The act of destruction of Saibaba's body was slow and steady. As various illnesses afflicted him in the harsh conditions of prison, he had to be taken to the Nagpur government hospital multiple times in the last few years. Even the doctors requested that he be taken out of jail, but those requests

were ignored. In August 2022, he got a severe continuous fever. Because of that, he became susceptible to COVID also. COVID negatively impacted his health, he continuously caught cold and fever, he would fall unconscious suddenly, and have blackouts.

Saibaba was subjected to solitary confinement in the infamous "anda cell" – a chilly cell with high barracks and an egg-shaped window near the roof through which the winter night's cold air blew in harshly. By the time he was released, Saibaba's body has become vulnerable to minor ailments, which hastened his passing.

Professor GN Saibaba's martyrdom re-emphasizes the necessity to question the validity of laws like UAPA in a democratic country, to stop the misuse of the criminal justice system by any government to quell dissent, to push for the bail and speedy trial of all political prisoners, and to strengthen the resistance against a government that wished to eliminate aspirations of justice for all. How just is a justice system that uses the process to punish? Even if a person is acquitted at the end of a long politically motivated proceeding, how long is too long by constitutional and democratic standards? This question must bother us all.

-Akash Bhattacharya ■



Comrade Sarbjit Johal

Comrade Sarbjit Johal (62), longstanding activist of the London-based South Asia Solidarity Group and a great friend and well-wisher of CPI(ML) passed away in a London hospital on 9 October morning. She had been battling cancer for more than a decade. She attended the Vijayawada conference of the Indian People's Front in February 1992. That was the beginning of her long association with the CPI(ML) movement. In subsequent years she attended conferences of the All India Progressive Women's Association and the 10th and 11th Congresses of the CPI(ML) in Mansa (March 2018) and Patna (February 2023) respectively.

Sarbjit worked as a teacher for many years and inspired many young people. Always a creative activist, she also became an artist in the 200s. Most of her paintings are inspired by protests and struggles of the people. From the protests against massacres in Bihar and the anti-rape movement of 2012-13 to the Shaheen Bagh protests, farmers' movement and the ongoing international solidarity campaign for Palestine in recent years, her paintings exuded energy, compassion and courage. Even a few days before she became completely bed-ridden she was drawing sketches to support an anti-JCB campaign against demolitions.



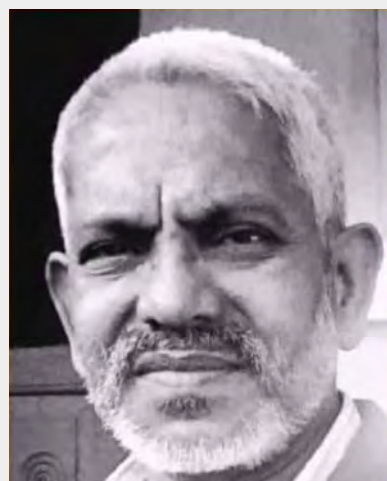
CPI(ML) expresses profound sorrow at the passing of Comrade Sarbjit and conveys deepest condolences to her daughter Chandni and all her comrades and friends. Rest in power, Comrade Sarbjit! ■

Comrade Gopal Naidu

Sculptor, painter, actor, writer, translator and a relentless crusader for people's culture, social justice and human rights, Comrade Gopal Naidu passed away following a massive cardiac attack in early morning on 11 October. He was a versatile activist driven by an unstoppable urge for progressive change. A South Indian brought up in Nagpur, Comrade Gopal was an organic product of the revolutionary communist movement in Telangana, Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh. Inspired by the struggles of the CPI(ML) (Liberation), he had lately joined the party and started taking a lot of interest in expanding the party's work in Maharashtra. His books like "Mitti ki kitab" (the book of soil), "Dangon ka canvas" (Canvas of communal carnage) represent an

evocative combination of sculpture, paintings and writing to talk about the sufferings of the people and also the striving for justice.

The first time I met him in Nagpur on 25 May 2023 over an anti-fascist convention, he recorded a long conversation for a digital platform. More recently we met in Pune in August 2024 on my way back from the PWP conference at Pandharpur. He had converted our Nagpur conversation into an interview for the Hindi journal Samyantar. He had lot of ideas about Maharashtra and for forging broader unity among Left activists and other fighting forces in the arena of people's movements and progressive culture. Revolutionary communists must continue to draw inspiration from the



creative urge, activism and legacy of Comrade Gopal Naidu. Red Salute comrade, rest in power!

-Dipankar Bhattacharya ■

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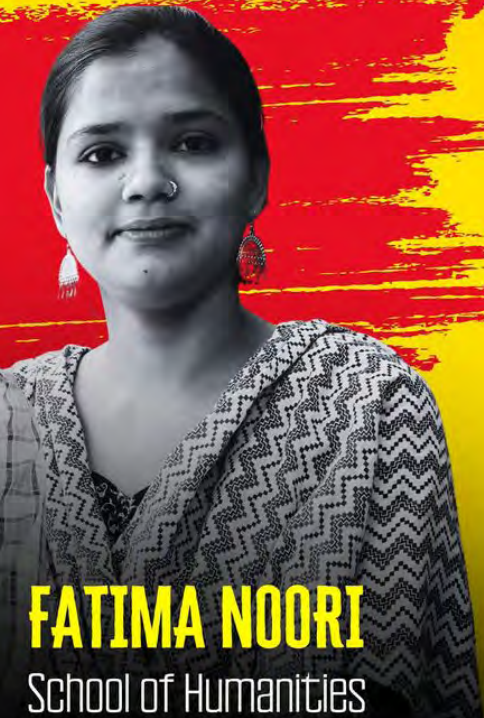
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School of Social Sciences



FATIMA NOORI

School of Humanities

Red Salute Comrade Nitish and Comrade Fatima Noori for winning Councillor post in school of social sciences and school of humanities, respectively, at Hyderabad Central University.

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