

Quarterly MINO-VIEW

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Voice of Minorities & Oppressed People in South Asian Societies



days of farmers' movement: Many lessons to learn from it; **UNITY IS ONE OF THEM**

p. 2



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MINO-VIEW

Quarterly Magazine

Voice of Minorities & Oppressed People in
South Asian Societies

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Objectives

The Mino-View, a quarterly magazine, is a humble attempt to cover all dimensions of minority's life and culture not only in Pakistan but in all states of South Asia. It will act as a mirror reflector, reflecting the issues related to the identified minorities and other oppressed classes in the region. The magazine seeks to serve the objective of shedding light on the darkest issues of our social system by voicing the concerns of minorities and other oppressed sections of the South Asian societies. We will welcome feedback from our respected readers and concerned quarter. We invite social forces from all over the region to join hands for adopting a way towards egalitarianism.

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Editorial

The Indian farmers are protesting for the last four month against the three farm acts which were passed by the Parliament of India in September 2020. which kissan of India considered them as anti farmer bills and in response they started protesting and that protest is going to become a history's longest agitating and protesting movement. According to Haryana Police, there are around 40,000 committed protestors sitting at Singhu and Tikri at the Delhi border. But open source said that the original number is much higher. Farmer unions and their representatives have demanded that laws be repealed and have also stated that they will not accept a compromise. The Indian farmer is refusing to be marginalized any more. Shockingly, over 3.6 lakh Indian farmers have died by suicide since 1995 because of the distressed state of Indian agriculture. This works out that an average of 38 farmer commit suicides every single day for the last 26 years! Imagine if 38 lawyers, doctors or chartered accountants were to die by suicide every day then Panic would spread across the length and breadth of the land. But for decades now, the plight of the Indian farmer has gone largely unreported. Six state governments (Kerala, Punjab, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Delhi and West Bengal) have passed resolutions against the farms acts and three states (Punjab, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan) have tabled counter legislation in their respective state assemblies. These Indian protesting farmers going through a very hard period, leaving their home and family, bravely faced cold weather and sacrificed more than 300 lives of their fellow farmers to continue their struggle.

Darshan Pal SKM leader addressed the forty-sixth session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in a video message and stressed how the three farm laws - the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance & Farm Services Act, the Farmer's Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act - violated the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas of which India is a signatory.

Editor

Pakistan to renovate gurdwaras, temples across country

The Pakistan government has decided to renovate several holy sites belonging to minorities across the country, in a bid to further strengthen its case of providing safety and security to the minorities living in the country. As per details, several gurdwaras and temples will undergo renovation across Pakistan.

According to statistics, the total number of Sikh gurdwaras and Hindu temples in Pakistan are 1,830.

However, only 31 temples and gurdwaras are operational. Official sources say that the meager number of operational temples and gurdwaras has prompted the government to take action and renovate the minority holy sites.

The Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB), provincial governments along with the Sikh and Hindu community members will be part of the overall renovation process, which is likely to be completed this year. In Punjab province, a Sikh mansion in Rawalpindi will be restored, while renovation in at least two churches and seven Hindu temples is in progress in Lahore.

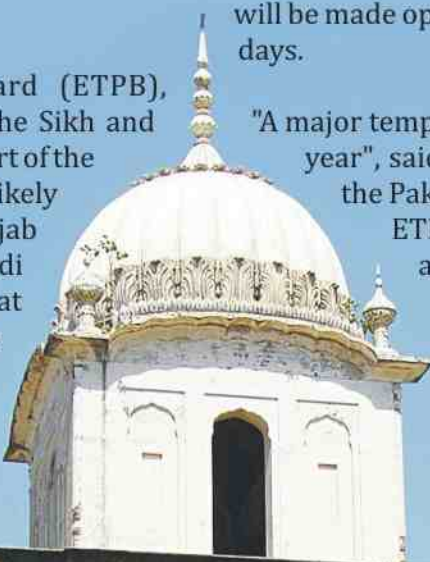
Moreover, the construction of the Hindu temple in the capital

Islamabad, is also likely to be completed in 2021. "Karsewa of Gurdwara Dera Sahib in Lahore has been going on for many years. But the Indian members of the Karsewa Committee had to return home as their visas expired and it could not be renewed because of the pandemic. So this work was stalled and will be resumed soon," Sardar Ameer Sindh, Secretary General of Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (PSGPC), said.

"Similarly, the restoration work at the Gurdwara Bali La, Nankani Sahib and Gurdwara Tanbo Sahib will also be completed soon," he added. The ETPB has maintained that gurdwaras and Hindu temples across Pakistan will be renovated and restored and will be made open to the communities in the coming days.

"A major temple and gurdwara are activated every year", said Ramesh Kumar Vankwani, head of the Pakistan Hindu Council. "Apart from the ETBP, the provincial governments are also playing their part in the restoration of the ancient historical temples and gurdwaras," he added.

Source: Tribune India





days of farmers' movement: Many lessons to learn from it; **UNITY IS ONE OF THEM**

Author: Prabhat Patnaik

Participation in a non-divisive mass movement, i.e., one that is not directed against some other segment of the people, of which the struggle for improving the material conditions of life is a classic example, is the greatest teacher of the values of democracy and unity. This is why political revolutions which are the highest form that such a mass movement can take, are occasions for immense social churning when people's attitudes towards one another are also revolutionised; indeed this constitutes the very condition for the success of the revolution and people learn this elementary fact in the process of participating in the revolution itself.

