

Quarterly MINO-VIEW

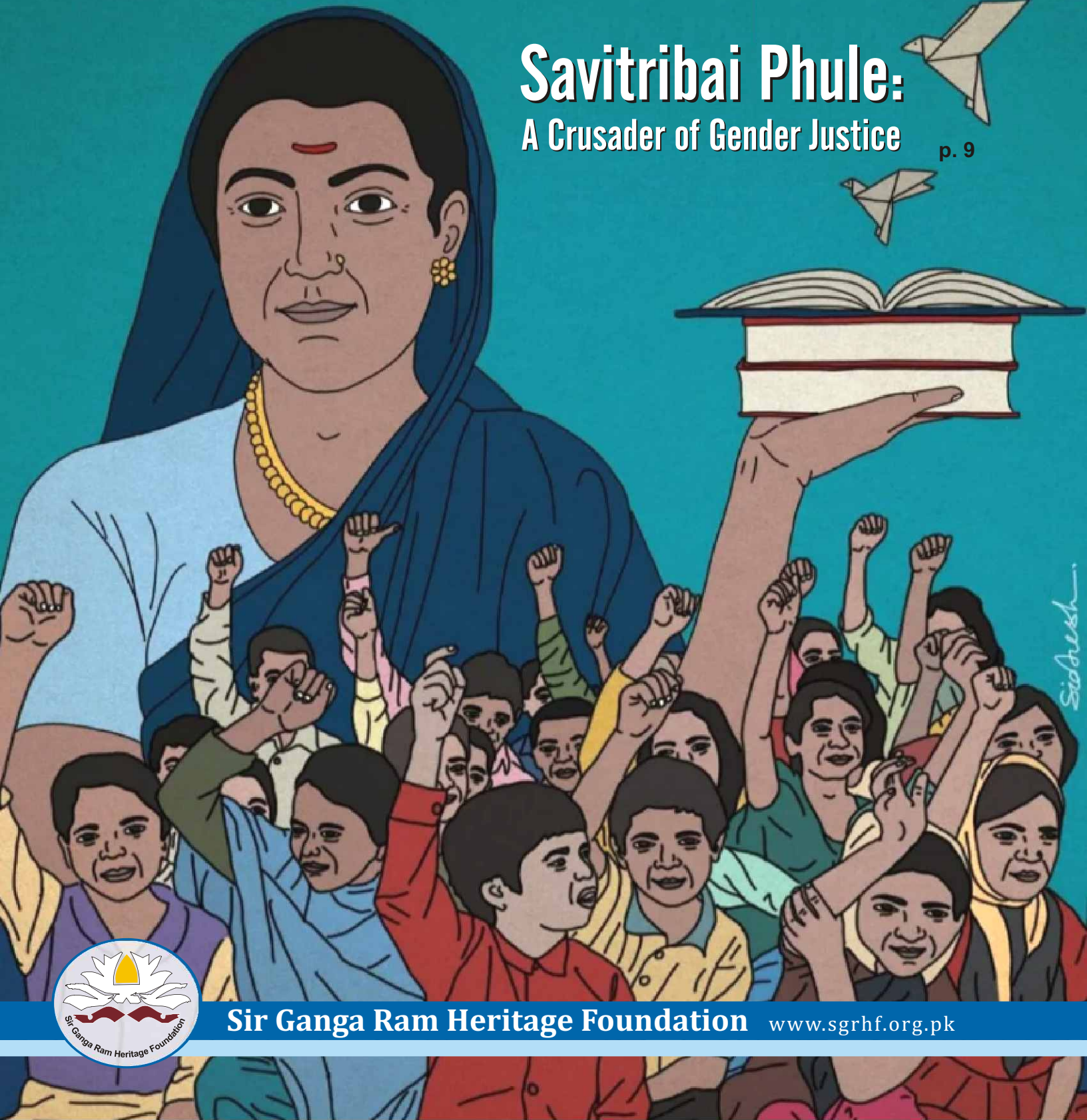
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Voice of Minorities & Oppressed People in South Asian Societies

Savitribai Phule: A Crusader of Gender Justice

p. 9



Sir Ganga Ram Heritage Foundation www.sgrhf.org.pk

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

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Editorial

Welcome to the latest edition of Mino-View. The recent call by the European Parliament to address caste-based discrimination and intersectional discrimination is a positive step forward. The adoption of a policy addressing these issues and stepping up consultations with affected communities is essential. It is vital that the European Commission, External Action Service and Council pay attention to these calls with the utmost urgency. In another move, The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has highlighted the need to acknowledge the link between manual scavenging and the caste system in India to take positive initiatives for better reforms. The OHCHR report also mentioned its Universal Periodic Review that Scheduled Castes have suffered from landlessness and homelessness due to historical violence and discrimination. It also highlights the significant proportion of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes women who face various forms of violence and discriminations. These issues need to be addressed urgently and the Indian government needs to take steps to prevent such violence and discrimination. Human Rights Watch's World Report 2023 highlights the BJP-led Indian government's abusive and discriminatory policies towards Muslims and other minorities. HRW shows its concern on intensification and broadening of the crackdown from Indian authorities on activist groups and the media in 2022. The increase in crimes and atrocities against scheduled castes in India is also alarming as India's National Crime Records Bureau's (NCRB) recently published its annual report, which shows that the atrocities against crimes against scheduled castes and Dalits in India has increased to 50,291 reported cases in the last two years. The situation is not any better in other South Asian countries including Bangladesh & Pakistan, where incidents of violence against religious minorities, have been reported. The recent viral video showing a police officer in Pakistan beating several people, including Hindu men on preparing food at their restaurants during Ramadhan, is also unacceptable. The rape allegations and protests in Nepal highlight the need to address widespread sexual violence. It is crucial to ensure that victims of sexual violence receive the support and protection they need and that perpetrators are brought to justice. It is essential to protect the rights of religious minorities and prevent such incidents from occurring. The need to address caste-based discrimination is urgent and the recent ban on caste-based discrimination in Seattle is a welcome move. The opposition to the ban by groups such as the Hindu American Foundation and coalition of Hindus in North America reveals the deep-seated prejudices and ideologies that perpetuate caste-based discrimination. In conclusion, it is vital to address caste-based and intersectional discrimination globally. Governments and international organizations must take action to protect the rights of affected communities and ensure that perpetrators of violence and discrimination are held accountable. It is time to acknowledge and address these issues with the urgency they deserve.

Caste bias exists in US, has to be countered, says Kshama Sawant

Yashwant Raj



Kshama Sawant made history when Seattle adopted a resolution moved by her to ban caste-based discrimination, become the first US city to do so. She took and stared down critics like the Hindu American Foundation, a powerful advocacy group and many Hindu Indian Americans who argued the ban discredits and singles out Hindus. Sawant is determined to take on the Hindu right wing and, at the same time, both the Republican and Democratic parties alike for not representing workers adequately. Her own political outfit is called Socialist Alternative. Sawant says the caste ban was borne out of the movement she and others had launched three years ago to oppose India's Citizenship Amendment Act and the National Register of Citizens.

Here are excerpts from an interview:

What would you say to critics of the ban on caste-based discrimination that that okay cost is bad and we are dealing with it internally but with this resolution, you have put a target on the entire community of Indian Americans and South Asians?

Kshama: First of all, it's i's completely dishonest to say that there is any target on Indian American community or South Asians because the Seattle anti-discrimination law already bans discrimination on the basis of religion or national origin. And my question to these people is, if you oppose discrimination based on caste, why would you oppose a law that bans caste discrimination. It's contradictory to what you claim to stand for.

In fact, throughout history, we have seen right-wing forces start their right wing talking points couched in progressive sounding

rhetoric, like 'Oh, I'm against discrimination, but this is not the way to go'. So no matter how you put a fight against discrimination, they will say, 'Well, this is not the right way to go about it'.

It's not surprising that it's the Hindu American Foundation (an advocacy group that led the opposition to the caste ban) and coalition of Hindus in North America that are opposing this, because they, you know, their entire agenda as you can see from their website is very aligned with Hindutva ideology. And they actually don't want to address caste discrimination because they are some of the purveyors of caste oppression because it's an integral part of Hindutva ideology.

Although it's far from the only one. So it's not surprising that it's not only that they oppose this legislation. They are also the right wing Hindu, right wing forces, who are the purveyors of Islamophobia as well. So it's not just about this issue. And this argument that it's somehow anti-Hindu, it's all a fake argument, it's, as I said, it's a right wing talking point.

