

# frontier

Vol. 55 : No. 37

ISSN 0016-2094

March 12-18, 2023

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Published weekly for Germinal Publications Pvt. Ltd. by Sharmistha Dutta from 44, Balaram Dey Street, Kolkata-700006 and Printed by her at Laser Aid, 35A/3, Biplabi Barin Ghosh Sarani, Kolkata-700 067.

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[Typeset by THE D-COMLASER, 60 Sikdar Bagan Street, Kolkata-4, Ph : 98361-58319]

## *No Endgame is in Sight*

**M**UCH TO THE DISMAY OF MERCHANTS OF DEATH OR ONE may call them war-gamblers, nothing spectacular happened on the occasion of the first anniversary of Russia-Ukraine war on February 24. Russians didn't observe the day by launching a massive offensive as speculated by the defence experts of America and Europe. And quite expectedly Ukraine's president Zelenskyy marked the sombre anniversary by issuing renewed pledges to push for victory. Also, for him it was an opportunity to demand more weapons, rather more advanced weapons, from the West. All things considered, the war is likely to stretch beyond 2023 because Russians are not leaving unless they get their objectives fulfilled. They are now trying to consolidate their control over territorial gains they have achieved over the year through enormous sacrifices. Despite tremendous devastation in Ukraine American policy of prolonging the war has not changed. The Pentagon, however, celebrated February 24 by committing a new package of long-term security assistance for Ukraine with a \$2 billion in drones ammunition. With US and its allies continuing to bolster the Ukrainian means no endgame is in sight. No peace initiative from any side. Both sides are strengthening their ground position so that they could bargain from a position of strength in any negotiation in future. There are so many self-proclaimed mediators and yet nothing positive is emerging.

Barring Hungary no European country shows any interest in a negotiated settlement without which peace in the region will remain elusive for years to come. The one-year old war is now being directly orchestrated from the war room of Washington while sufferings of Ukrainians are multiplying with every passing day. Giving his annual state of the nation address, Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban called for peace and said that the conflict could last for years, and everyone in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Union (EU) was in favour of escalating war, except for Hungary.

For one thing the EU was already at war with Russia, albeit indirectly, because they were sending weapons and training military personnel. As per Orban's assessment "Europe is on the verge of drifting into war, they are walking on a very thin platform". The White House strategists want Europe's direct participation in war so that they could kill two birds with a single stone—their plan is to weaken Russia and Europe as well. The way they are provoking rebel Moldovan region with the aim of fomenting tensions illustrates among

other things that America needs another front to decimate Russian forces. Reacting to American conspiratorial move Russia warned Ukraine and NATO against provocation in Moldovan breakaway province of Transnistria. Moscow saw in it a new threat to Russian peace-keepers stationed there. Not very long ago Moldova raised a hue and cry over destabilisation exercise by Russia. This way or that storm is gathering over Europe substantiating Hungary's narrative. Allegations and counter-allegations are fuelling war hysteria making a peace process difficult to start.

Meanwhile, China has launched its 'peace diplomacy' to assert its position in global power theatre. Whether America likes it or not, a multi-polar world is a reality and the Ukraine war has hastened the new

trend of geo-political polarisation. But China's idea of peace in a 14-point formula is not attracting much attention from the parties concerned. Their position paper on war calls for sovereignty (for Ukraine) and protection of national security interests (for Russia) while opposing the unilateral sanctions imposed by the US. If respecting Ukrainian sovereignty means vacation of Donbas by Russia then China's peace politics has no taker in Moscow. And if protection of Russian security interests means stoppage of NATO expansion then the West is unlikely to respond to China's initiative. After all two parallel lines never meet.

China has been on the sidelines for one year. They are too hesitant to antagonise America despite their unlimited friendship with Russia.

What matters in their strategic calculation is business. Unlike North Korea and Iran China has not yet sent a single bullet to Russia. If China was at all serious about peaceful resolution of the conflict they could have stepped in much earlier without sitting on the fence for a year. They are actually doing a balancing act in which they are masters, to keep both Russia and America in good humour.

Land has historically been the root cause of any conflict, big or small, and will continue to be so. But American and Western weapons alone are not capable of ensuring victory or creating conditions for victory. In truth it is creating conditions for a catastrophe for the people of Ukraine as if their current predicament is not enough. □□□

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## COMMENT

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### 'Doctors, Not Bombs'

IN THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH of the recent devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, Cuba dispatched medical teams to the affected areas to provide care to victims.

Their departure was marked by a farewell ceremony, which featured a large photo of Fidel Castro. It was quite appropriate, for the international medical solidarity which Cuba regularly extends to countries throughout the world is the brainchild of the late iconic leader himself, who, in 2003, proudly proclaimed that Cuba does not drop bombs on other countries but instead sends them doctors.

Though Castro retired from his official duties as President of Cuba 15 years ago to the day, he has continued to remain a leader in solidarity and in peace. Cuban doctors were sent to more than 70 countries over the years, including nearly 40 different countries in 2020

to help in the fight against Covid-19. Cuba's campaign against the cholera epidemic which broke out in Haiti after another earthquake saved many lives. In 2014 Cuba's leadership successfully fought Ebola in Africa.

Patients from 26 Latin American and Caribbean countries have travelled to Cuba to have their eyesight restored by Cuban doctors in what was dubbed "Operation Miracle". Among them was Mario Teran, the Bolivian soldier who shot and killed Che Guevara. What a tragedy for Mario Teran!

In 2014, Fidel received the Confucius Peace Award for his efforts in ending tensions with the United States and for his work to eliminate nuclear weapons. In addition, he played a key role in helping initiate, host and mediate the peace talks between the Colombian government and FARC guerillas which resulted in

a peace deal in 2016, ending 52 years of brutal civil conflict.

The historic role that Fidel Castro played was always outsized for a country as small as the island nation of Cuba, and as a result, his impact was felt beyond its borders. One of the first countries that Cuba aided, back in the early 1960s, was Algeria, which had recently won its independence from France.

"It was an unusual gesture: an underdeveloped country tendering free aid to another in even more dire straits.... It was an act of solidarity that brought no tangible benefit and came at real material cost".

Cuba, under Fidel's leadership and with the support of the USSR, played a key role in liberating southern Africa from US and apartheid-era South African domination, and in ultimately ending apartheid in the country itself. It was for this reason that the first nation Nelson Mandela visited after his release from prison was Cuba. While there, Mandela lauded the nation as "a source of inspiration to all freedom-loving people".