While the pedagogic role of participation in such a mass movement does not need belabouring, its significance is immense and not always appreciated. The anti-colonial struggle was one obvious example. The fact that large numbers of people suddenly found themselves transcending caste and gender prejudices and even got drawn into acquiring socialist or communist attitudes, was a result of their participation in the anti-colonial struggle. True, the sweep of this struggle in India remained somewhat arrested, but India's march to modernity, enshrined in a constitution that promised equality for all citizens, that established democratic institutions and fundamental rights for all and that separated the State from all religions, would not have been possible otherwise.

This was a profound change in a society characterised by millennia of institutionalised inequality and oppression in the form of the caste system. This change was the product of the movement against colonialism that drew in large numbers of people and promised a new India, though of course individual leaders tasked with framing the constitution, gave expression to this yearning of the people.

Philosopher Akeel Bilgrami gives a specific and quite striking example of the role of a mass movement in changing people's attitudes. In the Bengal Provincial

Legislative Council, a bill providing for women's suffrage had been defeated in 1921. Subsequently however the Khilafat Movement gathered steam and many Muslims who were drawn into it experienced an attitudinal change. Many of them joined the Swarajya Party founded within the Congress by C R Das who had advocated entering legislatures to introduce progressive legislation for change.

When the same Women's Suffrage bill was introduced in 1925 in the Bengal Legislature, it was adopted, with the Swarajist Muslims voting in favour of it. Overcoming gender prejudices typical of a traditional society was made possible within a short span of time because of participation in a mass movement that necessarily brought in important attitudinal changes. That movement itself, though anti imperialist in its thrust, was inspired by a hopelessly traditional objective, of bringing back the Caliphate; even so however, it effected such important attitudinal changes (many of the early Communists, incidentally, were recruited from its ranks).

Exactly a similar effect is being produced by the kisan movement today. A substantial number of the participants in this movement were swayed by the communal frenzy that was unleashed in the wake of the Muzaffarnagar riots in 2013, which by creating a rupture between the Jat Hindus and the Muslims, had paid handsome electoral dividends to the BJP. Electoral hegemony in this region had eluded the BJP until then, but in the wake of the communal riots and the ensuing polarisation between the communities, the BJP not only entered this region, but on the strength of it obtained the lion's share of parliament seats from Uttar Pradesh in the 2014 elections, so that it acquired a majority on its own at the centre. Even the BJP's subsequent victories in UP, whether in the assembly elections or in the 2019 parliamentary elections, were founded upon this communal polarisation in Western UP.

But the kisan movement has overcome this

polarisation and brought Muslims and Hindu Jats together against the three infamous farm laws. In fact when the alleged instigator of the 2013 riots, now a member of the union council of ministers, wanted to break the call given by kisan leaders not to hobnob socially with BJP bigwigs, by forcibly entering a village to attend a social occasion, his entry was opposed by villagers, some of whom were then roughed up by his entourage of goons. His claim that it was only members of a rival political party that opposed his presence was belied by the fact that the villagers gathered at the police station insisting on registering an FIR. It is clear that there is a sea change in the attitudes of the people because of the movement itself where the old myths spun by the BJP no longer work.

Likewise, the conflict between the Jat peasants and the dalit labourers has been a perennial feature of this region which has been a major impediment in the way of worker-peasant unity. Here the economic conflict between the employer and the employee has been compounded by the caste conflict between the Dalits and the Jat peasants. This simmering contradiction had come into the boil some decades ago in a village called Kanjhawala not far from Delhi, which had captured national attention at that time. The current Kisan movement however has brought the two groups together in an unprecedented show of unity. It is obvious to both groups and indeed to all engaged in the struggle against the three farm bills, that the implementation of these bills will sound the death-knell of Indian agriculture as it exists today, to the detriment of all its classes. The coming together of these groups is an event of immense significance, made possible by the mass movement against the bills.

The third area where traditional attitudes are being transcended relates to the gender question. In a highly patriarchal society, the fact that women have been so extraordinarily active in the Kisan movement is itself of momentous significance, something that nobody could have anticipated. There is an upsurge among women that has brought them into the public sphere and this has great significance for gender relations in future.

Then there is the relation between industrial workers of the area and the farmers where again we find quite an unprecedented level of solidarity. The effects of the mass movement are also manifest in the symbols

invoked, in the history recapitulated and in the traditions of struggle recovered. There is for instance a recovery of the “pagadi s a m b h a l ”



movement of 1906 in which Bhagat Singh's uncle, Ajit Singh, had been involved. The parallel between the current threat to Indian agriculture and what it had faced during the colonial period, is thus underscored by the movement.

The democratising and unifying role of the Kisan movement therefore is as unmistakable as it is significant. It stands in striking contrast to the divisiveness and the authoritarianism introduced into the polity by the BJP government.

And here we come to the crux of the difference between mass movements on secular, bread-and-butter issues and the sort of movements that the BJP is invariably associated with, which are essentially divisive. When L K Advani had launched his rathayatra, many commentators had referred to it as igniting a huge “mass movement”; what this description missed is that there is an ocean of difference between “mass movements” that bring attitudinal changes and the BJP-type movements that do not.