IANS: Critics of the ban also argue that Seattle already banned all sorts of discrimination, including on the basis of ancestry, which would include your country, religion, background. Why add caste to it, specifically?

Kshama: They're grasping at straws to oppose something that is clearly -- was clearly -- needed. And, in fact, you can see from the response that we've gotten globally, just this overwhelming support shows that this is actually needed. Even from a legal point of view, the reason this kind of case was filed in California was because the state does not have a specific discrimination (law) against caste (refers to a case filed by a tech company employee).

And if you look at the pre-existing discrimination law in the city, you know, before we won this ordinance, for example, it bans discrimination on the basis of gender and also bans discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. At that time when people were advocating for having sexual



orientation also, in addition to gender, the right wing at that time said 'Well, why do you need to do that, it's already protected by the ban on discrimination based on gender'. But that's not true.

I mean, they're separate things. In fact, the law is stronger when it recognises and stops a very specific form of discrimination. And the reason you need to put in caste is because this type of discrimination is very real and it is becoming more widespread as the concentration of South Asian immigrant workers increases.

IANS: The last point that critics have brought up is that caste-based discrimination is not so rampant in the US and, in fact, it's very rare. So why bother? And that some of the data cited in support for the need for a caste ban is suspect, especially those coming from Equality Labs (a Dalit civil rights organisation in the US).

Kshama: All the data that we have, which is a lot, completely defies this talking point from the Hindu American Foundation. Yes, we have the Equality Labs study. We're very clear that none of these studies has perfect methodologies but they do reveal something very important about what's happening in relation to caste discrimination. And it's not just a study by Equality Labs.

There's also another study which used a different methodology, but reached the same conclusion: that there is a serious issue of caste oppression and that it is pervasive in the United States where we have South Asian community members. That study was by the Carnegie Endowment for International

Peace.

The Carnegie study also acknowledged limitations of their own methodology. What they said and this is a very important point, given how much fear oppressed caste people feel in even coming out as Dalits or oppressed caste, if anything, there's under-reporting. In addition to the statistical studies, we've also seen hundreds upon hundreds of Dalits and other oppressed caste workers speak up about the kinds of discrimination that they face in the workplace. It ranges from being denied raises and promotions to being treated unfairly in reviews, peer reviews and appraisals and also include day-to-day harassment, day-to-day indignity of being the target of so-called jokes on the basis of caste.

IANS: So just to be clear, this discrimination based on caste is by Indians on other Indians?

Kshama: I wouldn't say only Indians because other people from South Asia also face discrimination. For example, the ban on caste discrimination that was achieved by the movement in California State University was spearheaded among others by a Dalit activist from Nepal. This type of discrimination which, as I said, is very specific, is faced by oppressed castes - South Asian immigrant workers - from dominant caste South Asian bosses.

IANS: So it's basically a brown-on-brown kind of thing?

Kshama: I wouldn't use that term because that's a phrase used by the right wing to dismiss the real racism in our society.

Question: So essentially, it's South Asians on South Asians?

Kshama: Again, I wouldn't put it in that way. I wouldn't use that phrase, because it's important to explain that the reason this is happening has nothing to do with them being South Asian. Under capitalism, we see different types of oppression. And so there's racism in the United States; and that's not just by South Asians, racism is rife in all of



society.

There is sexism in India and other countries as well. What it really points to is what Malcolm X once said, which is, you can't have capitalism without racism. Similarly, you can't have capitalism without sexism. You can't have capitalism without caste oppression. Different types of oppression have a common thread running through them which is originating in a very class based society, a society that benefits a very few people at the top and then divide-and-conquer strategies are used to divide masses at the bottom.

IANS: So when did you start thinking of bringing a resolution to ban caste-based discrimination?

Kshama: In many ways, the genesis of this movement goes back to our fight against another type of oppression, which is discrimination against Muslims. It really began with many activists - Hindu, Muslim, Dalit and other activists - fighting alongside Socialist Alternative (her political organisation) and my office three years ago for another historic resolution we won that year -- in February of 2020 -- condemning the CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) and NRCA (National Register of Citizens) citizenship laws of the Modi regime.

And based on that we won another resolution in solidarity with the farmers movement in India. So you know, this movement has been maturing where activists have been fighting alongside us on many different issues and in December of last year, it was clear that organisations and other activists in in our movement wanted -- and I agreed with them -- to

really push for a big, progressive measure related to caste and that's how we came up with the idea of banning caste discrimination.

In fact, when we started researching how to do this, we found out that actually there are universities across the United States that have already banned caste discrimination on their campuses. So that was really heartening for us. You know, that was good, but there was already momentum around that issue. And so we built a movement here that united Dalit activists alongside dominant caste progressive Hindus -- organisations like the Hindus for human rights -- were on our side and also Muslim and Sikh activists, union members, Alphabet workers union -- the union that represents Google workers -- were also on our side and of course Socialist Alternative, my organisations.

IANS: And so now, are you planning to take this movement to other cities and states?

Kshama: We absolutely need this to spread around the country and inside. It's clear, just from the overwhelming response we have got that 1000s of activists across the nation want to win it and we want to actively help them win. And it's like the most important thing we are sharing with them are the lessons from how we won. If we don't build fighting movements like the one we've built here, you will not be able to defeat the Hindu right wing and you won't be able to overcome the opposition of the Democratic establishment in your city either.

IANS: Did you get support from the four Indian Americans in Congress - Ami Bera, Pramila Jayapal, Raja Krishnamoorthi, Ro Khanna?

Kshama: I wrote a letter personally to Pramila Jayapal and Ro Khanna. I don't believe we heard back from Ro Khanna at all. And the momentum was so strong that we did get, I think, some sort of social media tweet from Pramila Jayapal.

IANS: Can you speak a little bit about the international response to the ban? From India?



Kshama: We received an overwhelming response from people in India. It is clear that it has really captured their imagination. We've received letters of excitement and congratulations from ordinary people, including young young people and we got a letter of support from the spokesperson of the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu.

IANS: What about the Indian diaspora? In Canada, England? Any of these countries?

Kshama: Yes, definitely. We have received letters of support from direct and other activists in the UK, Australia and also, as I said, people from Canada literally came and joined us for the vote here. And since then, we've also received a couple of letters of support from other people and other organisations in Canada as well.

IANS: So what next? Is there a new agenda that you are working on now?

Kshama: Yeah, I don't know if you have heard yet. But this is an election year for the City Council, I'm not going to run again. This coming Saturday, actually, Socialist Alternative and I and other activists are going to launch a new nationwide movement called Workers Strike Back. We are demanding \$25 an hour minimum wage (it's \$15 currently), Medicare for All and continuing the fight against oppression and discrimination and also a call for building a new party. You know we believe that the working class in the United States needs a new party of its own because our interests are not being served by the Democrats or Republicans.

Source: The Weekend Leader

The European Parliament calls for stepping up consultations with Dalit communities & the adoption of a policy addressing intersectional discrimination

The International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) welcomes the adoption of the European Parliament's annual report on human rights and democracy in the world 2022 and the European Union's policy on the matter.

In addition to the calls by the European Parliament for the EU to adopt a “policy on caste discrimination” and “the adoption of an EU instrument for the prevention and elimination of caste-based discrimination” contained in previous annual reports, the 2022 report also calls on the EU to adopt specific local strategies to combat caste-based discrimination. The resolution stipulates that the strategies need to be based on dialogue with local Dalit representatives and civil society and to consult with them on the negotiation, implementation and monitoring of EU agreements and instruments that affect them.

Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are also calling on the EU to “strongly address intersectionality by developing a policy to fight the multiple forms of discrimination faced by the millions of women and girls who are victims of caste-based, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights violations, including sexual abuse and violence, displacement, forced and/or bonded

labour, prostitution and trafficking.”

The call for action by MEPs on eliminating caste-based discrimination covers all areas of EU relations with the affected countries, including political dialogue, trade, cooperation or humanitarian aid. The European Commission, External Action Service and Council should now heed these calls with the utmost urgency.

“We are pleased to note that the European Parliament has once again prioritised the elimination of caste-based discrimination and shown the importance it places on having a strong and effective EU policy on caste-based discrimination, based on regular and in-depth consultation with Dalit-led organisations.” said IDSN's Executive Director, Meena Varma, reflecting on the report.

IDSN stands ready to assist the EU in this task and to help it connect where not already the case, with partners on the ground. It looks forward to seeing these policies integrated immediately into the Mid-Term Review of the EU Action Plan on Democracy and Human Rights, currently being undertaken.