After the Chernobyl disaster of 1989, Cuba took in and treated 24,000 affected children. Many of these individuals and their families still live there to this day. This act of solidarity cannot be understated given the economic conditions in the island nation at the time. While Cuba benefited greatly from the support of the USSR and Eastern Bloc after its 1959 Revolution, which Fidel led, by 1989 the Communist governments had fallen and aid from

the USSR itself, which would collapse in 1991, was drying up. As a result of all of this, Cuba would enter what it called its "Special Period", a time of great economic deprivation which many believed would lead to the collapse of the Cuban Revolution as well. But Fidel and Cuba hung on, and they continued to extend help to people around the world even while they were having trouble feeding their own people. □□□ [Contributed]

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**NOTE**


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## 'Revolutionary Democracy'

*Robin McGregor writes:*

**T**HE LATEST ISSUE OF THIS twice-yearly Indian Marxist-Leninist journal ('REVOLUTIONARY DEMOCRACY' edited by Vijay Singh) [New Series Vol. I, no. 2, September 2022. £5.00 + £2.P&P from NCP Lit: PO Box 73, London SW11 2PQ] has once again arrived on these shores. This time half the journal is taken up with matters pertaining to Ukraine, with the remainder devoted to contemporary Indian politics and some historical material. This is an issue in which the journal's affiliation to the views of the late Albanian leader Enver Hoxha strongly comes to the fore, with a number of pieces arguing that events in Ukraine demonstrate the imperialist nature of contemporary Russia. Statements by the Revolutionary Communist Party of Volta-PCR/V / Burkina Faso and the Revolutionary Alliance of Labour of Serbia amongst others take this view. Of course Hoxha considered that this had been the nature of the Soviet Union after the death of Stalin and the coming to power of Nikita Khrushchev and his alleged restoration of capitalism in the USSR when Mikhail Gorbachev was merely the Stavropol Komsomel regional

deputy director of agitation and propaganda. Two long articles originally published in Albania in 1974 and 1987 are reprinted here which back up this argument. They accuse both Khrushchev and later promoters of "Soviet Revisionism" of encouraging Great Russian chauvinism, particularly on the place of the Russian language in the non-Russian parts of the USSR. Allegations of "Great Russian chauvinism" have of course long been levelled throughout the existence of the USSR, by Trotskyites and by imperialists who sought to destabilise the USSR by fanning ethnic conflicts. It is often overlooked that many of nationalists in the non-Russian republics were just Anti-Russian (and anti-Soviet) but extremely anti-Semitic and very hostile to minorities within their borders and in neighbouring countries. It might be worth noting that it was Stalin who reversed Lenin's policy of using the Latin alphabet for newly literate peoples in Siberia and the Central Asian soviet republics and insisted on the Cyrillic alphabet.

There are three substantial articles dealing with contemporary India. The first deals with the impact of the latest budget from the right-

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wing BJP government of India on the peoples of India. India's poorest half of the population owns a mere six per cent of the nation's wealth. Things are getting worse with inflation in commodity prices affecting the poor harshly. Another article describes how a 1942 Ordinance used by British colonial authorities to clamp down on the growing Independence movement is still in force in new guises and has been used to suppress national movements in Jammu and Kashmir. An example of the Indian government's brutality is given in an account of a massacre of villagers of Silger in one of India's Tribal Areas by government forces allegedly in pursuit of Maoist terrorists. Of the historical material there is an offering from the Editor on Grover Furr, the American academic who has carefully exposed as lies all of Khrushchev claims in his 1956 "Secret speech". There is also a somewhat technical, but important piece concerning the authenticity of some of Lenin's last writings when he was very ill.

This issue concludes with another piece from the Soviet archives. This time there are Stalin's observations made in March 1951 on the Communist Party of India's tactics. By that time the party was frustrated by its lack of progress since the formal ending of colonialism in 1947. Stalin's advice was that copy-

ing the Chinese path was unsuitable for India; was inadvisable, partly because geography did not permit the Soviet Union offering the same military support that it had given to China and that India had a larger working class. Stalin was firmly opposed to individual terrorism such as bumping off particularly bad land-

lords. It is to be hoped that this and related previously published materials will be consolidated to a separate book as they have much to say about Stalin's later years and Soviet relations with the Indian and Chinese communist parties (and other topics) which needs to be better known. □□□

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#### MUSTO'S COLUMN

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## Alienation in Marxist Tradition

*Marcello Musto*

**S**INCE THEY WERE FIRST published in the mid-nineteenth century, Karl Marx's early writings on alienation have served as a radical touchstone in the fields of social and philosophical thought, generating followers, contestation and debate. It was in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 that Marx first developed his theory of alienation. His concept of "alienated labour" pushed beyond the existing philosophical, religious, and political notions of alienation to ground it in the economic sphere of material production. This was a groundbreaking move, but alienation was a concept that Marx never put down, and he would go on to refine and develop his theory in the coming decades.

Although thinkers on the topic of alienation have, for the most part, continued to make use of Marx's early writings, it is in fact in the later work that Marx provides a fuller, more developed account of alienation, as well as a theory of its overcoming. In the notebooks of the Grundrisse (1857-58), as well as in other preparatory manuscripts for Capital (1867), Marx delivers conception of alienation is historically grounded in his analysis of social relations under capitalism. If this important aspect of Marx's theory has been underappreciated until now,

it remains nonetheless the key to understanding what the mature Marx meant by alienation—and helps provide the conceptual tools that will be needed in transforming the hyper-exploitative economic and social system that people live in today.

### *A Long Trajectory*

The first systematic account of alienation was provided by Georg W F Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), where the terms *Entausserung* ("self-externalisation"), *Entfremdung* ("estrangement") and *Vergegenständlichung* (literally: "to-make-into-an-object") were used to describe Spirit's becoming other than itself in the realm of objectivity.

The concept of alienation continued to feature prominently in the writings of the Hegelian Left, and Ludwig Feuerbach's developed a theory of religious alienation in *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) where he described man's projection of his own essence onto an imaginary deity. But it subsequently disappeared from philosophical reflection, and none of the major thinkers of the second half of the nineteenth century paid it any great attention. Even Marx rarely used the term in the works published during his lifetime, and discussion of alienation was notably absent from the Marxism of the Second International (1889-1914).

It was during this period, however, that several thinkers developed concepts that later came to be associated with alienation. In his *Division of Labour* (1893) and *Suicide* (1897), Émile Durkheim introduced the term "anomie" to indicate a set of phenomena whereby the norms guaranteeing social cohesion fall into crisis following a major extension of the division of labour. Social upheaval associated with major changes in the production process also lay at the basis of the thinking of German sociologists. Georg Simmel in *The Philosophy of Money* (1900) paid great attention to the dominance of social institutions over individuals and to the growing impersonality of human relations. Max Weber, in *Economy and Society* (1922), dwelled on the phenomena of "bureaucratisation" and "rational calculation" in human relations, considering them to be the essence of capitalism. But these authors thought they were describing unstoppable tendencies of human relations, and their reflections were often guided by a wish to improve the existing social and political order—certainly not to replace it with a different one.

The return to a Marxist theory of alienation occurred in large part thanks to Gyorgy Lukács, who in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) introduced the term "reification" (*Versachlichung*) to describe the phenomenon whereby labour activity confronts human beings as something objective and independent, dominating them through external

autonomous laws. When the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 finally appeared in German in 1932, the hitherto unpublished text from Marx's youth caused waves throughout the world. Marx's concept of alienation described the labour product confronting labour "as something alien, as a power independent of the producer". He listed four ways in which the worker is alienated in bourgeois society: (1) by the product of his labour, which becomes "an alien object that has power over him"; (2) in his working activity, which he perceives as "directed against himself", as if it "does not belong to him"; (3) by "man's species-being", which is transformed into "a being alien to him"; and (4) by other human beings, and in relation "to their labour and the object of the labour".