The reason why a “mass movement” like the kisan movement brings about a transcendence of the given level of consciousness is because it unites people on a common secular cause. Movements such as what the BJP gets associated with, far from uniting people to transcend their existing level of consciousness, play on the existing fault-lines of society; they reaffirm those fault-lines, accentuate the prevailing divisiveness and strengthen the extant backward consciousness instead of leading to its transcendence.

It is no accident that the RSS had remained aloof from the anti-colonial struggle. That struggle had been the basis of a new awakening in the country; the kisan movement has emerged as the legacy of that awakening and it is carrying that awakening forward.

Source: National Herald India

Joint Statement: EU Should Speak Out Against India's Rights Violations

**Bilateral Human Rights Dialogue
Scheduled for January 12**



(Brussels, January 11, 2021) - The EU should take a strong stand and press India to immediately end systemic human rights violations, seven organizations said today, ahead of the European Union-India human rights dialogue scheduled for January 12, 2021. India should also free all detained human rights defenders and others arrested on politically motivated charges.

In July 2020, the EU and India recommitted to a Strategic Partnership based on “shared principles and values of democracy, freedom, rule of law and respect for human rights.” However, the year was marked by India’s systematic and brutal crackdown on human rights, further restrictions on dissent and civic space, growing prosecutions of human rights defenders and the rise of hate speech and discrimination against vulnerable groups and minorities. Despite this, the EU has not publicly expressed concerns over the deteriorating situation.

In the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024, the EU and its member states committed to ensuring that human rights would “underpin all aspects of the internal and external policies of the European Union.” Decisive action by the EU and its member states in areas such as civil society space, refugee rights and minority protections in the EU will be paramount to ensure a coherent, credible human rights policy, the groups said.

In the past year, mass protests in India against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, a law that discriminates against Muslims, were often met with excessive use of force by the security forces. At least 31 people were killed and scores injured. Hundreds were arrested and many remain detained despite the severe overcrowding of Indian prisons and the health

risks associated with the Covid-19 pandemic.

Repressive laws such as the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) and the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act are frequently used to target and jail government critics, as well as to prevent human rights defenders and organizations from accessing resources and continuing their work with dignity and in safety.

Some human rights organizations, including Amnesty International India, have been forced to shut down. The National Investigation Agency, India’s counter-terrorism agency, has raided the offices of other groups. Human rights defenders, including 83-year-old Stan Swamy, a prominent advocate for the rights of tribal communities, have been detained under politically motivated charges. Muslims and Dalits were targeted by supporters of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and some mainstream media. Initially, after the outbreak of Covid-19, both communities faced further discrimination social and economic boycotts, and physical attacks.

Violations by police and security forces also continued, with the National Human Rights Commission reporting 77 deaths in police custody, 1,338 deaths in judicial custody and 62 alleged extrajudicial killings through October 2020. In Jammu and Kashmir, the revocation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution in August 2019, which provided a degree of autonomy to Kashmir, was followed by mass arrests, a rise in allegations of torture and other ill-treatment and a communications shutdown. Scores of people remain detained without charge. and by limiting mobile internet to only 2G service in some Muslim-majority areas, the authorities have impaired access to information, healthcare facilities, education and



justice, with even more serious consequences during a pandemic. Human rights defenders and journalists have been subject to baseless prosecutions.

“The Indian government's crackdown on civil society represents a grave breach of India's national and international commitments on the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly,” said Eve Geddie, head of office and advocacy director of the Amnesty International European Institutions Office, stressing that “the country sits on the UN Security Council and the UN Human Rights Council, whose members are required to 'uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights”.

The human rights situation in India continues to deteriorate amid timid or no response from the international community, the groups said.

“As it becomes more and more evident that there is no political will by the Indian government to truly address human rights violations in the country, ongoing human rights violations should meet a robust reaction from the international community,” said Gerald Staberock, secretary general of the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT). “The current approach based mainly on quiet diplomacy has yielded little result. The EU and its member states need to send a clear message that India's persistent disregard for its human rights obligations carries a political cost and that real changes will have to be implemented if Delhi wants to meet its ambition to be an influential actor in the international community.”

The reinstatement of the EU-India human rights dialogue is an important opportunity for the EU to articulate its concerns with the Indian government

and press it to adhere to its human rights obligations. However, for this to be effective, the EU should take a strong stand and establish clear benchmarks for human rights progress in India. These should be used in all exchanges with its Indian counterparts, up to highest level, to ensure public oversight and accountability of the EU's India policy.

As a matter of priority, the EU should insist that India immediately release all arbitrarily detained human rights defenders, journalists and other critics; repeal or amend repressive laws used to silence dissent; ensure accountability for human rights violations and grant access to all EU and United Nations independent experts and international human rights monitoring mechanisms, including in Jammu and Kashmir. Failing to do so would not only betray the EU's human rights commitments, but also betray the victims and human rights defenders who are counting on the EU to hold India up to scrutiny and to ensure accountability for abuses.

“The EU and its member states have pledged to speak out against any attempt to undermine respect for universality of human rights and to throw their full weight behind courageous human rights defenders throughout the world ,” said Claire Ivers, head of the EU Office at Front Line Defenders. “An ineffective dialogue, held as a box-ticking exercise with no real ambition to robustly raise concerns and prompt much-needed change in the country, would send the wrong message that India is allowed to dodge international scrutiny and that the EU and its member states are willing to put political and economic interests above human rights.”