Source: IDSN



Police officer suspended for manhandling Hindu man in Sindh over 'Ramadan Ordinance violation'

A police officer in Sindh province of Pakistan was suspended after he tortured and arrested Hindu shopkeepers for allegedly “violating the Ramadan Ordinance”.

A viral video shows SHO Kabil Bhayo of the Khanpur police station in the Ghotki district roaming a market with a stick in his hand. He allegedly beat several people, including Hindu men, when they were preparing food at their restaurants for delivery orders.

An arrested man told local media that he belonged to the Hindu community, adding that they did not offer dine in service during Ramadan.

After the video went viral, the Sindh Human Rights Commission (SHRC) took notice and wrote to the senior police officers to take action against the SHO.

“The act is a violation of fundamental rights of citizens regardless of their religion and beliefs and goes against Article 20 of the Constitution of Pakistan, which guarantees the freedom to profess and manage religious institutions,” a letter issued by the SHRC stated.

It added that the SHO's attitude was against the landmark judgment announced by former chief justice Tassaduq Hussain Jilani on minority rights in 2014.

SHRC Chairperson Iqbal Detho asked the senior police officials to probe into the matter and take action against the SHO.

Source: Daily Pakistan



India: Suppression of Free Speech, Minorities

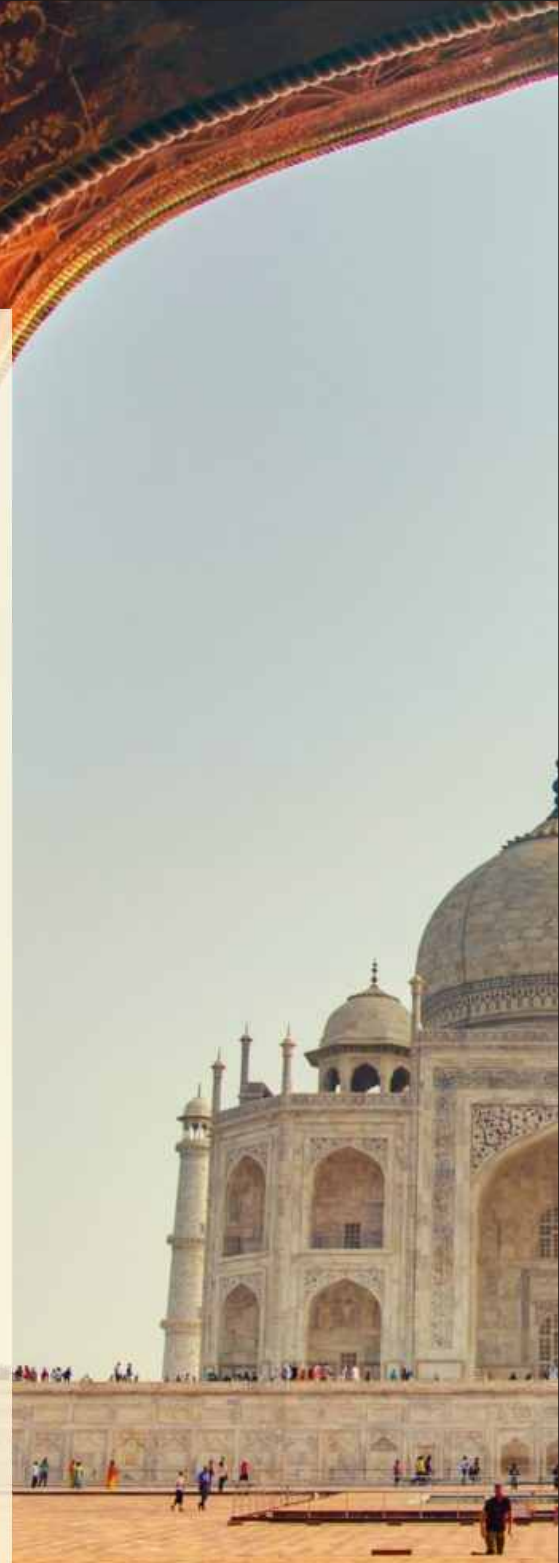
Indian authorities intensified and broadened their crackdown on activist groups and the media in 2022, Human Rights Watch said in its World Report 2023. The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government used abusive and discriminatory policies to repress Muslims and other minorities.

Authorities throughout India arrested activists, journalists and other critics of the government on politically motivated criminal charges, including of terrorism. They harassed rights groups through tax raids, allegations of financial irregularities and use of the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, which regulates foreign funding of nongovernmental organizations. The authorities in several BJP-ruled states demolished Muslim homes and properties without legal authorization or due process as summary punishment for protests or alleged crimes.

“The BJP government’s promotion of Hindu majoritarian ideology provokes authorities and supporters to engage in discriminatory and at times violent actions against religious minorities,” said Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “The authorities should be reining in party members and supporters responsible for abuses instead of jailing critics and shutting down rights groups.”

In the 712-page World Report 2023, its 33rd edition, Human Rights Watch reviews human rights practices in close to 100 countries. In her introductory essay, acting Executive Director Tirana Hassan says that in a world in which power has shifted, it is no longer possible to rely on a small group of mostly Global North governments to defend human rights. The world’s mobilization around Russia’s war in Ukraine reminds us of the extraordinary potential when governments realize their human rights obligations on a global scale. The responsibility is on individual countries, big and small, to apply a human rights framework to their policies and then work together to protect and promote human rights.

Indian authorities misused laws forbidding forced religious conversion to target Christians, especially from Dalit and Adivasi communities. In August, the BJP government approved the early release of 11 Hindu men sentenced to life in prison for the gang rape of a pregnant Muslim woman and murder of 14 members of her family during the 2002 anti-Muslim riots. BJP affiliates





celebrated publicly, prompting widespread condemnation. The action highlighted the government's discriminatory stance toward minority communities even in cases of violence against women.

Three years after the government revoked Jammu and Kashmir's constitutional autonomous status and split it into two federally governed territories, the government continued to restrict free expression, peaceful assembly and other basic rights there. The authorities invoked the Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act, as well as terrorism allegations under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, to conduct raids and arbitrarily detain journalists and activists and even barred a Pulitzer prize-winning Kashmiri journalist from leaving India without justification. Suspected militants attacked minority Hindu and Sikh communities in the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley.

In an interim ruling in May, the Supreme Court halted all use of the colonial-era sedition law, which has repeatedly been used to arrest critics of the government. The Supreme Court also expanded access to legal abortion to all women regardless of marital status and to people other than cisgender women. It widened the definition of family to include same-sex couples, single parents and other households considered “atypical,” extending family benefits to them.

In a significant step to protect survivors of sexual assault, the Supreme Court banned the degrading “two-finger test,” akin to virginity testing, which was used on survivors of sexual assault or rape to determine whether they were “virgin” or “habituated to sexual intercourse,” saying that anyone who conducts the practice will be guilty of misconduct.

In September, the Supreme Court did not reach a verdict on whether Muslim female students can wear a hijab, a headscarf, in educational institutions in BJP-led Karnataka state, with two judges expressing opposing views.



During India's Universal Periodic Review at the United Nations Human Rights Council in November, member countries raised concerns and made recommendations on a range of issues including the need to protect minority communities and vulnerable groups, tackle gender-based violence, uphold civil society freedoms, protect human rights defenders and end torture in custody.