For Marx, unlike for Hegel, alienation was not coterminous with objectification as such, but rather with a particular phenomenon within a precise form of economy: that is, wage labour and the transformation of labour products into objects standing opposed to producers. Whereas Hegel presented alienation as an ontological manifestation of labour, Marx conceived it as characteristic of a particular epoch of production: capitalism.

Diverging fundamentally from Marx, in the early part of the twentieth century, most of the authors who addressed alienation considered it a universal aspect of life. In *Being and Time* (1927), Martin Heidegger approached alienation in purely philosophical terms. The category he used for his phenomenology of alienation was "fallenness" [Verfallen], that is the tendency of human existence to lose itself in the inauthenticity of the surrounding world. Heidegger did not regard this fallenness as a "bad and deplorable property of which, perhaps, more advanced stages of human culture

might be able to rid themselves", but rather as "an existential mode of Being-in-the-world", as a reality forming part of the fundamental dimension of history.

After World War II, alienation became a recurrent theme—both in philosophy and in literature—under the influence of French existentialism. But it was identified with a diffuse discontent of man in society, a split between human individuality and the world of experience, an insurmountable condition humaine. Most existentialist philosophers did not propose a social origin for alienation, but saw it as inevitably bound up with all "facticity" (no doubt the failure of the Soviet experience favoured such a view) and human otherness. Marx had helped to develop a critique of human subjugation in capitalist relations of production. The existentialists, by contrast, sought to absorb those parts of Marx's work that they thought useful for their own approach but in a merely philosophical discussion lacking any specific historical account.

For Herbert Marcuse, like the existentialists, alienation was associated with objectification as such, rather than with a particular condition under capitalism. In *Eros and Civilization* (1955), he took distance from Marx, arguing that human emancipation could only be achieved with the abolition—not the liberation—of labour and with the affirmation of the libido and play in social relations. Marcuse ultimately opposed technological domination in general, losing the historical specificity that tied alienation to capitalist relations of production, and his reflections on social change were so pessimistic as to often include the working class among the subjects that operated in defence of the system.

### ***The Irresistibility of Theories of Alienation***

A decade after Marcuse's interven-

tion, the term alienation entered the vocabulary of North American sociology. Mainstream sociology treated it as a problem of the individual human being, not of social relations, and the search for solutions centered on the capacity of individuals to adjust to the existing order rather than on collective practices to change society. This major shift of approach ultimately downgraded analysis of historical-social factors. Whereas, in the Marxist tradition, the concept of alienation had contributed to some of the sharpest criticisms of the capitalist mode of production, its institutionalization in the realm of sociology reduced it to a phenomenon of individual maladjustment to social norms. These interpretations have contributed to a theoretical impoverishment of the discourse of alienation, which—far from a complex phenomenon related to man's work activity—became, for some sociologists, a positive phenomenon, a means of expressing creativity. In this form, the category of alienation was diluted to the point of being virtually meaningless.

In the same period, the category of alienation found its way into

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psychoanalysis, where Erich Fromm used it to try to build a bridge to Marxism. For Fromm, however, the emphasis was on subjectivity, and his notion of alienation, summarized in *The Sane Society* (1955) as “a mode of experience in which the individual experiences himself as alien” remained too narrowly focused on the individual. Fromm’s account of Marx’s concept based itself exclusively on the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts and sidelined the role of alienated labour in Marx’s thought. This lacuna prevented Fromm from giving due weight to objective alienation (that of the worker in the labour process and in relation to the labour product).

In the 1960s, theories of alienation came into fashion and the concept seemed to express the spirit of the age to perfection. In Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), alienation theory linked up with the critique of immaterial production: “with the ‘second industrial revolution’, alienated consumption has become just as much a duty for the masses as alienated production”. In *The Consumer Society*

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(1970), Jean Baudrillard distanced himself from the Marxist focus on the centrality of production and identified consumption as the primary factor in modern society. The growth of advertising and opinion polls had created spurious needs and mass consensus in an “age of consumption” and “radical alienation.”

The popularisation of the term, however, along with its indiscriminate application, created a profound conceptual ambiguity. Within the space of a few years, alienation had been transformed to designate nearly anything on the spectrum of human unhappiness; it had become so all-encompassing that it generated the belief that it could never be modified.

With hundreds of books and articles being published on the topic around the world, it had become the age of alienation tout court. Authors from various political backgrounds and academic disciplines identified its causes as commodification, overspecialization, anomie, bureaucratization, conformism, consumerism, loss of a sense of self amid new technologies, personal isolation, apathy, social or ethnic marginalization, and environmental pollution. The debate became even more paradoxical in the North American academic context, where the concept of alienation underwent a veritable distortion and ended up being used by defenders of the very social classes against which it had for so long been directed.

### *Alienation According to Karl Marx*

The Grundrisse, written in 1857-58 provides Marx’s best account of the theme of alienation, though it remained unpublished even in Germany until 1939. When the text was eventually translated into European and Asian languages from the late 1960s, including its English-language publication in 1973, scholars focused more their attention on the way Marx

conceptualised alienation in his mature writings. The Grundrisse’s account recalled the analyses of the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, but was enriched by a much greater understanding of economic categories and by a more rigorous social analysis. In the Grundrisse Marx more than once used the term “alienation” and argued that in capitalism:

the general exchange of activities and products, which has become a vital condition for each individual— their mutual interconnection —appears as something alien to them, autonomous as a thing. In exchange value, the social connection between persons is transformed into a social relation between things; personal capacity into objective wealth.

The Grundrisse was not the only incomplete text of Marx’s maturity to feature an account of alienation. Five years after it was composed, “Capital, Volume 1: Book 1, Chapter VI, unpublished” (1863–64) brought the economic and political analyses of alienation more closely together. “The rule of the capitalist over the worker”, Marx wrote, “is the rule of things over human beings, of dead labour over the living, of the product over the producer”. In capitalist society, by virtue of “the transposition of the social productivity of labour into the material attributes of capital”, there is a veritable “personification of things and reification of persons”, creating the appearance that “the material conditions of labour are not subject to the worker, but he to them”.

Marx gave a similar account—much more elaborated than the one provided in his early philosophical writings—in a famous section of Capital: “The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret”. For Marx, in capitalist society, relations among people appear not “as direct social

relations between persons ... but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things". This phenomenon is what he called "the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labor as soon as they are produced as commodities and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities". Commodity fetishism did not replace the alienation of his early writings. In bourgeois society, Marx held, human qualities and relations turn into qualities and relations among things. This theory of what Lukács would call reification illustrated this phenomenon from the point of view of human relations, while the concept of fetishism treated it in relation to commodities.