The organizations behind this joint statement are:
 Amnesty International
 Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW)
 International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN)
 International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
 Front Line Defenders (FLD)
 Human Rights Watch (HRW)
 World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)

Source: *IDSN*

India went from 'free' to 'partly free' in 2020: Freedom House



US-based research institute voices fear the world's largest democracy is descending into authoritarianism under Modi. Freedom House has downgraded India from free to partly free, voicing fear that the world's largest democracy was descending into authoritarianism under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The democracy research institute, which is independent but receives funding from the United States, pointed to mob violence against Muslims, intimidation of journalists and rising judicial interference since Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won power in 2014.

"Rather than serving as a champion of democratic practice and a counterweight to authoritarian influence from countries such as China, Modi and his party are tragically driving India itself toward authoritarianism," Freedom House said in its annual report on Wednesday. "Under Modi, India appears to have abandoned its potential to serve as a global democratic leader, elevating narrow Hindu nationalist interests at the expense of its founding values of inclusion and equal rights for all."

Freedom House also pointed to the "ham-fisted" COVID-19 lockdown ordered by Modi in which enormous numbers of workers who lacked resources were obliged to walk across the country to their villages. "The ruling Hindu nationalist movement also encouraged the scapegoating of Muslims, who were disproportionately blamed for the spread of the virus and faced attacks by vigilante mobs," it said. With the decline of the billion-plus nation in Freedom House's rankings, it said that less than 20 percent of the world's population lives in free countries, the lowest since 1995.

Freedom House also voiced alarm at deteriorations in Hong Kong, where Beijing imposed a draconian new security law; Belarus, where strongman Alexander Lukashenko has held onto power despite protests following elections widely seen as unfair; and Ethiopia, where Nobel Peace Prize-winning Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed launched a military campaign in which rights groups have reported major abuses. The United States remained classified as free following Donald Trump's turbulent presidency but Freedom House warned of the "parlous state of US democracy".

It pointed to Trump's false allegations of election fraud and the January 6 storming of the Capitol "incited by the president himself". Freedom House also highlighted the Trump administration's dismissal of inspector-generals tasked with looking out for government misconduct as well as "disproportionate violence by police" against anti-racism protesters last year.

"The United States will need to work vigorously to strengthen its institutional safeguards, restore its civic norms and uphold the promise of its core principles for all segments of society if it is to protect its venerable democracy and regain global credibility," it said.

Source: Al Jazeera



Sri Lanka ends forced cremations of COVID-19 victims

Amidst mounting international criticism, Sri Lanka has revised a controversial mandatory order to cremate the bodies of COVID-19 victims, which denied minority communities, including Muslims, their religious rights.

The government revised a gazette notification issued in April last year. The new notification has allowed both burials and cremations.

For 10 months, Muslim and Christian minorities in the country and international rights groups have been lobbying the government to end the policy of forced cremations.

The government was resisting calls to allow burials citing health concerns. It cited the opinion of some experts who claimed that the burial of COVID-19 victims would contaminate the water table thereby spreading the pandemic further.

The country had earlier come under intense criticism from rights groups, including the UNHRC, over the cremation order.

They said it failed to respect the religious feelings of the victims and their family members, especially of the Muslims, Catholics and some Buddhists.

The cremation of bodies is forbidden in Islam.



The decision to end forced cremations followed the visit of Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan.

The Muslim minority leaders, who met Khan, said the decision to allow burials was linked to Sri Lanka seeking the support of the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) at the ongoing UN Human Rights Council session in Geneva.

Sri Lanka is due to face a fresh resolution, which would pin the island to achieve reconciliation through a credible accountability mechanism over its human rights record.

Pakistan is a member of the OIC. The OIC nations had appealed in Geneva when the sessions began to reverse the forced cremations decision.

Source: The Hindu

Manual Scavenging

Author: Shoma A. Chatterji

- Not Just Inhuman But a Crime

A few days ago, a manual scavenger in Mysuru committed suicide because he was being harassed by his bosses for five months and was not even paid his salary. He left behind a suicide note stating that he was forced to enter a manhole to clean it without safety gear or even a pair of gloves.

He felt severely humiliated because these bosses made him put his thumb impression on a paper which stated that he had stepped into the manhole without protective gear of his own volition.

How could this be true? Is it not the duty of the superiors that a manual worker or safai karmachari step into the manhole wearing protective gear which is compulsory?

Four of seven labourers were killed when they were trapped inside an under-construction manhole at Purba Putiary Pump house near Aikyatan club in Kolkata, West Bengal a few days ago.

A total of seven workers were rescued from the manhole. Two of the labourers were rushed to SSKM Hospital where they were declared brought dead. While two others were declared dead at Baghajatin State General Hospital, according to a report in Indian Express. Three other workers have received injuries and are being treated at Baghajatin State General Hospital.

Is this not tantamount to murder?

According to a Human Rights Watch Report, (Cleaning Human Waste: "Manual Scavenging," Caste and Discrimination in India, August 2014), on September 6, 2013, the Indian Parliament passed The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 (the 2013 Act), committing itself yet again to ending manual scavenging.

Seven months later, on March 27, 2014, the Indian

Supreme Court held that India's constitution requires state intervention to end manual scavenging and "rehabilitate" all people engaged in the practice. This meant not only ending the practice but also ending the abuses faced by communities engaged in manual scavenging.

The government's recognition in the 2013 Act of the historically rooted and ongoing injustice faced by communities engaged in manual scavenging is important, but also points to failures in implementing previous laws and policies to address the problem.