Source: Human Rights Watch

Savitribai Phule: A Crusader of Gender Justice

Ritu

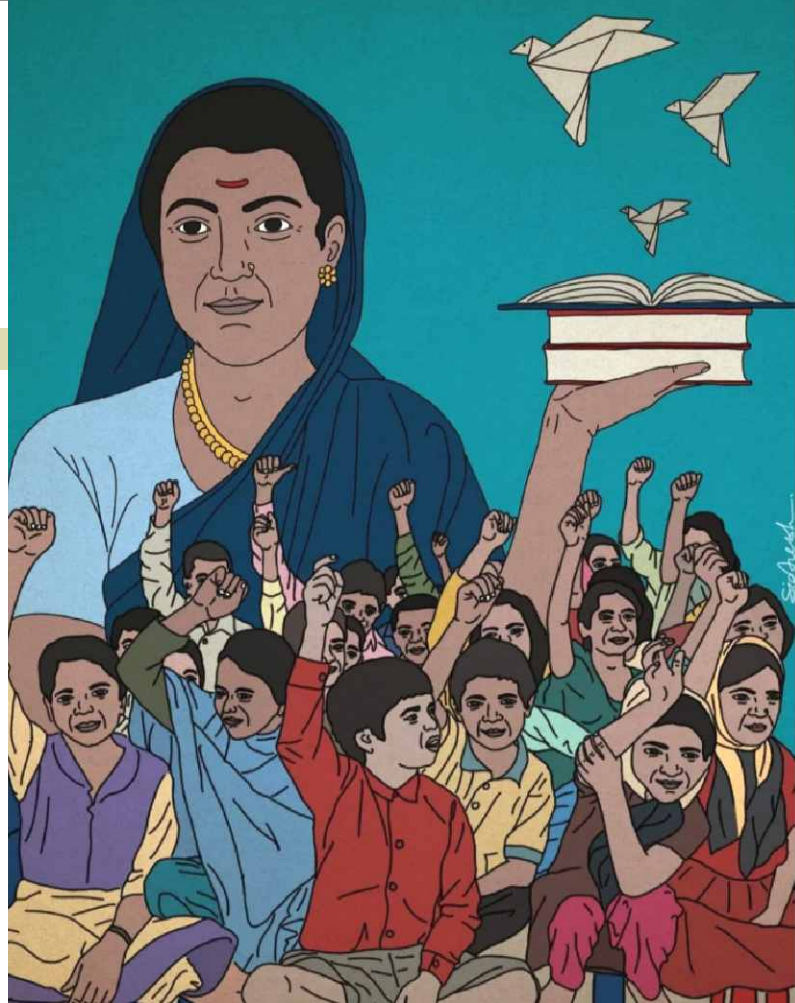
On 3rd January, 2023, the nation is celebrated 192nd birth anniversary of Savitribai Phule, who was a great social reformer, educationist, author and poet. She was born on 3rd January, 1831 at Naigaon in Satara region of British India. As per the tradition of that time Savitribai Phule was married to the Jyotiba Phule at the age of nine, like every other woman of the time she had option to engage herself in household works throughout her life but instead of this Savitribai Phule chose to bring changes in her life along with others.

Contribution of Savitribai Phule to Society

She and her husband launched one of the first anti-caste struggle in British India and mass activism against prevailing Brahmanical norms and patriarchy. She actively began working for Satyasodhak Samaj while she was a teenager (1873) and she and Jyotiba Phule eventually condemned to be socially ostracized for aiding widows, expectant mothers, shudras and atishudras.

Under such conditions, it would had been difficult for a woman from a lower caste to grasp the concept that patriarchy and caste are closely intertwined throughout the nineteenth century, when society was heavily influenced by the caste system. She was the first woman who had come to the understanding that women from lower castes had to fight for equality on two fronts: caste and patriarchy. She and Jyotiba had setup first school for women in 1848, apart from that she had also established Mahila Seva Mandal (Association for Women's Service) in 1852, which worked for spreading awareness among women for their rights.

In his book "A Forgotten Liberator," author Braj Ranjan Mani correctly noted that, as a woman, she



was able to grasp the double oppression that most women experience, since she identified the gender question in connection to caste and Brahmanic patriarchy. She became actively involved in the fight against issues that were unique to women on several fronts. She spearheaded several movements to protect widows from being victimised. Savitribai Phule advocated and encouraged widow remarriage and campaigned against infanticide of illegitimate children. Orphaned children and women who had been abandoned received shelter from her. She went on strike because widow's heads were being shaved by barbers.

Learn English to annihilate Caste

Few of us knew that Savitribai Phule was a successful poet and writer. She has also compiled and edited many of Jyotiba Phule's speeches. Caste and Patriarchy were two of her most important intellectual engagements. Savitribai Phule was a great supporter of English and Western education and in many of her writings she said, "Learn English to annihilate Caste." She kept the spirit of



social justice alive after Jyotiba Phule's death and due to the fact that she always remained a kind and compassionate person, she lost her life while she was helping plague patients. After Jyotiba Phule's demise, she did not allow the organisation to fade away; instead, she remained dedicated for the spirit of social justice.

For women today, what she accomplished 200 years ago still remains a challenge. There is a huge difference between literacy rate of men and women, widow remarriage is still a taboo in our society, women are mere sex object for many men in the society and the lower-caste women are still unaware that, caste and patriarchy are interlinked.

A forgotten leader

Being a first female teacher of India, Savitribai Phule had never accorded with the recognition she deserved. Amongst the names of great social-reformers like Raja Rammohun Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, her name has been missed by modern history writers. Most of us still do not know about Savitribai Phule and those who know her, they know her by the wife of Jyotiba Phule or just a general knowledge question that 'She is first female teacher of India', but none of us were told what it means to first

female teacher of India? How much struggle she had done to educate the masses, to uplift the downtrodden, to give recognition to widowed women? Savitribai Phule's contributions are still not sufficiently acknowledged in popular narratives, making it difficult for her name to gain household recognition like Rani Lakshmibai.

The path for the recognition

Many schools and colleges have been named after Savitribai Phule to emphasize her significance to the nation. Additionally, the Vice-Chancellor of JNU, Dr. Santishree Dhulipudi, has formally observed Savitribai Phule's birth anniversary and demanded that her birth anniversary be recognized by the UGC. The Indian government must applaud these initiatives, Savitribai Phule should be mentioned in school textbooks and anti-caste historians must be encouraged to research such notable individuals.

Savitribai Phule was a woman of deeds than words; as a result of her efforts, the women of this country received "education"; as a matter of fact, she is a role model for the entire women's community, but particularly for marginalized women who fought against all odds to achieve social and gender justice.

Source: Countercurrents.org

Disturbing statistics of forced conversions, murders and rapes of religious minorities in Bangladesh: Reports



The Bangladesh National Hindu Grand Alliance has informed that a total of 154 religious minorities, including Hindus, were killed in the country between January and December 2022.

The organisation held a press conference in Dhaka on January 5 during which it presented the annual report of atrocities on Bangladeshi minorities.

Also known as the Bangladesh Jatiyo Hindu Mahajot, it revealed that 39 women belonging to the minority communities were raped (27 of them were gang-raped). About 14 of the victims were killed after committing rape.

Besides, it stated that 62 religious minorities went missing in 2022 and 849 people were threatened with death. Another 424 religious minorities were attempted to be killed and 360 of them were left injured.

According to Bangladesh National Hindu Grand Alliance Secretary General, Gobinda Chandra Pramanik, a whopping 89,990 acres of land belonging to religious minorities in the country remain occupied. And 572 families were also evicted from their homes last year.

Pramanik informed that 445 families of religious minorities were forced to leave Bangladesh altogether. In all, Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and other minorities suffered a total financial loss of Taka 220 crore 89 lakh. The annual report of atrocities on minorities in Bangladesh said that about 319 families and temples were looted while 173 businesses were vandalised in 2022. Moreover, 519 cases of arson and 891 cases of attacks on residences were also registered.

The Bangladesh National Hindu Grand Alliance also

pointed out that there have 128 instances of temple attack, 72 cases of idol theft and 481 cases of vandalism in the last year. It added that 152 religious minorities were forcibly converted in 2022 and attempts for conversion were made on 40 others.

The Hindu organisation said that about 791 religious minorities were arrested on false cases of blasphemy. It lamented that a hateful environment of intolerance has been created in Bangladesh and that the Hindu community has never been able to experience 'real freedom.'

The Bangladesh National Hindu Grand Alliance demanded the establishment of 60 reserved seats and separate electoral system in the National Parliament of the country. It also demanded setting up of Ministry of Minority Affairs and to prevent violence against the Hindu community and other religious minorities.

Hindu home attacked, idol vandalised by leader of youth wing of ruling Awami League party

In November 18 last year, the residence of a Hindu family was attacked and their puja mandap was vandalised in the Kostapara area in Bhuapur Upazila in Tangail district in the Dhaka Division of Bangladesh.

As per reports, the home belonged to local Hindu resident Subhas Ghosh. About 10 members of his family were injured during the attack and at least 4 out of them were admitted to the Bhuapur Upazila Health Complex for medical treatment.

Those hospitalised in the aftermath of the attack were identified as Ratan, Nikhil, Ashok and Shanto Ghosh. On the other hand, the accused was identified as Khorshed Bepari.

Source: www.opindia.com

Tracking rising religious hatred in India, from half a world away

Pranshu Verma

R a q i b
H a m e e d
Naik stood in his tidy American kitchen, feeling torn about his secret life. On the one hand, he was safe from the Indian government and far from the death threats and the late-night knocks on his parents' door. On the other hand, he was essentially in hiding, working on a scrappy secret data project to track hate crimes in India. But to grow it, he needed to go public.