The eventual diffusion the ma-

ture Marx's writing on alienation paved the way for a departure from mainstream sociology and psychology's conceptualization of it. Marx's account of alienation was geared to its overcoming in practice—to the political action of social movements, parties and trade unions to change the working and living conditions of the working class. The publication of what—after the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 in the 1930s—may be thought of as the "second generation" of Marx's writings on alienation therefore provided not only a coherent theoretical basis for new studies of alienation, but above all an anti-capitalist ideological platform for the extraordinary political and social movements that exploded in the world during those

years. Alienation went beyond the books of philosophers and the lecture halls of universities. It took to the streets and the space of workers' struggles and became a critique of bourgeois society in general.

Since the 1980s, the world of labour has suffered an epochal defeat, the global economic system is more exploitative than ever, and the Left is still in the midst of a deep crisis. Of course, Marx cannot give an answer to many of contemporary problems but he does pinpoint the essential questions. In a society dominated by the free market and competition among individuals, Marx's account of alienation continues to provide an indispensable critical tool for both understanding and criticising capitalism. □□□

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#### BUDGET AS AN INSTRUMENT OF IDEOLOGY

## More on The Union Budget 2023-24

*Anup K Sinha*

**T**HE UNION BUDGET IS AN important statement as well as a reflection of the main objectives of government policy. The government earns revenue from taxes and fees. It also has the power to borrow from non-government sources like the public, the banking sector, and even the central bank. In India the central bank is the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). Borrowing from the central bank creates new money in the economic system, while the other ways of borrowing do not. Ideological compulsions are reflected in who is taxed and by how much, and what kinds of goods are taxed and to what degree. This is where the class character of the state comes in. Are taxes imposed adequately on the rich so as to have a more equal post-tax distribution of income? Are goods that are used more by ordinary working class and middle class people left alone or taxed mini-

mally? Similarly, on the expenditure side the priorities of the government are even more clearly evident from the pattern of spending chosen by the government. What kind of social security programmes are supported? To what extent the safety of the poor and vulnerable are addressed and improved? These are the key questions that ought to be gleaned from the budget. The rest are pure numbers, with which the corporate media usually becomes obsessed.

Any one viewing the budget presentation by finance ministers in the Indian parliament would think that the economy was extremely healthy and strong. Steady growth was the only major concern of the government of the day. This attitude is always reiterated by corporate India's reactions to the budget. After all, whatever be one's troubles, who would dare to oppose the government? On the other hand, the par-

liamentary opposition always claims that the budget is useless and anti-poor, even though they themselves may not have any concrete proposal for truly inclusive democratic development for the nation. It becomes something of an absurd drama: both reactions in the parliament as well reactions in the media and the business world. It is irrelevant which party is in government and which party is in the opposition. The scene is the same. In a way, the thrust of policies is the same too: creating a favourable ambience for large private capital to flourish with the blessings of the state.

#### ***Change and Continuity in India's Fiscal Policy***

India's fiscal policy has evolved over the years, but since the advent of economic reforms in the early 1990s, the crux of budgets have remained the same: how to contain the deficit so as to minimise spending, without making serious efforts to generate more revenue. With the advent of the current government in New Delhi, spending for the poor and deprived has reduced discernably. The govern-

ment is however very eager to put forward schemes and projects, without much substance, that help project a pro-poor stance. In short, as far as economic ideology is concerned, the Indian state's fiscal stance has remained the same since 1991 even though political changes have taken place in terms of who runs the union government. It is in this light, the critical comments on the most important document of economic policy must be constructed. Despite so many "pro-poor schemes" announced repeatedly in budget after budget, the degree of economic inequality in the distribution of wealth and income have shot up. The nation has still to go miles in terms of affordable housing, health care, quality and universal education, environmental conservation, and last but not the least, employment opportunities.

However, within this ideological structure of facilitating capital, there is a cycle that can be noticed. Every five years when the parliamentary election approaches, there is a plethora of feel-good schemes that seem to be of concern for the welfare of the poor, is announced. This is in anticipation of votes. The corporate media takes it up in full

throttle to convince viewers how sympathetic the government is towards the poor. It works to some extent in terms of its objective. This year though, as we shall see below, the government has been quite blatant about reducing its pro-poor spending. This time the NDA does not seem to care about votes. It appears they have supreme confidence about coming back to power in 2024. It is becoming clearer day by day, that this union government does not require improvements in the welfare of the poor to survive politically. The opiate of religious fervour and communal intolerance will suffice.

The one number that is most talked about in India's budget is the fiscal deficit, which is the extent of fresh government borrowing. There are different economic views on the significance of the fiscal deficit, but most conservative economists at the IMF and the World Bank would nudge governments to keep it around 4 per cent of national income at the most. The last few years, because of the pandemic, almost every country of the world was forced to expand its fiscal deficit by spending more. India's fiscal deficit was budgeted to be 6.4 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) and the revised estimates have pegged it at the budgeted estimates for 2022-23. The budget estimates for fiscal deficit this year that is 2023-24, is projected to be 5.9 per cent of GDP. This number is not sacrosanct as the extent of borrowing may be justified to the extent that resources garnered by borrowing contribute to the development of the nation. Future tax revenues for higher incomes can be used to repay the government's debt.

The revenue deficit, which is a measure of the difference between current spending and earnings was budgeted last year to be 2.6 per cent, ended the year at 2.9 per cent, and

is projected to be 1.7 per cent in the coming year. The revenue deficit is where the flab of government spending lies. It also reflects some essential current spending that go into the social sector maintenance funds. It deserves close scrutiny as to which expenditures are being cut, the socially useful ones, or the largesse distributed to bureaucracy, or subsidies to large farmers, or targeted benefits for poor farmers.

The budget does reflect that it has maintained the fiscal discipline in keeping expenditures under control. However, this 'discipline' might be contested in the broader framework of what budgetary expenditures can do in terms of improving welfare and how borrowings can be paid back, or taxes increased on the rich and the super-rich. No budgetary number is cast in stone: it is the context and the will of the government that matters.

#### ***On spending and taxes***

Ideally, the government's budget can be used to create an ambience for inclusive growth. Consider India's population and rank all individuals according to income, from the richest to the poorest in descending order. Take the top 20 per cent. They are very comfortable to say the least. They run the nation, they are the professionals and businessmen and the thought leaders and influencers of public opinion. They do not need government support to survive and prosper. Now take the poorest 40 per cent. They are desperately poor and deprived, and even if a few are above the poverty line their position is precarious in the sense that they can slip back into poverty at the slightest perturbation. They require government support for education, health, shelter, livelihoods, economic security and insurance. Historical data from other nations suggests that a nation must spend at least 6 per cent of its GDP

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Price: 400tk

[300tk for teachers and students, if  
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March 12-18, 2023

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continuously for a decade, on education and health-care, for poverty to be reduced by half. India has hardly ever crossed the 3 per cent mark since 1947.

There is still the middle 40 per cent left. This is a huge number, over 500 million strong. This middle India has some modicum of education and is extremely innovative, energetic and street-smart. However, their dynamic energy is restricted by the lack of physical infrastructure – an affordable and adequate access to electricity, housing, telecommunications, ports, highways and financial services. This portfolio of assets is patchy, and unevenly available. The lack of physical infrastructure diverts the energy of these people towards illegal activities like crime and smuggling, and also these people become the foot soldiers of the major political parties of India. The great lumpen-proletariat of India. That is how they make a living.