Recent examples from communities engaged in manual scavenging in the states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh highlight the failures of previous government attempts to end manual scavenging and eliminate the entrenched attitudes and discriminatory practices that still bind members of affected communities to this degrading and unnecessary occupation.

"As per the Act, these manholes should not be cleaned manually; these should be cleaned only with machines. If a person is cleaning the same, he should be provided all the safety equipment. But the authorities do not do so which is illegal," said B R Tisawarah, president of Chandigarh Dalit Welfare Association.

For a mere amount of Rs 300 for cleaning a manhole, these men and women have been putting their lives at risk. "A poor illiterate man does not know that if a contractor is asking him to go down and clean the manhole, he should be given safety gear. Is it not the duty of the officer concerned to provide the safety gear? At least the officer is educated," said Sukhrum Chauhan, general secretary of Chandigarh Dalit Welfare Association.

On May 27, 2016, India Spend stated: "As many as

12,226 manual scavengers were identified across India-82% of these are in Uttar Pradesh-according to a reply to the Rajya Sabha (Parliament's upper house) on May 5, 2016, by Minister of State for Social Justice Vijay Sampla. These are under-stated official figures. The persistence of manual scavenging is linked to the Hindu caste system, with about 1.3 million Dalits, mostly women, make a living as manual scavengers across India."

However, lack of education is not always the reason for pushing them into inhuman work. The panchayat in Nhavi village in Maharashtra's Jalgaon district hired nine women and men to manually clean open defecation sites. Bimal told Human Rights Watch that she does not want to clean excrement, but has continued to do so because she fears her family will be thrown out of the home where she lives. Bimal's husband, Kailash, has a college education, but began manually cleaning toilets for want of work as no work place with upper caste workers would have him as co-worker, subordinate or boss. Is this not a crime?

He got himself a job as manual scavenger in Nhavi in 1989 when he was unable to find alternate employment. He said, "I studied commerce and banking, but I couldn't find work. Even though I am educated, the panchayat hired me to clean toilets because I am from this community."

Among the caste and sub-castes categorised as "manual scavengers" Valmiki, is the caste that lives widely in Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, Han and Hadi in Bengal, Balmiki Dhanuk and Halalkhor in Uttar Pradesh, Mehar in Assam, Mehatar in Hyderabad and Maharashtra, Paki in coastal Andhra Pradesh, Thotti in Tamil Nadu, Mira, Lalbegi, Chura and Balashahi in Punjab and Balmiki, Mehatar and Chuhra in Delhi. (Gita Ramaswamy, *India Stinking: Manual Scavengers in Andhra Pradesh and their work*, Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2005, p. 3)

But this is not about statistics or about the sub-castes categorised as Valmiki or Hadis. It is more importantly about the children of such families bearing the brunt of what occupation their parents are engaged in. This problem is multiplied because many parents hide the reality of their occupation from their children who get to know it from the way the mainstream treat them - at school, on the playground, at shops and libraries where they are shunned and treated very badly.

Vinod Kamble, who began his life as a manual scavenger himself and later succeeded in graduating from the FTII, Pune, has made a film on two boys of whom one is forced to help his father in manual scavenging though he loves to go to school. The name of the film is *Kastoori* in Hindi which has already been praised at national film festivals.

"The film is inspired by the true story of Sunny Chavan, a young boy who assisted his father in conducting post mortems and found the experience quite disgusting but he had no choice. Sunny began doing post mortems from the time he was in the 8th standard. I read about this boy in a newspaper and he reminded me of my own childhood. I began helping my father who was a manual scavenger from the time I was in the 5th standard. I also helped my grandmother in her duties as a scavenger. As a growing child, I could not do anything about the very bad deal I got from people and so, I identified with the tragedy of Sunny's boyhood and decided to make this film," says Kamble. The film focuses on how the boy is disgusted with the bad smell of his body and seeks *kastoori* through every mean to get that smell off his body.

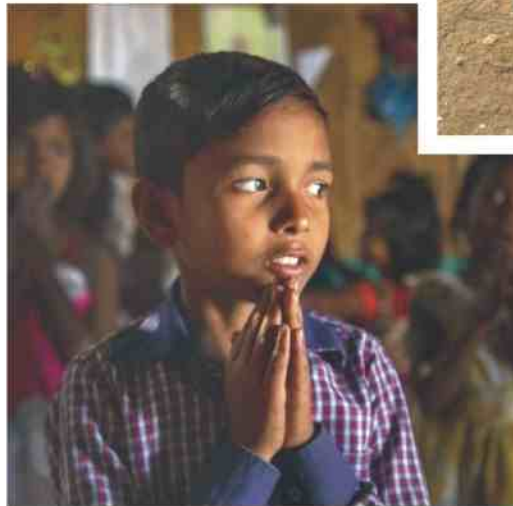
Bezwada Wilson, of Karnataka, did not know that he belonged to a low caste because his parents kept it hidden from him. When he learnt the truth, he felt like committing suicide. (Sonali Acharjee, *India Today*, December 26, 2020). But he did not and decided to do something about his people and he is doing it right now.

He did not even know what the word *bhangi* meant when, at ten, someone threw the word at him. It changed the direction of his life forever. Wilson committed himself to a long journey to eradicate the scourge of manual scavenging and liberate his caste brethren from the indignity of the profession.