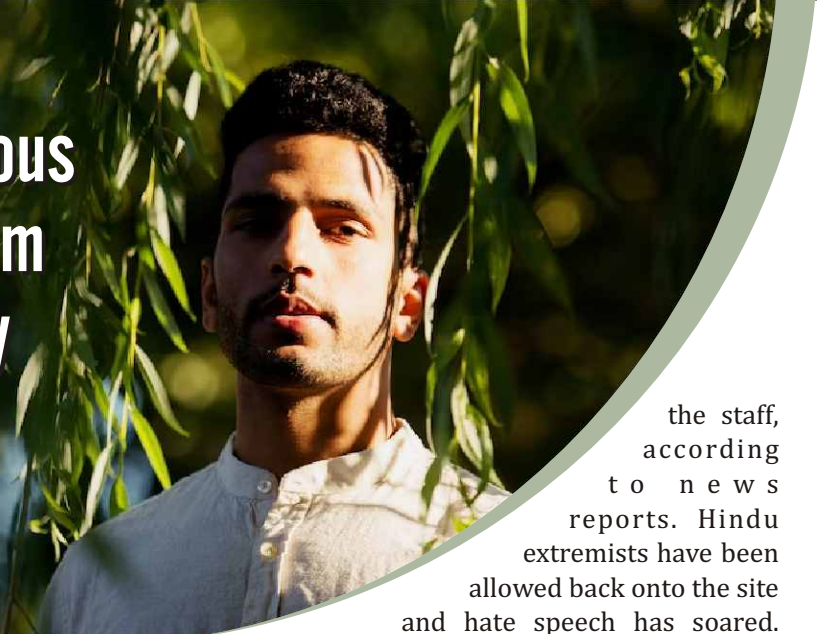
Naik, 29, is the founder of HindutvaWatch.org, one of the most robust real-time data sets of human rights abuses in the world's largest democracy. Using video and picture evidence submitted by a network of Indian activists, along with news aggregation, the site tracks hate crimes by Hindus against Muslims, Christians and members of the lower-ranked castes. Since its founding in April 2021, it has catalogued more than 1,000 instances of violent attacks and rhetoric. (Hindutva refers to political ideology that advocates for Hindu supremacy.)

It is likely an undercount, Indian political experts said. Still, the website has angered the increasingly authoritarian government of right-wing Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which critics charge promotes the idea that the Hindu majority is superior and tolerates deadly crimes against Muslims and Christians.

At least 11 times, Naik said, the government or Indian law enforcement have petitioned Twitter to suspend its account or take down some of its content, one of its most important venues for publicizing its findings. As of Sunday, its Twitter account remains active.

Until he agreed to an interview with The Washington Post, Naik, who is Muslim, ran both the site and its Twitter account anonymously from Cambridge, Mass., where he settled after fleeing India in 2020.

With Twitter now in the hands of Elon Musk, his work has become more complicated. In India, the third-largest market for Twitter, Musk has fired nearly 90 percent of



the staff, according to news reports. Hindu extremists have been allowed back onto the site and hate speech has soared.

Naik worries that Musk might acquiesce to the Modi administration's attempts to stifle Hindutvawatch.

Twitter did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Despite that, he has decided to make his work public, hoping to build his homegrown site into a major operation aimed at warning the Indian government that its human rights violations are being catalogued.

"At some point, it becomes very important for you to come out in the public and look into the eye of your oppressor," Naik said in an interview with The Post. To say: "I'm watching you, whatever you're doing. And preserving evidence."

Preserving evidence of hate crimes

After gaining independence from the British Empire in 1947, India aspired to be a secular nation where people of all faiths could live in peace. But religious tensions have repeatedly flared rarely with as much vitriol as under Modi.

Since Modi took control in 2014, hate crimes against minorities in India have skyrocketed by 300 percent, according to a 2019 study by Deepankar Basu, an economics professor who studies South Asian politics at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst.

Since then, Modi's party has only become stronger in India's parliament, but updated hate crime statistics are hard to find, multiple experts said. After 2017, India's crime bureau stopped collecting data on hate crimes, news reports show.

Modi's office did not return a request for comment.

The stop has created a gaping void of information, the scholars added and most attempts to report on hate crimes in India have quickly been shut down or disappeared.

Enter Naik. He was born in Kashmir into a family of modest means and spent much of his youth preparing to become an engineer. But that all changed once he got into college and became a journalist reporting on the injustices against Kashmiri Muslims unfolding around him.

Naik recounts how his passion for the work traces back to a single moment in 1997, when he was approaching 4 years old.

It was the spring. Protests were roiling Naik's neighborhood in Kashmir, a Himalayan and majority-Muslim region claimed by India and Pakistan. Mistakenly believing Naik's dad was a sympathizer with Muslim insurgents, military men came and took his father away. He returned after three days, beaten and bruised.

Naik said his passion for the work traces back to his own childhood. (Mary Inhea Kang/The Washington Post)

In college, Naik got a taste for journalism after volunteering to cover events in Kashmir for a small website while studying political science. The job exposed him to the plight of Muslims in the region, he said.

In 2019, Naik's work began to draw wider attention. Modi stripped the disputed regions of Jammu and Kashmir of autonomy, sparking violent protests. Modi responded with a curfew and an internet shutdown.

Naik was one of only a few journalists able to report on the unrest, filing dispatches for the Globe Post from the earliest days. Soon, Naik recalled, Indian intelligence officials were haunting his parents' home in Kashmir.

After being questioned by Indian intelligence officers three times in August 2019, Naik said he spoke with people from organizations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, who urged him to leave. They bought him a plane ticket to New Delhi, where he spent weeks bouncing from couch to couch.

Shortly after, Naik decided to go the United States after an American-based charity group invited him come to give lectures about his experience. At one of those talks, he said, an activist approached and mentioned that he had

purchased the domain name HindutvaWatch.org to track Hindu hate crimes. The site was not active and the activist did not have time to work on it.

At the start of the pandemic, Naik returned to his parents' home in Kashmir after his dozens of speaking events in the U.S. wrapped up. Soon, Indian intelligence officials were ringing his phone and Naik decided it was time to leave for good.

In August 2020, he came back to the United States on a tourist visa and later applied for a special work visa. He lived in Mississippi for roughly a year before settling in East Cambridge around August 2021, where he stayed with a friend who worked in biotechnology.

With plenty of free time on his hands, his thoughts turned to Hindutva Watch.

A retelling of what's taking place

On the Fourth of July 2022, Naik woke up bleary eyed and sick. But then a Twitter message popped up on his computer.

An activist sent him a video of a group of men in India beating a Muslim man, squatting in the street naked. Naik tried to verify if it was real and asked a journalist contact who lived near the village to investigate. Local police denied the incident, saying the Muslim man was mentally ill. But several local residents confirmed it.

Less than a day later, Naik posted the video and police response on Twitter and his website, etching an incident into digital history.

"We want to make sure the evidence is properly preserved," he said.

That video is one of hundreds Naik has worked to verify and document: scenes of police beatings, homes being bulldozed, Hindu nationalist rallies that turn hateful and racist, even members of Modi's party calling for "Muslim genocide."

Every day, Naik and a band of six activists across the world scour social media, messaging apps and chatrooms looking for hateful videos, text and speech in the Indian language press, Twitter, Reddit, Telegram and WhatsApp. Activists and journalists also send them videos that need to be verified.

The group holds virtual meetings multiple times a week, where they discuss the reports and videos that need to be

verified. Hindutva Watch works with individuals on the ground who can help anonymous so they can report and verify without fear of retaliation. English subtitles are put on videos in local Indian languages.

In the past, Twitter has taken down some of its content at the request of Indian officials, Naik said.

One of the site's volunteers, who spoke with The Post on the condition of anonymity for security reasons, joined Hindutva Watch last year after his own Twitter account got banned for reasons that are still not clear, he said. He had been tracking hate crimes as an activist, but without Twitter he was lost.

"It is important to document hate crimes," he said, because the mainstream media is "not showing this."

Other organizations have done what Hindutva Watch does, with varying levels of success. In 2017, the Hindustan Times, a prominent national newspaper in India, started a hate crimes tracker on violence against Muslims and lower-caste Indians that were often coded as murder or assault.

But the initiative stopped, which news reports indicate may have been due to government pressure. The paper's editor in chief, Bobby Ghosh, who spearheaded the initiative, resigned shortly after. He declined to comment.

Citizen's Religious Hate Crime Watch, a data tracking project, also operated with a similar mission, but it shut down in 2019 without explanation, multiple scholars said.