From the government's point of view, the resource requirement could be very large. The best strategy would be to allow private capital to build infrastructure, with the state putting in some capital as a partner, and providing a clear-cut regulatory framework to guide and control investments. On the other hand, as far as the bottom 40 per cent are concerned the state has to provide the basic framework to develop fundamental capabilities like education and health. Financial resources would not be forthcoming in these sectors from private capital because the ability to pay of the bottom 40 per cent is severely limited. Social returns are high in these sectors, but private profitability is extremely low. Hence the state has to provide the resources. Ideally, even for the state, the short term returns to capital would be low. It is best to use tax revenues (and not borrowed resources) to fund the social sector. Taxes, unlike borrowings,

do not have to be returned. The affluent have to share in the building of a stable market economy by paying more taxes.

#### **Fiscal Policy and Development**

Indeed, this has been the general pattern of development finance in most economies that are now economically affluent. The capitalist state funds the building of a highly productive work force and middle class. The rest of the economy is essentially built by private capital – first the infrastructure duly guided and steered by the state. Then the market for consumer goods develops in a sustained way, and the income of the economy increases as it moves to a mature capitalist phase. In India it has been the opposite. Governments, from independence to contemporary times, have always neglected the welfare of the bottom 40 per cent and concentrated on making the top 20 per cent richer, with some resources used to create physical infrastructure. In fact India's budgets have always displayed an aversion to raise taxes, and a hesitation to switch expenditure significantly to the social sector: an economy characterized by low taxes, high borrowing, low social sector expenditure, with big capital and a subservient bureaucracy skimming off much of the public resources for private gains.

In this light one can see that India's tax collections have been low compared to the wealth and income enjoyed by the top 10 per cent of the population. During 1997 and 2022, the average tax revenue to GDP ratio was only 7.3 per cent. Most European countries have a tax-GDP ratio well above 40 per cent. There is a lot of space for India to augment tax revenues and keep borrowings under control. Tax revenues could be used economically best for building social capital in education and health.

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As far as social sector spending is concerned, this year's budget appears contrary to the past. Despite this being a pre-election year, the Modi government has dared to reduce spending in key areas such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA). For the third time in a row this year, capital investment allocations have grown while there has been a reduction in social sector spending. Indeed, this year (2023-24) the budgetary allocation for the social sector has dipped below 20 per cent of government expenditure for the first time since 2009. The social sector not only provides employment opportunities, it also creates long-term human capabilities through education and health. Going a step further to view the picture emerging for particular heads of accounts, it appears that employment and income generation for the poor would be held back significantly, as the allocation for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act scheme has been cut from a revised estimate of Rs 89400 crore for 2022-23 to a budgeted amount of Rs 60,000 for 2023-24, reflecting a massive cut. Similarly, there have cuts in food subsidies and spends for rural development benefiting poor farmers. Food grain entitlements for the

poor have been reduced too. The budgetary allocations for health, education, and other social safety measures have fallen, or are about the same this year as the last.

On the other hand, capital expenditure has increased by a whopping 33 per cent in this year's budget. Yet the fiscal deficit has been capped at 5.9 per cent. This clearly indicates that there are lots of spending cuts on the anvil when one goes through the fine print of the budget. This is supposed to be the highest ever spending on capital. The objective is to create jobs and attract more of private investments. Yet all this is happening at a time when private investment has been extremely shy of investing especially when demand has been low. Employment opportunities are scarce and those with employment have been hammered by high retail inflation rates, well higher than 6 per cent. This year the budget has assumed a 10.5 per cent nominal growth of GDP. If the inflation rate continues to hover above 6 per cent, then the real rate of growth will be only around 4.5 per cent. This is not going to be above 6 per cent as predicted by international bodies. Large capital spending has historically been associated with high inflation rates. No reason why inflation will come down this year in a

significant way. The roots of high inflation are supply chain disruptions and international market uncertainties as in the crude oil market. These do not seem to be melting away in the short run.

One thing is clear about the development vision of the government: the rich have to be given continuous incentives and sops, like this year's tax relief for the highest bracket of individual income earners. On the other hand, the plummeting allocations for the poor continue unabated. The Modi administration's priority is to have an authoritarian government that promotes growth without bothering too much for human development. It is a model of unaimed opulence. In the times of high inflation, job losses, and slowdown in economic growth, the poor have much to be anxious about. In a way the Modi government represents a continuity with earlier governments' strategies: growth first, equity later. It will cause a lot of suffering; both economic and social. The new India has a great deal of similarity with the old India that was evolving since independence. There are a few key differences too: the new India is a lot less caring about human suffering, much less tolerant of differences, and much less global in terms of identity. Capitalism is here with jackboots and all.

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## POLITICS OF RENAMING

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### Hinduising Heritage

*Arup Kumar Sen*

**V**ERY RECENTLY, THE SUPREME Court dismissed a petition which sought directions to the Centre to constitute a "renaming commission" for restoring the "original" names of places "renamed by barbaric foreign invaders." The Court ruled that "a country cannot remain a prisoner of the

past" and the "court should not be an instrument to create havoc." A two-judge bench of Justices K M Joseph and B V Nagarathna came down heavily on the petitioner, Ashwini Upadhyay, saying that the country cannot be "kept on the boil" and "Hinduism does not allow bigotry." The Bench questioned

Upadhyay for selectively pointing fingers at only a particular section of society, and told: "You want to keep this as a live issue and keep the country on the boil? Fingers are pointed at a particular community. You are relooking at the past selectively. You run down a particular section of society. India is a secular country. Let us not break society with such kinds of petitions. Please keep the country in mind, not any particular religion." (Quoted in The Telegraph, February 28, 2023; See

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also The Indian Express, February 28, 2023)

It should be mentioned in the above context that the well-known historic city in Uttar Pradesh (UP), Allahabad, was renamed as Prayagraj in October 2018 after the State Cabinet passed a resolution under the leadership of the Chief Minister, Yogi Adityanath. It was reported that the Centre had approved the renaming of Allahabad as Prayagraj, a fortnight ahead of the 'Kumbh Mela', which began in the city in January 2019. Similarly, the proposal for renaming the iconic Mughalsarai Junction railway sta-

tion as Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Junction, floated by the Yogi Adityanath government in UP, was later approved by the Centre. Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, a prominent organiser of the RSS in UP and co-founder of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the forerunner of the BJP, was found dead in mysterious circumstances near the Mughalsarai railway station in 1968. Amit Shah, as the president of the BJP, inaugurated the renamed railway station in August 2018 and told: "Today is a very big day for the Bharatiya Janata Party as Mughalsarai station, where Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyay was

killed, has today been named after him".