In 2016, Wilson won the Magsaysay award for his contribution to the cause. The number of manual scavengers has come down from 1.5 million in 1996 to around 54,000 in 2019. But India needs hundreds of Wilsons to eradicate this illegal practice forever, where humans are forced to manually clean the waste of fellow humans.

How inhuman can one get? Isn't India is the biggest democracy in the world? Think about it. This is not just inhuman. It is a crime.

Source: thecitizen.in



In Pictures: A day in the life of an Indian child scavenger

Ten-year-old Imradul Ali started scavenging after school over a year ago to help his family make ends meet.

Ten-year-old Imradul Ali started scavenging after school over a year ago to help his family make ends meet. Once school is done for the day, 10-year-old Imradul Ali rushes home to change out of his uniform so he can start his job as a scavenger in India's remote northeast.

Armed with a large sack, he goes to a landfill in the slums of Gauhati, the capital of Assam state. Here, he hunts through heaps of other people's garbage, searching for plastic bottles, glass or anything salvageable he can recycle or sell. Around him, cows graze on the mountains of waste that line the site.

Ali comes from a family of scavengers, or "rag pickers" - his father, mother and elder brother all earn their income through it. He started doing it over a year ago to help his family. The family was hit hard last year by the COVID-19 pandemic, as they could not go to the landfill to work. They struggled during the months-long lockdown in India but were able to get food through the help of aid organisations.

Ali says he doesn't want to spend his life doing this, but he doesn't know what the future holds. "I want to continue going to school and would like to be a rich man," he said. He earns up to 100 rupees (\$1.30) a day, while the rest of his family makes about 250 rupees (\$3.30) each.

"It's very difficult to run a family by rag-picking," said Ali's mother, Anuwara Begum Thadeus Kujur, who runs the Snehalaya charitable group, says it's always sad to see children collecting scraps to survive. His group runs five childcare institutions, taking care of 185 boys and girls and has helped 20,000 children over seven years. "We carry out motivational programs for poor parents to realise the value of education before putting their children into schools," he said.

Ali's father wants his son to continue going to school, hoping he will run his own shop or get a coveted government job when he grows up, putting an end to their suffering. As for Ali, he wants to drive a car and wishes to own one in the future. "I want good food and clothes," he said.

Source: Aljazeera

Minority leaders demand India to arrest killers of 11 Pakistani Hindus

The leaders of minority community demanded Indian government to immediately arrest the killers of 11 Pakistani Hindus in India, condemning the Modi regime's blithe response to provide justice to the victim family.

They were addressing a webinar on "India for selected Hindus only" held here and attended by Hindu leaders along with family members and relatives of 11 Pakistani Hindu citizens who had been killed in Jodhpur India. Members of National Assembly Ramesh Kumar and Harmeet Singh joined through video link. The members of the victim families said the killers of their dear ones were roaming freely in India and sought justice by apprehending the killers and bringing them to task.

MNA Ramesh Kumar said the government would try its utmost to get the killers arrested and that he would also contact the Hindu Council. He said the

protection of minorities was government's responsibility and that he would also take up the matter with the Indian High Commission. Moreover, the issue would be raised at every platform to provide justice to the family.

MNA Wasim William urged the UN Security Council to help provide justice to the victim family which had not yet received the bodies of their dear ones. He said even the FIR was not yet registered for the crime and even the women were made subject to third degree torture by the police. Punjab MPA Mahrinder Paul Singh urged the government to take up the matter at every forum as the state was responsible for minority community's protection. Haroon Sarbdiyal said India was not even sparing Hindus going from Pakistan and called for practical measures to ensure killers' arrest.

Source: The News





Thousands of Indian women join farmers' protests against new laws

Thousands of female farmers hold sit-ins and a hunger strike outside India's capital on International Women's Day against new agricultural laws.

Thousands of women have joined protests by farmers on the outskirts of New Delhi to mark International Women's Day, demanding the scrapping of new agricultural laws that open up the country's vast farm sector to private buyers.

The demonstrations were held at multiple sites on the capital's fringes where tens of thousands of farmers have camped for more than three months to protest against the laws, which Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government says are necessary to modernise agriculture.

Wearing bright yellow scarves representing the colour of mustard fields, the women took centre stage at one key site, chanting slogans, holding small marches and making speeches against the laws.

"This is an important day as it represents women's strength," said Veena, a 37-year-old from a farming family, who gave only one name in order to protect her identity.

"I believe if us women are united, then we can achieve our target much quicker," added Veena, who travelled from the northern state of Punjab

to the sprawling Tikri protest spot.

More than 20,000 women gathered at the site near Delhi's border with the state of Haryana, police and event organisers said.

"This is a day that will be managed and controlled by women, the speakers will be women, there will be a lot of feminist perspectives brought in and discussions on what these laws mean for women farmers," said farm activist Kavitha Kuruganti.

"It is one more occasion to showcase and highlight the contribution of women farmers both in agriculture in India as well as to this movement."

Modi 'doesn't care about women'

About 100 women sat cross-legged in front of a makeshift stage in Ghazipur, one of the protest sites on Delhi's border with Uttar Pradesh state.

Women farmers attend a protest against farm laws outside New Delhi [Danish Siddiqui/Reuters] Holding the flags of farm unions, they listened to female farm leaders speak and chanted slogans against the laws. At least 17 took part in a day-long hunger strike.