The Indian news group NDTV keeps track of hate speech from politicians and an organization called Doto maintains a catalogue of abuses which Hindutva Watch sometimes cites. Altnews is a prominent fact-checking news site.

Khaled Beydoun, a global Islamophobia scholar at Wayne State University in Detroit, said it is crucial that Hindutva Watch exists, because winners write history.

"Ten years from now, the history of what is taking place under the Modi years will be entirely authored by the Modi regime," he said. "But this [site] provides a retelling of what is taking place with Muslims in real-time."

Rana Ayyub, an investigative journalist who also writes for The Post, said hate crimes "have completely disappeared from our mainstream publications. ...

Hindutva Watch is documenting hate crimes, attacks on minorities and persecution that has otherwise been normalized by the mainstream media."

Hindutva Watch has also proved to be valuable evidence to some Indian lawmakers. Asaduddin Owaisi, a Muslim lawmaker in the lower house of the Indian Parliament, said he has spent years trying to convince opposition lawmakers that Muslim hate crimes are happening. The visual evidence can help.

"Whether it changes their minds or not is a different thing," he said in an interview. "But definitely, when you see a video of beatings ... how can anyone deny it?"

'If Twitter goes down'

These days, Naik's father, who also spoke on the condition of anonymity for security reasons, said he chats with his son sporadically and mostly keeps tabs on him on Twitter.

In a WhatsApp phone call, he said he is worried about his son's future and would have preferred if Naik stuck with his original plans to be an engineer.

"We are tense and worried all the time because of what happens to journalists," he said, referring to reporters being jailed. "If he comes home, they could do anything."

Meanwhile, as Naik, who moved elsewhere on the East Coast a few months ago, ran HindutvaWatch.org anonymously, he at times reported on the rise of the Hindu right in America under his own name.

In April 2021, a report he wrote for Al Jazeera about how coronavirus funds were steered to "Hindu right-wing groups" in the United States prompted death threats and became part of a wider defamation lawsuit filed by the Hindu American Foundation, an influential lobbying group seeking to shape the image of Hinduism in the United States. The case was dismissed by a federal court in December.

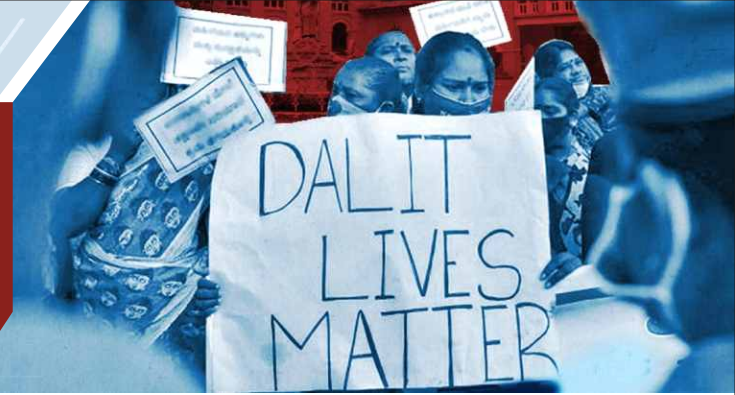
And now, with Musk leading Twitter, Naik worries the billionaire's desires to open the site up to all kinds of speech has repercussions for India. It is likely to stoke anti-minority sentiment that already runs high on the website, he said.

If the site becomes overrun with hate speech, he said, it is more dire. "If Twitter goes down," Naik said, "it would seriously impede our work."

Source: www.washingtonpost.com

Increase in Crimes against Dalits and Other Scheduled Castes in India

Qura tul ain Hafeez



One of the most severe hate crime laws in the world, India's Prevention of Atrocities Act (PoA) seeks to punish and deter violence against Dalits (ex-untouchables) and Adivasis (tribals). However, worries over its efficacy in tackling historical oppression rule popular discourse in India and the international humanitarian community. The Dalit minority in South Asia has endured centuries of prejudice, marginalisation, stigma and violence. And the phenomenon of prejudice based on ancestry is what causes this violence.

Violent attacks against Dalits (ex-untouchables) have recently increased; A horrific video that has gone viral on social media platforms shows a group of guys severely beating and kicking a lady while she cries and screams while being surrounded by onlookers. According to sources, a distressing video of the violent incident in UP shows a Dalit girl being exposed to excessive abuse in an open field next to a water body on the suspicion that she desecrated the water for upper class Hindus by bathing in it. The disclosure of such incidents and depressing statistics on caste atrocities has once again exposed India's facade of social and economic growth and shown the fundamental problems with Hindutva ideology. It has put a spotlight on the Indian judicial system's inability to promote social equality and stop discriminatory violence.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau's (NCRB) recently issued annual report, which was published on August 29, 2021, compared to 2020, atrocities and crimes against scheduled castes increased by 1.2%. (50,291 cases). The biggest percentage of Scheduled Caste (SC) atrocity cases were reported in Uttar Pradesh (13,146 cases), accounting for 25.82%, followed by Rajasthan (14.7%, 7524 cases) and Madhya Pradesh (14.1%, 7214 cases). 70.8% of incidences of atrocities against scheduled castes were recorded by the top five states mentioned above.

Tens of millions of Dalit men, women and children work as agricultural workers for a few kilogrammes of rice or wheat per day because they have little land of their own to produce. The majority of people are on the verge of famine, barely able to feed their families, unable to send

their kids to school and trapped in a cycle of debt that is passed down from generation to generation. When the day is over, they return to a shack in their caste-segregated Dalit community that has no power, miles away from the nearest water source.

Moreover, upper caste Hindus restrict them from going into places of worship, using public drinking fountains or wearing shoes when with other Hindus of their caste. Scheduled castes are forced to clean human excrement, dig the village cemeteries, wash and use separate tea tumblers at tea stalls, etc., all because they are considered "untouchable" due to their caste status and hence pollute. However, every attempt to overthrow the established social order is always greeted with violence or financial reprisals. Similarly, women are the primary targets of gendered violence in all patriarchal societies and in a nation like India, Dalit women are particularly at risk since ruling castes employ sexual assault to maintain caste identity. The following graph shows the statistics of violence against Dalit women in India from 2011 to 2021.

Although untouchability was outlawed by India's constitution in 1950, the Atrocities Act is the first statute to specifically classify all verbal, physical and "political, ritual or symbolic violence" against Dalits and Adivasis as crimes or "atrocities." But despite numerous revisions and three decades since its first introduction, the act has not resulted in a significant shift in society, highlighting the fact that very few cases filed under the Atrocities Act result in convictions and that most never ever reach the courtroom.

To sum up, Dalit injustice results in severe pain and suffering that spans generations. Stigma accompanies a person from birth until death and has an impact on every element of life, including access to justice, housing, employment and political engagement. Women and girls are frequently the targets of sexual assault, human trafficking and they are particularly susceptible to early and forced marriage, bonded labour and negative cultural norms, making Indian society a difficult place to survive.

Source: Modern Diplomacy

Nepal: Impunity Reigns, Fueling New Rights Violations



The Nepali government has yet to pursue justice for conflict-era rights abuses or continuing abuses by security forces, Human Rights Watch said in its World Report 2023. The government has not investigated cases of torture, enforced disappearance, or extrajudicial killing; has blocked conflict-related cases from proceeding in the regular courts; and has failed to credibly investigate or prosecute continuing allegations of abuse by the security forces. Women and members of marginalized communities, including Dalits, are disproportionately the victims of rights violations and also find it hardest to seek redress.

“Lack of justice for conflict-era violations has contributed to a general state of impunity in post-conflict Nepal, undermining respect for human rights and governance across the board,” said Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “The newly elected government should amend the transitional justice bill to address its shortcomings, bring it back to parliament and finally move forward with delivering truth, reparations, justice and guarantees that the abuse will not recur.”

In the 712-page World Report 2023, its 33rd edition, Human Rights Watch reviews human rights practices in close to 100 countries. In her introductory essay, acting Executive Director Tirana Hassan says that in a world in which power has shifted, it is no longer possible to rely on a small group of mostly Global North governments to defend human rights. The world's mobilization around Russia's war in Ukraine reminds us of the extraordinary potential when governments realize their human rights obligations on a global scale. The responsibility is on individual countries, big and small, to apply a human rights framework to their policies and then work together to protect and promote human rights.

A new transitional justice bill, to address abuses committed during Nepal's 1996-2006 civil war, was presented to parliament in August 2022. It raised some hopes among victims and families who have waited over 16 years for justice, but it had significant flaws. These include wording that makes it possible to grant an amnesty for certain gross violations of human rights, crimes against humanity and war crimes. In addition, verdicts from a new special court would not be subject to judicial appeal, in violation of international fair trial guarantees. The bill was neither amended nor brought to

a vote before parliament was dissolved ahead of November elections.