The above developments testify that the BJP governments at the Centre and in the State carry the agenda of changing place names having any connection with the Muslim heritage in India. Renaming such places carries the signature of politics of Hindutva. The recent verdict of the two-judge bench of the Supreme Court on the petition moved by Ashwini Upadhyay is a counterpoint to the dominant politics of renaming, being pursued by the BJP as an organic part of the politics of Hindutva. □□□

#### BENGAL SCENARIO

## Political Corruption: Yesterday and Today

*Sukanta Sarkar*

**N**OWADAYS IN WEST BENGAL 'SSC Scam' or one can say scam related to teachers' recruitment, which involves multi-crore rupee transactions, is widely discussed. Central Agencies have been investigating it for quite some time. In truth they have already arrested some important actors including a senior cabinet minister of State Government and an ex-vice chancellor. Besides SSC Scam they have been monitoring cow and coal smuggling cases as well. In connection with cow smuggling a heavy weight leader of the ruling party and some of his close associates are languishing in jail. Given the crisis situation the ruling Trinamul Congress is regularly facing flak from the Opposition and media.

The party led by Mamata Banerjee has been in power since 2011. After 2 years 'Sarada Chit Fund' scandal came into focus and some big wigs of the party were arrested. Also, a State Cabinet Minister was in the net. Now he is on bail. These two are the big issues of

corruption of the Mamata regime at the moment. And opposition leaders lose no opportunity to grill Ms Banerjee in assembly all the time as they see in her the real mastermind of all these corrupt practices, albeit they forget their own past. Reports and allegations of economic corruption relating to cut money, syndicate atrocities and extortion at the local level by a section of leaders and activists of the ruling party are being exposed continuously in the media, particularly in dozens of TV channels. Yet, everything goes on in business as usual fashion. Nothing concrete happens other than a few arrests and judicial activism.

Common people of West Bengal are shocked. But there is nothing new in economic corruption, nepotism, extortion, fraud by the operators of ruling party. It was endemic during the Congress rule in the '70s. It also existed in 34 years of Left Front governance. Then why people of West Bengal are surprised today? Because the scale of corruption is so enormous that it was unthinkable even a decade ago.

Today allegations of extortion, cut money, oppression of syndicate come in the name of individual leaders of the ruling party but, earlier it had been done in the name of the then ruling Party by a section of influential leaders. At that time people saw nepotism and partisan culture in recruitment in government jobs, particularly in recruitment of teachers in primary and secondary schools. After assuming power in 1977 Left Front led by the CPIM started well with a clean slate; initially people, especially lower-middle class and poor people were feeling happy with Left Front. Their Operation Barga programme drew international attention. But, after a few years they –ruling 'marxists' and their partners in crime–began to put their own people almost in every institution, small, medium and large, particularly in schools, cooperatives, local administrative bodies. In many places they recruited party cadres or their close relatives as teaching and non-teaching staff in the academy, blatantly violating all rules and democratic norms. At that time none heard any major economic transaction about recruitment, rather, in plain language, selling of government jobs with premium. But, after mid-'80s allegations about bribe regarding recruit-

ment in school, college, cooperative, municipality, panchayat, factory, jute mill began to surface. In the name of local party or mass-organisations they used to take money but the quantum was not as high as it is today. It was 10 to 60-70 thousand only (now 5 lakh to 15-20 lakh is the norm). Particularly, in the municipality, school, college, cooperative bank recruitment the scenario is horrible. In the mid- '90s the state CPIM top leadership realised what was going on and that its fallout wouldn't be healthy for the party in future as it would jeopardise their electoral fortunes. They took some steps to stop these corrupt practices. But the vices had already spread extensively in the party structure from top to bottom. This was a kind of cancerous growth defying solution. In due season a section of powerful leaders also entered in that vicious circle of corruption. These leaders grabbed government land and built private schools, colleges, medical institutions, private hospitals, private universities, hotels, resorts etc anonymously or in some relative's name and in league with the businessmen and other professionals of dubious distinction of being called notorious. Left Front is out of power for the last 12 years and

CPIM and their allies who were engaged in loot in yester years are in a very bad shape organisationally but private schools, colleges, universities, hospitals, hotels, resorts, real estates built by some of their 'comrades' are doing very well today and earning crores of rupees. Change in government is no problem for them. Capitalism with Marxist tag is fine! Party card holders are enjoying bonanza of neo-liberalism in so many ways.

Cooperative sector was a major area of nepotism during the Left Front rule, particularly, in the cooperative banking establishments. In most cases local CPIM leaders were instrumental in managing cooperative bank recruitment. They used to provide jobs to their family members in addition to party activists. Not only that, huge amount of loans from the cooperative banks found their destination to their own people. In maximum cases the beneficiaries did not repay as it is the case with India's corporate tycoons in respect of their astronomical borrowings from nationalised banks. Because of this kind of bad loans a large number of cooperative banks in the state are now on the verge of liquidation.

Then allegations of extortion from promoters by the local bosses of the

party in many places were very common in those days. Apart from that in the name of party or mass organisations' different programmes, cultural or otherwise, they used to collect 'donation' from government employees, teachers, professors and traders, big or small, on several occasions round the year.

Corruption in politics in India has so far been institutionalised. As per the report of Transparency International (TI), an international survey agency and watch dog, 'India has the highest share of bribery in Asia (39%), as well as the greatest proportion of citizens exploiting personal connections (46%). India has the highest level of political corruption, which is the primary cause of rising corruption cases.'

What Anand Singh of the Hidayatullah National Law University (HNLU), Raipur, said on political corruption in India, may not be out of place to quote here: 'there is no one-size-fits-at all explanation for political corruption, and the amount of corruption, and the forms it takes, vary consistently with the political environment. The degree and nature of corruption vary depending on the sort of regime under which it occurs.'

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## COMMUNAL TINDERBOX

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# The Conversion Controversy

*Ranjan Solomon*

**C**HRISTIANS ARE UNDER frequent threat by the Chief Minister in Goa. Without any real evidence to corroborate false qualms, he has vowed to act with an unyielding hand to put down forced conversions that were taking place in remote corners. Pastor Dominic has been one of his targets and the government had even imposed Section 144 around his residence. Religion cannot be conducted under political surveillance.

Minority Christians fail to grasp the upheaval not only in Goa but in the country as a whole. Such religious persecution contradicts the secular vision prescribed in the constitution. There is a plain message to all right wing rulers: "Faith is a matter of conviction and nobody requires permission to join another faith group as long as it was not under duress. Many Hindus attest to the fact that they join Pastoral min-

istries in Goa to find solace and, often, healing from dreadful illnesses. They do not generally convert to Christianity and Pastors do not make that a pre-requisite.

Extremist leaders from the Hindu majority feign fear of the minorities as if the country is at imminent risk of being taken over by Muslims and Christians. This is an incongruous notion. Since the Sanvordem riots, Goa's reputation for peaceful co-existence has been alternated by scruffily constructed hate laboratories. It was once the question of beef. Then, there were several Gram Sabhas which voted to forbid per-

mission for Muslims from residing in their areas or set up businesses in the area. (Muslims are skilled business persons and the loss will be Goa's). After that came the desecration of crosses whose perpetrators still roam free while an innocent elderly man was blamed for the mayhem and later declared innocent. If persistent communal bullying persists, Goa will be seen as space where ease of business is thorny and could lead to declining investments, flight of/skilled labour, and a sully of Goa's image as an inclusive space.