“Women are sitting here, out in the open, in protest, but Modi doesn't care. He doesn't care about mothers, sisters and daughters. He doesn't care about women. That's clear,” said Mandeep Kaur, a female farmer who travelled 1,100km (680 miles) from Chhattisgarh state to participate in the protests.

Women have been prominent at the forefront of the protests, which have posed one of the biggest challenges to Modi since he took office in 2014.

Many travelled with the thousands of male farmers who arrived at the protest sites in late November and have since organised and led protest marches, run medical camps and massive soup kitchens that feed thousands and raised demands for gender equality.

“Today Modi is sending wishes to women across the country on International Women's Day. Who are these women he is sending wishes to? We are also like his daughters, but he clearly doesn't care about us,” said Babli Singh, a farm leader.

Demonstrations were also held at Jantar Mantar, an area of New Delhi near Parliament where about 100 women held placards denouncing the new laws and calling for their withdrawal.

“Today we are finding ourselves under attack at all fronts. As women, as peasants, as workers, as youth and students,” said women rights activist Sucharita, who uses one name. “We are opposed to the laws that have been passed in favour of corporations.”

Multiple rounds of talks between the government and farmers have failed to end the

deadlock. The farmers have rejected an offer from the government to put the laws on hold for 18 months, saying they will not settle for anything less than a complete repeal.

Modi's government says the reforms will bring private investment into a vast and antiquated farm sector, improve supply chains and cut colossal waste.

'Invisible workforce'

Agriculture accounts for nearly 15 percent of India's \$2.9-trillion economy and employs about half its workforce.

Women farmers have as much at stake as men from the new farm laws, Kuruganti added.

“Markets that are distant as well as exploitative make single women farmers more vulnerable and in any case, a patriarchal society has discriminated and made them vulnerable.”

International Women's Day, sponsored by the United Nations since 1975, celebrates women's achievements and aims to further their rights.

Women often embody what agricultural experts call an “invisible workforce” on India's vast farmlands.

Nearly 75 percent of rural women in India who work full-time are farmers, according to the anti-poverty group Oxfam India and the numbers are expected to rise as more men migrate to cities for jobs. Yet, less than 13 percent of women own the land they till.

Source: Al-Jazeera

Ambedkar and the call to Conversion! **Would he have been arrested today under provisions of laws against "Love Jihad"?**

On 14 April, and the nation will gratefully remember Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar who was born on this day in 1891, one hundred and thirty years ago! He was a polymath and civil rights activist who contributed immensely to the nation: among others, as the Father of the Constituent Assembly, as the one who conceptualised the Reserve Bank of India and above all, as a social reformer who was known for his campaigns against the social discrimination which oppressed the Dalits, women and labour. One fact that the nation should not forget (particularly the Governments of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat with their newly-minted 'forced conversion' laws) is that one of the greatest acts of this versatile Indian, was his clear, loud and unequivocal call to conversion! As early as 1935, Ambedkar made the most daring and path-breaking speech of his career, announcing that, because of the intransigence of the Hindus and the failure of a decade of nonviolent protests, he had decided to abandon Hinduism and to seek another faith. He urged the leaders at the Yeola Depressed Classes conference to consider their religious identity a choice, not a fact of destiny. In a highly emotional voice he said, "If you want to gain self-respect, change your religion. If you want to create a cooperating society, change your religion. If you want power, change your religion. If you want equality, change your religion. If you want independence, change your religion. If you want to make the world in which you live happy, change your religion".

About twenty years later, on 14 October 1956, (apparently the date on which King Ashoka became a Buddhist) Ambedkar, together with his wife and at least 365,000 of his followers, mainly Dalits, decided to exit Hinduism and embrace Buddhism. Ambedkar was disgusted with the caste system in the Hindu society and the deep-rooted hatred of the "upper caste" Hindus towards the "lower caste" Hindus. For several years, he had pleaded with political leaders, freedom fighters, social reformers, men of letters, administrators to end the discriminatory and obnoxious system. He also launched several agitations against social evils and against the atrocities perpetrated on the "lower castes" by the "higher castes". His incessant cries fell on deaf ears. Nobody listened to him, no one cared!! Ambedkar had no alternative but to get out of a system that was throttling him and millions of Dalits all over the country. He pondered on the possibility of embracing Islam or Christianity; however, he finally decided on Buddhism because he was convinced that within the Buddhist, fold the Dalits would enjoy greater dignity, equity and respect. His conversion was indeed a watershed moment when Dalits in the country got a more meaningful identity and a voice that would now be heard; for

centuries, their identity as human beings was trampled upon by the four-fold varna system dominating Hinduism. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism was not born of fantasy nor was it a sudden overnight decision. Apparently, he had spent over twenty years studying various religions and discerning which one would be most suited for him and the down-trodden masses for whom he spoke. Addressing a huge gathering of Mahars in Bombay in May 1936, he openly spoke out his ideas on conversion and why he considered it to be the best and only route towards emancipation. He unequivocally stated, "I tell you all very specifically, religion is for man and not man for religion; to get human treatment, convert yourselves"