The continuing impunity for conflict-era violations is matched by impunity for ongoing abuses by law enforcement and security forces. Deaths caused by the use of excessive or unnecessary force while policing protests, as well as deaths in custody allegedly as a result of torture, are rarely if ever credibly investigated.

On May 18, a 20-year-old Dalit man, Sundar Harijan, died in Rolpa jail in suspicious circumstances while serving another person's sentence in an apparent case of corruption by prison officials. On June 6, police killed an 18-year-old woman, Nabina Tharu, in Bardiya district, when they opened fire on protesters who were blocking a road using live ammunition.

A series of high-profile rape allegations led to repeated protests and calls to address widespread sexual violence in Nepal. Official statistics show that the number of recorded rapes has risen in recent years. A statute of limitations was extended from one year to two (or three years if the victim is a child), but the limitation remains an obstacle to justice. Victims of conflict-related sexual violence are among those affected.

The rate of child labor increased as a result of the Covid-10 pandemic and UNICEF found that one in five families struggles to feed their children. These problems could be eased if the government fulfilled a commitment to extend the Child Grant social protection program to all districts.

Parliament passed a new citizenship act, but President Bidya Bhandari refused to sign it. If it becomes the law, the act could provide citizenship documents to thousands of people who were excluded under the previous law. However, it still contains provisions that discriminate against women, making it harder for them than for Nepali men to pass Nepali citizenship to their children, leaving millions of people effectively stateless.

Source: Human Right Watch

United Nations Universal Periodic Review - IV - India



UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW [UPR IV] - SUBMISSION OF JOINT STAKEHOLDERS' REPORT TO UNHRC

1. SUMMARY OF THE JOINT STAKEHOLDERS' REPORT OF THE OFFICE OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS [OHCHR] - UPRIV:

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR] has released its UPR Report with a summary and compilation of the Joint Stakeholders' Report across the globe.

The Joint Stakeholder Report with Dalit and Adivasi Perspective submitted by SASY is titled "JS 19" which includes three recommendations- [76, 91, 123 in the Summary of the Joint Stakeholders Report - Published by United Nations - Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights] relating to Dalits, Manual Scavengers, and Dalit, Adivasi Women. It stated that the link between manual scavenging and the caste system needed to be acknowledged to make any meaningful reform in that respect; point 91 stated that Scheduled Castes directly suffered from landlessness and homelessness due to the violence and discrimination historically perpetuated against them and point 123 stated that a significant proportion of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes women consistently faced verbal abuse, physical assault, sexual harassment and assault, domestic violence and rape, sexual exploitation, forced prostitution, kidnapping and abduction, forced incarceration, and medical negligence. SASY had live screened the UPR session at 3 central districts namely Villupuram, Cuddalore &

Coimbatore. And in 27 villages of Cuddalore and 5 villages of Coimbatore District. Around 1284 persons from organisations, HRDs, women leaders, children, college students, community leaders, trade union members, panchayat presidents, parish priests, movement leaders participated in the live screening of UN UPR India's session and made it as a people-centered event. The India's report was presented by Indian representatives that was headed by the Solicitor General of India Mr. Tushar Mehta and was live telecasted through UN Web TV from 7 p.m to 10: 30 p.m [IST].

The Indian representatives made a detailed presentation for about 40 minutes on the India's report on action sought against terrorism, violence against women, children, religious and linguistic minorities, persons with disabilities, vulnerable groups, state-less people and health care of infant and maternal etc.

Following this, 132 member states including United Kingdom, USA, Indonesia, Iraq, Singapore, Malaysia, Lithuania, Libya, Republic of Korea, Saudi Arabia, Angola, Russia, Spain, France, Norway, Luxembourg, Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, Holy See, Greece, Nepal, Philippines, Sweden, Seoul, Vietnam, Zambia, Algeria, Argentina, Portugal, Qatar, UAE and others made their specific recommendations to India with regard to Dalit and Adivasi concerns.

RECOMMENDATIONS BY MEMBER STATES - DALIT, ADIVASI, WOMEN AND CHILDREN CONCERNS

1. Iraq & Algeria - Abolition of death penalty and

- strengthening of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights especially for women and persons with disabilities.
2. Libya - Right to life of the Human Rights Defenders and Women HRDs
 3. Marshal Islands - Annihilation of caste discrimination and addressing the unequal social order. To address caste-based discrimination by providing equal access to essentials; Adequate resources towards prevention of violence against women; continue efforts towards paris agreement
 4. Greece - Addressing the issues of Journalist Attacks
 5. Britain & Nepal - Addressing violence against women and children and ensuring their protection
 6. Luxemburg - Release of the HRDs from prisons, providing citizenship to the state-less people
 7. Malavi, UAE - Fullest implementation of the RTE act and providing quality, free education for all
 8. France, Republic of Korea, Denmark, Ukraine, Mexico- Abolition of Child Labour, Death penalty, Action against Domestic Violence, ratifying OPCAT, CEDAW
 9. Portugal - Addressing Gender based violence and economic disparities in the society
 10. Seoul - Taking strict measures on caste-based discriminations in India
 11. Sweden - Implementation of the PWDs Act
 12. Spain - Addressing Discrimination, Honour Killings and Promote Equality; criminalize marital rape and implementation of CEDAW, special legislations for minorities.
 13. USA- Addressing the unlawful activities - UAPA, CIA, attack on HRDs, Journalists and right to protection
 14. Sudan & Argentina - Addressing enforced disappearance
 15. Australia, Zambia, France, Algeria - Abolish Death Penalty
 16. Germany - To make human rights commission for effective for the implementation of Prevention of Atrocities Act. For any possible amendments to the Human Rights Act 98 not to weaken the protection and limit the ability of individuals to exercise and enforce their rights & to continue to protect women and girls from violence
 17. Italy -Consider enabling safe environment for civil society to exercise freedom of express and opinion
 18. Slovenia - Promotion of human rights education at schools while addressing gender education & recommends adopt measures towards the eradication of gender-based violence with capacity building programs.
 19. Netherlands - To straighten the prevention of gender-based violence through long term education and to stablish institutions to support the victims
 20. Liechtenstein - To take steps in view of abolishing death penalty; national laws to ban corporal punishment.
 21. Mexico - Ensure prevention of sexual abuse of women specially of lower castes; Ratify UNCAT; Review implementation of NRC to avoid statelessness; adopt comprehension law for protection of human rights defenders
 22. Brazil - To strengthen institutions to combat acts of violence against women & to review the penal code on freedom of expression, association and religion to bring it into line with the international covenant on civil and political rights
 23. Belgium - Right of Expression in accordance with the article of 19 ICCPR
 24. Holy See - Repeal laws that prohibit or discourage religious conversion, end discrimination on the basis of religion, adopt a mortarium on the death penalty
 25. Sierra Leone - Continue the effort to prohibition of caste-based discrimination, combat child forced marriages, to address the intersectionality with terms of poverty with affected women communities.

This is the very first time the UN UPR session was live telecasted in various parts of the state, districts, taluks and villages and was made as a people/community centric approach. The recommendations of the members states and will present them after 4 months [February 2023] and hoping the recommendations will make a ripple effect from UN to the grass root level for better access to human rights and justice.

Source: United Nations



Ruchi Kumar

For Many Indian Women, Lack of Toilet Access Poses Health Risks



On a humid afternoon in May, a handful of local residents gathered at a one-room home in an unplanned housing settlement in Mumbai. The women greeted each other and then sat down on the small porch and on the tiled floor inside, swapping stories about the day's events through the doorframe. Their conversation was lighthearted until someone mentioned hydration and the mood changed. "We won't be consuming any more liquids today," said 31-year-old Kalawati Yadav. "If we do, we might have the urge to urinate by later in the evening." By then, the public toilets would be filthy from the day's use and without lighting, they would also be dark. "It's not a safe time to go," Yadav said.

Daytime is not much better, though, because the facilities are rarely truly clean. According to the women, the public toilets are usually dirty, unlit and lacking in water. They are also in short supply. Two facilities, each with a dozen toilets - six for women and six for men - service the entire settlement, Subhash Nagar, which covers about one tenth of a square mile and as of 2020 housed more than 9,000 people. The municipal government is supposed to be responsible for sanitation, but there is very little oversight. (City officials did not respond to multiple requests for comment.)