Mohan Bhagwat avers that "Hindu society has been at war for over 1,000 years against foreign aggressions, foreign influences and foreign conspiracies and now finally Hindu society has awakened. But why the counter-aggression, especially when the Hindu community is pulsating with values and vigour. In general, Hindu society is not fragile and is hugely vibrant in numbers and spiritual dimensions. Hindus should be confident, imbibing tolerance and inclusion. The recent drift into belligerence by fringe elements is out of sync with the teachings from the seers and saints of Hindu traditions. Counter-aggression has no purpose. Their worry should remain the harsh fact of internal caste and ethnic conflicts.

Goa is obtusely gripping patterns of communalism from elsewhere in the country. Anti-Muslim and Anti-Christian sentiments around the country are being animated by right wing fringe elements and aped in Goa. Muslims and Christians around the country are being told that they do not derive from the 'Indic' traditions, and hence are not true Indians. The government should aggregate the manifold services run by various Christian traditions to understand the impact the church has made to social development. Conversions are an irrelevant aspect for

mainstream churches. Muslims not only serve their community according to their religious dictates; they contribute to the economy of the State in greater proportions than their numerical strength represents.

The rebuilding of temples purportedly brought down by Portuguese rulers is assuming communal dimensions. Reparations must be paid for by the coloniser who destroyed heritage spaces. Portugal is an economically outdone country, but they must do their part. Is this a political move or genuinely reclamation of heritage? If so, why not restore Christian heritage sights? It does not quite add up.

Political rhetoric and ambiguous interpretations of the Freedom of Religion Acts are responsible for the high rate of Christian persecution in India. The UK-US-based group Open Doors ranks India high in a World Watch List of 50 countries where it is dangerous to live as a Christian. India traditionally parades itself as a secular state, one where all religions are recognised and can peacefully co-exist. Facts-on-the-ground contradict this claim. In 2017, the Pew Research Centre analysis of 198 countries ranked India as fourth worst in the world for religious intolerance.

The recently established Goa Christian Federation (GCF), comprising Clergy and Lay Christian leaders has united to serve oppressed people of all faiths. For now, the efforts will be in Chhattisgarh where Adivasi Christians faced attacks from right wing forces that drove them out of their homes, villages, and fields. The attackers insist that Adivasis embrace Hinduism or face being banished from their homes forever. They have socially boycotted the Christian Adivasis, organised assaults, and traumatised them.

GCF demands that right wing elements that attacked the Adivasis must be subject to legal action. What happened was a systematic campaign of dispossession and denial of

identity and choice. Police are also complicit and until all perpetrators are reigned in, the culture of impunity will worsen conditions for the Christian Adivasis. Chhattisgarh swiftly needs adequate relief camps to which people had fled under duress by extremists. Chhattisgarh authorities must restore the rule of law and allow Adivasis Christians to live by their faith convictions and reclaim their dignity and Constitutional right to practise whatever religion they choose to adopt.

Right wing fundamentalists have dismantled homes and prayer houses of the Christian Adivasis and the elementary task of the government is to ensure that they are rebuilt by the State. Victims of violence should be adequately compensated for the psychological pain and agony they suffer, apart from loss of property, agricultural assets, cattle and livelihoods. Pastors arrested under dubious sections of the law must be set free.

Indian secularism is at grave risk. A spate of anti-conversion bills and Chhattisgarh are being pushed like a malignant phenomenon with no clarity of intent, except to divide-and-rule. Secular-minded Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Christians and animists must push-back in masses, reclaim common humanity, and celebrate India's magnificent and multi-religious/cultural values. □□□

[source:countercurrents.org]

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“NO HEROES, NO VILLAINS”

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## Revisiting Satyajit Ray's Cinema

*Nilosree Biswas*

**I**N 1992, WHEN FILM HISTORIAN Richard Schickel, at the behest of the Academy Awards committee, produced a montage based on Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray's film clips, he was forced to request footage from the British Broadcasting Corporation and Channel 4 in the UK, as America had none.

Was Ray's work already a *passé* “relic of a bygone” or was the presence of universalism—a distinct marker of Ray's cinema—improbable for the times?

Perhaps it was the latter. By the 1990s, Ray's films were rarely screened in the west. According to Bert Cardullo, American author and film critic, the humanism in Ray's work did him a disservice. “Like Chekov, Ray refuses to take sides either with characters or ideologies since he is interested above all in the complex human”, he says. “There are no heroes or villains in his works, no simple winners or losers”.

Ray's heroes embody central characters who have the freedom of engaging with their spatial setting, as well as their “human fundamentals” that tend to “undercut all cultural distinctions”. In other words, Ray's cinema is about the human condition and its emotional substrate arising from the “dailiness”—or undramatic aspects—of life. Amidst this apparent contrasting observation, Ray creates cinematic tension through two primary pivots: the conjugal and the political.

In *Apur Sansar* (*The World of Apu*, 1959), Apu, an idealist, commits to a marriage by a quirk of fate when the designated groom's psyche fails on the wedding day. Unprepared for a conjugal life, he ties the

knot with Aparna, his friend's cousin. Initially strangers, they soon bond and their mutual love and marital bliss become transformative, beyond the typical romance of newlyweds.

In the film, Ray uses the concept of love as a device of resurrection; an answer to Apu's life issues. He goes on to show marriage as an act of comradeship and a support system, manifesting his sublime cinematic language of stolen glances and subtle body movements as imprints of sensuality. What Ray devised in *The World of Apu* gets carried over to his next film, *Devi*.

*Devi* (*The Goddess*, 1960) is about an orthodox Hindu father-in-law who believes that his young daughter-in-law is an incarnation of Mother Goddess, a storyline based on the religious fundamentalism of colonial Bengal. Poignant cinematography captures the story of young Dayamoyee and Umaprasad, beginning with moments of desire followed by tragic events.

In the opening scene, Dayamoyee, 17, is shown pining to be with her husband, who must return to Kolkata for his studies. The camera frames them lying on an ornate wooden bed, with Umaprasad looking at Dayamoyee but never making eye contact—a “glance” technique Ray uses as a key element for the viewer to visualise intimacy.

Later, the same device is employed in reverse to depict their relationship culminating in a heart-wrenching scene as Umaprasad returns home, prompted by an urgent letter. As he steps into their expansive courtyard, Dayamoyee, now a human idol, seated at a distance, makes eye contact with her hus-

band. She smiles halfheartedly as a lone tear rolls down her cheek, affirming her confusion, derangement, and helplessness. Umaprasad tries hard to make Dayamoyee see the insanity of her new life as a goddess, but she refuses. The drifting conjugality in *Devi* and the breakdown of a once affable relationship poses definitive questions about the comforting nature of an ordinary marriage and the demands of a patriarchal system.