If Ambedkar were alive and in Gujarat today, he and his followers would have been hauled up, fined and imprisoned under the provisions of the amendments of the 'Gujarat Freedom of Religion Act' which was passed by the Gujarat State Assembly on April 1, 2021, amidst strong protests from the Opposition members. Were it not for the fact that the original act of 2003 and its present amendments are blatantly violative of the Constitution, some of the provisions are so ridiculous that they could lead to tears of laughter. For example, 'The Statement of Objects and Reasons of the Bill' state that, "there are episodes of religious conversion promising better lifestyle, divine blessings and impersonation. There is an emerging trend in which women are lured to marriage for the purpose of religious conversion." In that speech in Bombay, Ambedkar said that Hinduism had failed to secure basic human rights emphasising that, "Hindu society does not give equality of treatment, but the same is easily achieved by conversion." So how would the Government of Gujarat deal with an Ambedkar today who openly states, "to get human treatment, convert yourselves"? One needs to revisit the 'Gujarat Freedom of Religion Act 2003', which was passed by the Gujarat Assembly on March 26, 2003; at that time, the entire Opposition walked out. However, it took a full five years till 2008, for the Gujarat Government to frame the necessary rules. The law is easily one of the most draconian ones in the history of any democracy in the world and was piloted by the then Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi who is currently the Prime Minister of India! During his election campaign in 2002, he singled out Muslims and Christians and promised to bring in an anti-conversion law, which he did so.

The provisions of the 2003 law include the following:

- it prohibits forcible conversion by allurement or fraudulent means. 'Allurement' is defined as "any gift or grant of any material benefit, either monetary or

otherwise'. 'Force' is defined as "show of force or a threat of injury of any kind, including threat of divine displeasure or social ex-communication". 'Fraudulent means' is defined as "misrepresentation of any other fraudulent contrivance".

- it provides for punishment of those who seek to forcibly convert for a period up to three years imprisonment and a fine up to Rs.50,000. but if the person being forcibly converted is a "minor, a woman, or a person belonging to scheduled caste or scheduled tribe", the punishment is for a term of up to four years imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 1 lakh
- anyone seeking to convert someone from one religion to another, either by performing a ceremony as a religious priest, or takes part directly or indirectly in the ceremony, shall have to take prior permission from the district magistrate (a civil authority) through a prescribed format
- the person who is sought to be converted shall have to intimate the district magistrate about the ceremony within a prescribed period, to be laid down in the rules. In case of default, the converted shall face upto one year imprisonment or a fine of Rs.1,000 or both

The Act at that time was clearly aimed at the minorities of the State particularly the Muslims and Christians. In fact, there were attempts in subsequent amendments to say that one can convert, without permission and the possibility of punishment, to Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism since these religions belong to the 'Hindu fold'. The Government had to hastily withdraw these attempts because of huge protests from leaders and representatives of these religions. The proponents of this warped idea, were certainly not educated enough to realise that all three are Protestant Religions: Sikhism is monotheistic (drawing many elements from Islam); whereas Buddhism and Jainism are a-theistic and in their theology, they do not worship the pantheon of Gods of Hinduism. With that same perverted logic that withdrawn amendment said that no permission was needed for a Catholic to become a Protestant and vice-versa. In February 2006, in keeping with the letter and spirit of his anti-Constitutional law, at a Shabri Kumbh (a mass gathering of Hindus) programme in the Dangs (supported by the Gujarat Government), Modi warned the Christians "It is my constitutional duty to prevent conversions. Our Constitution disapproves of them, and yet some people turn a blind eye." Morari Bapu accused the Christians of bringing in plane-loads of missionaries from the Vatican "who come here to carry out conversion activities but when we organise a 'ghar wapsi' why should it be termed as bad?" Both Modi and Morari Bapu also clearly endorsed the 'ghar wapsi' programmes which were part of that programme. In 2009, the constitutional validity of this law was challenged in the

Gujarat High Court by the Gujarat United Christian Forum for Human Rights and others. A notice was sent to the Government to respond, they did not do so because they did not have a legitimate response and the courage to do so. The petitioners later withdrew their petition with an intention of making it stronger.

The point is not whether one has the right 'to convert another', but whether a citizen of India, has the right to choose a religion of one's choice. Article 25 of the Constitution of India guarantees the freedom of conscience, the freedom to profess, practice and propagate religion to all citizens and Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (of which India is a signatory) asserts that "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance". Does one need more?! At this juncture, the questions one needs to ask are: if two mature consenting adults would like to marry, what right has the State to stop them from doing so? Then, if a Dalit girl wants to embrace Buddhism, since it is the religion of her husband and could lead to enhancing the quality of her life, (Ambedkar made this so obvious!), does she have the right to do so? Or for that matter, if a Christian girl wants to freely embrace Islam after marrying a Muslim, does she also have the right to do so? Why should the State (with its brutal mechanism and vigilantes) or anyone else, interfere in matters which are personal and private and clearly violative of Article 21: the right to privacy. On 24 August 2017, the Supreme Court of India in a historic judgement declared the right to privacy as a fundamental right, protected under the Indian Constitution. In declaring that this right stems from the fundamental right to life and liberty, the Court's decision has far-reaching consequences for every citizen.

The Gujarat Freedom of Religion law is clearly reflective of a patriarchal and prejudiced mindset. Some of the sections in the amended law like the 'offences to be cognizable and non-bailable' seem to be taken right out from the draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA). The people of India, are certainly experiencing difficult days under a fascist regime! This law needs to be protested because of its unconstitutionality. It must be withdrawn 'in toto' immediately! On 14 April and the days after, we all need to resonate with Ambedkar's call to conversion. It was a call to ALL Indians, then and now to defy and protest against anything unconstitutional; to openly propagate the right to convert to justice, liberty, equality and fraternity and to the religion of one's choice!

Source: Sabrang India