As a result, for residents of Subhash Nagar and for millions of low-income residents across India, bathroom schedules are often dictated not by biological need, but by inadequate toilet infrastructure. Several women told Undark that they routinely hold their urine and avoid drinking liquids in an effort to reduce trips to the facilities. These behaviors lead to stomach aches and constipation, but the women said they don't have better options. Their neighborhood was unplanned - starting as a collection of tin plank homes, which were later replaced with concrete structures - so the houses are not connected to septic tanks. There are no private toilets and the owners cannot afford to regularly use the fee-based facilities in other parts of the city.

This predicament is part of a larger story of India's efforts to bring affordable and sanitary toilets to its population of 1.4 billion people. According to *The Hindu*, an Indian daily newspaper, nearly half of all Indians practiced open defecation as recently as 2013, with people going outside in fields, bodies of water or other open spaces. Without public sanitation - septic tanks in particular, but also water and cleaning products - pathogens spread readily, causing serious health problems. The U.N. Deputy Secretary-General has called for the elimination of open defecation and in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched Swachh Bharat Abhiyan or Clean India Mission, an effort that led to the construction of over 100 million toilets. Today, according to the World Bank, just 15 percent of the population practices open defecation. Having new public toilets "is a step forward," wrote Sarita Vijay Panchang, a public health researcher who did her 2019 dissertation on India's urban sanitation, in an email to Undark. But many of India's public toilets are overcrowded, she noted. This leads to long lines, sewage overflows and concerns about personal safety - all of which constitute their own set of public health problems.

Surveys show that the situation is especially acute in urban areas like Mumbai. Safety concerns, as well as cultural norms, deter women from practicing open defecation as a fallback. (Men are more likely than women to practice open defecation even when public toilets are available.) Physicians and activists say the continued practice of caste- and class-based discrimination compounds the harms, as some women are forbidden from using the toilets in their workplaces. "The ceiling plaster has fallen on me once," said Ambika Kalshetty, the gathering's 35-year-old host, who works as a housemaid in the nearby high-rise apartments. The men's toilets were built atop the women's toilets, she explained and the men's "leak on us at times - it's disgusting." She said she really doesn't feel good until she returns home and cleans thoroughly with

soap and an anti-septic.

Another woman, Sangeeta Pandey, recalled watching a pregnant woman faint while waiting in a long line for the community toilets. "It was humiliating," Pandey said, "but also, what could she do?" Local activists have worked to raise awareness and bring improvements. Still, the women gathered in Kalshetty's home say that change is slow and for now, they are on their own to manage a difficult situation.

Several years ago, researchers surveyed more than 600 women across 33 slums in Maharashtra, the Indian state that includes Mumbai. They found that among those without proper toilet access, more than 21 percent reported holding in their urine and more than 26 percent said they modify their meals to avoid using the toilets at night. These findings are supported by Panchang's research in the region, which also found that women avoid urination and defecation when they perceive their community toilets to be unsafe.

Such behavioral changes can lead to negative health effects, said Suchitra Dalvie, a Mumbai-based gynecologist and women's health activist. Frequent urination helps flush any bacteria, thus reducing risk of urinary tract infections. (The women in Subash Nagar said that they regularly experienced UTIs, some as often as every few months.)

Even the relatively well-off are affected. Dalvie recalled a conversation with the state's former minister of health, a young woman who often needed to travel for work. The health minister would limit her water intake, knowing that the public toilets she would encounter on the road might not be adequate. This is an example of how women's problems have been normalized in India, said Dalvie. Toilet infrastructure is not just an issue of sanitation, said Deepa Pawar, a social activist focusing on gender and youth issues in marginalized communities. "It is a much larger problem that encompasses health, gender and social justice issues," she said. Pawar's organization, Anubhuti, conducted several toilet audits across Mumbai in 2017. Their audit of the K/East Ward, a municipal district that includes Subhash Nagar, found conditions similar those Undark reported: damaged toilets, lack of water and inadequate cleaning services. And while the central government has called for one commode per 30 individuals, the audit found far fewer.

Pawar grew up in Mumbai's low-income neighborhoods, so the issue is personal. "When you use your toilet at

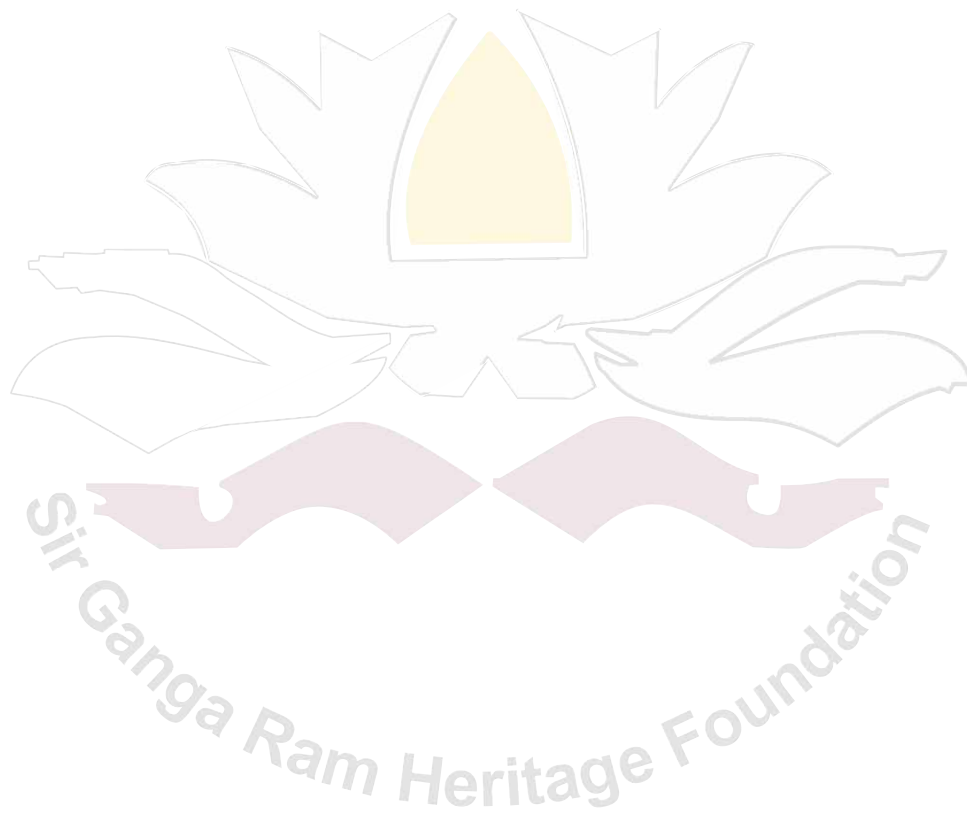
home, there is no struggle involved," she said. But in using public toilets, one must contend with an array of concerns. The problems were aggravated during the Covid lockdowns, Pawar said, when many of the city's free public toilets were closed. "They only kept the pay-and-use toilets functional. From where will the poor get the money to use these toilets if they are not allowed to work?" she asked. The closures particularly affected the nomadic communities that comprise nearly 10 percent of India's population. These are communities that traditionally moved around and while many have now settled, they are economically weak and face discrimination.

Women and men in Subhash Nagar were also forbidden from using the toilets during the lockdowns, but they said they used them anyway. And across Mumbai, many men simply defecated outside. Although the city government ordered toilet fees to be waived for everyone, Pawar and residents of Subhash Nagar say that in practice, women were still charged. "Essentially women were being penalized for their gender while men were being given a free pass," Pawar said. As a member of a nomadic tribe, Pawar is intimately familiar with the social dynamics that prevent some women from accessing basic services like toilets. "During our campaigns, we question local officials about the disparity in access to toilets for members of nomadic tribes like ourselves and they often respond by asking us why we don't use the free public toilets in malls instead," she said.

The reality is that those spaces cater to the middle and upper class and people of lower socioeconomic status are not welcome there. "Will a female laborer with a bullock cart be allowed to enter a mall? Has our society inspired such courtesies among those who work at and visit these malls to allow nomadic laborers within their complex?" she asked rhetorically. Mumbai is a large commercial city that relies on the labor of women and of marginalized communities, said Dalvie. Businesses, government and wealthy residents should therefore "accommodate the conveniences" of everyone.

Going forward, Panchang would like to see India strive to build more in-house toilets that are connected to sewers. Residents will be able to maintain them well and women will not have to pay such a heavy price for the country's efforts to eliminate open defecation. "Public toilets," she wrote in her email, "are not a substitute for household toilets."

Courtesy: Undark Magazine



Sir Ganga Ram Heritage Foundation