The questions posed in *Devi* are further explored through class and social security in *Kanchenjunga* (1962), Ray's first original screenplay. *Kanchenjunga* features three couples of varying ages who ponder life, marriage, love, and infidelity as they vacation in Darjeeling. The interlinked characters consist of parents Raibahadur Indranath Rai Chowdhury and Labonyo, their shy 19-year-old daughter Manisha, their elder daughter Anima and her husband Shankar (whose marriage is falling apart), ambitious engineer and Manisha's suitor Mukherjee, and Ashok, a lower middle-class jobless man accompanying his frail maternal uncle on a health recovery trip. As the story progresses, Manisha, for the first time, speaks her mind. She defies her class and is shown visibly interested in Ashok and not in Mukherjee.

It is through the growing interest between Manisha and Ashok that Ray returns to the concept of “organic” love, as he did in *The World of Apu*. In *Kanchenjunga*, love transpires from spontaneity and the filmmaker also introduces “interdepen-

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dence” as a premise of a conventional partnership. During a tense scene between Anima and Shankar, in which Shankar probes into his wife’s affair, their interdependence leads to an amicable patch up. They decide against divorcing and instead, prioritise the needs of their young daughter—their role as parents.

Conjugality in Ray’s cinema reaches its pinnacle with interdependence as its grounding fabric in Mahanagar (The Big City, 1963). A story of Subrata and Aarti, a middle class couple whose lives are disrupted by harsh realities. Love and conjugality are clearly not needed, and yet, Ray holds onto interdependence as his cinematic tool to reclaim the heartwarming and humane relationship template. In the film, Aarti, a homemaker, is compelled to take up the job of a salesgirl when Subrata’s bank meets an overnight closure.

Aarti shoulders the responsibilities of her large family and Subrata reciprocates by helping his wife file job applications. The film ends with Aarti, too, losing her job and yet together, they stay hopeful. In their optimism about life, Ray instills conjugal love back into the story. Henceforth, “conjugality” as a theme realigns and political becomes the pivot.

Ray told his biographer Andrew Robinson, “If you are a filmmaker, of course your surroundings, politics and whatnot make up the social milieu—that becomes relevant. From 1960 onwards, I was becoming more aware of my surroundings.” Social milieus did form an integral component of Ray’s work with unemployment, the political unrest of 1970, and the miseries of a hapless population resulting in the Calcutta Trilogy: Pratiwandhi (The Adversary, 1970), Seemabaddha (Company Limited, 1971), and Jana Aranya

(The Middle Man, 1975), his most definitive political cinema.

With these works, Ray was no longer the distant, observant filmmaker, but an eye closely looking into the lives of his characters. His shot divisions began to differ, with more mid shots and close-ups, while cramped houses, offices, and narrow lanes served as prime shooting locations.

In The Adversary, Ray soared into new visual language. He used photo negatives to depict the past and tight close-ups as an aesthetic through the film. Abrupt dialogue matched this visualisation, capturing Siddhartha, an unemployed middle class male, and his disconnect with his world. Living in a cramped rental house with a widowed mother, a revolutionary brother, and a sister aspiring for a better life, Siddhartha is presented as a dichotomy of individual aspirations and rampant corruption.

Though despair looms large for Siddhartha, Ray paints his leading man as humane. In an intense scene at the film’s midpoint, Siddhartha’s outburst at a lack of basic amenities—no fans in a harsh Calcutta summer—for other jobless young men queuing up for hours to be interviewed, is remarkably poignant. A few scenes later, the same Siddhartha is utterly inexpressive toward his love interest, Keya. He is visibly more bothered by his inability to resist his slow disenfranchisement than beginning a relationship with Keya, who he seemingly likes.

The city, which is established as capricious or ruptured in The Adversary, grows bleaker by the conclusion of the Calcutta trilogy in Jana Aranya (The Middleman, 1975). “The only bleak film I made is The Middleman. There is no question about that,” Ray said in a 1982 interview with Cinéaste.

Somnath Mukherjee, the central

character, is a jobseeker who chances upon a fellow football fanatic, Bishuda, who encourages him into a startup venture. Soon, Somnath is shown as an aspiring businessman, compelled to shed his hollowed middle class values and adopt the controversial rules of the business game. The film ends with him turning metaphorically into a middleman, trading off his friend’s sister (a sex worker) for a lucrative business deal. With The Middleman, Ray concludes his directorial journey into “political” as well as “conjugal”, though he revisits relationship themes in later films, but without the same positioning.

Interestingly, by 1975, Hindi cinema began to tackle corruption and failing systems—the same year Deewar (The Wall) was released. Deewar, now considered a cult film, ushered in Hindi cinema’s angry young man phase. While Siddhartha, in The Adversary, momentarily accepts his disenfranchisement, and Somnath, in The Middleman, compromises his ethics to survive, these compliant men in Ray’s films were far away from the Vijays of Deewar and Trishul (The Trident, 1978); essentially one-man armies seeking justice. And yet, 48 years later, Ray’s “meek” central characters, from Apu to Somnath, are more layered and relatable in their small and big battles. □□□

[Nilosree Biswas is an author and filmmaker. Courtesy: India in Transition, a publication of the Center for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania.]

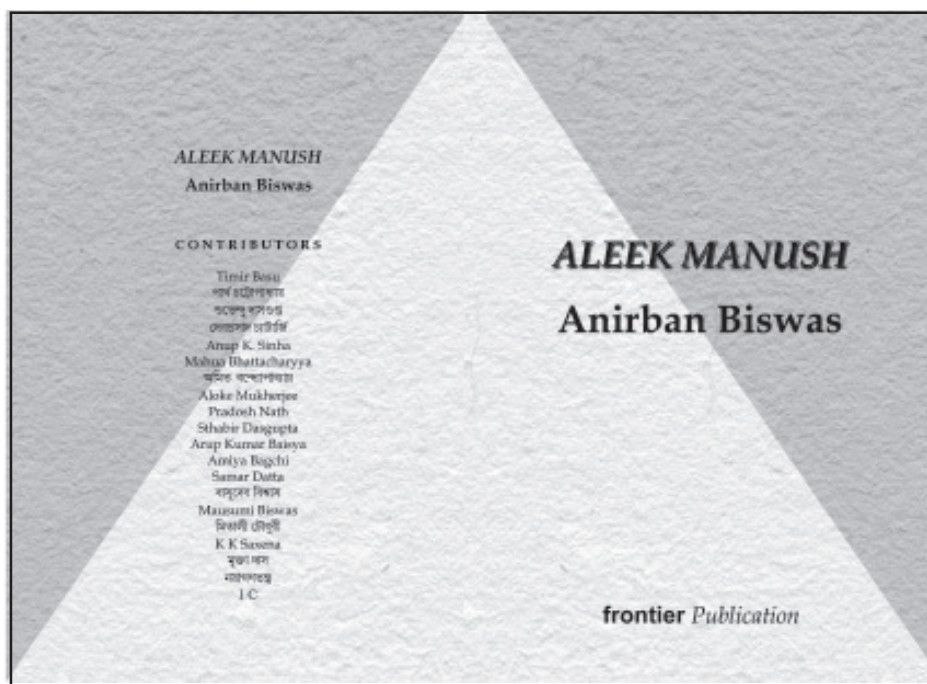
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