



**NEWSLETTER-12**

**January-2022**

### **Editorial Communication**

Dear comrades, friends and well-wishers,

For the first time since our 12th conference in December 2019 we were able to hold the meeting of our Central Executive Committee physically and not virtually in Delhi on the 20th and 21st of November, 2021. It was a breaking of barriers imposed on us not only by the pandemic but by the mindless muscle-flexings of the Modi-Shah-Doval regime, by the terror manifested in the utterly irrational measures, half-measures and no-measures devised by these cronies of corporate capitalists like Ambani and Adani, in the lack of food and jobs, lack of basic health facilities, lack of vaccines and most of all in the absolute lack of concern for human suffering.

We crossed a sea of deprivations and bereavements, managed somehow to hold the organisation together in the different states without losing track of the movement which constitutes its togetherness and at last met our comrades face to face, both familiar faces and new ones. These two days were most exhilarating for us and the exchanges of experience gave us back our sense of direction and confidence in our still unachieved mission.

The call we gave from the platform of our organisation this time was for our activists to overcome this atmosphere of terror created deliberately by those for whom the dreaded pandemic has been but an occasion for fattening themselves on the riches of the land and enhancing control not over the pandemic but over the distressed; our call was for our activists to break away from the nation-wide unofficially-imposed moratorium on all organised protests. It is not enough for us

to hold our ground, but to advance irresistibly to seize the initiative from our adversaries.

Rational protection against the pandemic must be taken, but we must be on the streets to regain our hard-won basic rights which are being snatched away from us by blinding us with irrational terror and forcing us to stay at home. Our activists must discover new ways of becoming fully active and of renewing their ties everywhere with women in farms and factories, women migrating to feed the family and women keeping the home fire burning somehow. The farmers' movement, in which many of our women participated, has shown us that it is only united struggle on our part that can force our exploiters to yield place. Let that be a beacon for us in our own movement too.

**Malini Bhattacharya, President, All India Democratic Women's Association**

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## **A New Year Message for AIDWA**

-Mariam Dhawale, General Secretary, AIDWA

We enter 2022 with a renewal of our determination to strengthen the struggles for equal rights, democracy and secularism.

In 2021 we witnessed the unprecedented heroic and victorious struggle of the farmers in our country. They faced every brutality inflicted on them by the RSS-BJP regime. This fascist government resorted to all devious ways to try to break their spirit but did not succeed. Finally, PM Modi was forced to repeal the three anti-farmer Farm Laws. It was a victory of all Indians against a sell-out of our agriculture. It is a victory of the struggle against the Modi-Shah-Ambani-Adani nexus of looters.



We are completing 75 years of our independence this year. But the situation of the poor marginalized sections and women has not only exposed the utter bankruptcy of the central government but also the anti-poor, cruel, exploitative capitalist system.

The recent Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum has stated that the gender gap in India has widened to 62.5 per cent due to decrease in women's labour force participation rate, poor health care, lag in literacy, income inequality and inadequate representation in politics. India ranked 140 among 156 nations.

The growing malnutrition and starvation deaths in India are a stark reflection of the critical situation of food security. India accounts for about 30.8 per cent of world's stunted children. Health emergencies have pushed large sections of the people into poverty. And yet India's public health expenditure is among the lowest in the world.

Crimes and instances of violence against women have reached alarming proportions since the advent of the Modi government. 1 in 3 women experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. The horrific recent Hathras and Badaun incidents in Uttar Pradesh have exposed the absolute failure of the BJP regime in protecting women. In fact, BJP leaders have openly expressed support for the accused. There is no improvement in the schemes addressing violence such as the Nirbhaya Scheme and the One Stop Crisis Centres for rape victims. The Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao slogan has remained just a 'jumla'.

According to the statistics by the National Crime Records Bureau, a crime against women is committed every three minutes. Women are raped every 29 minutes and dowry deaths occur every 77 minutes. In every 10 rape cases, 6 are girls under 18. There has been an increase in domestic violence and sexual abuse, moral policing and 'honour' killings.

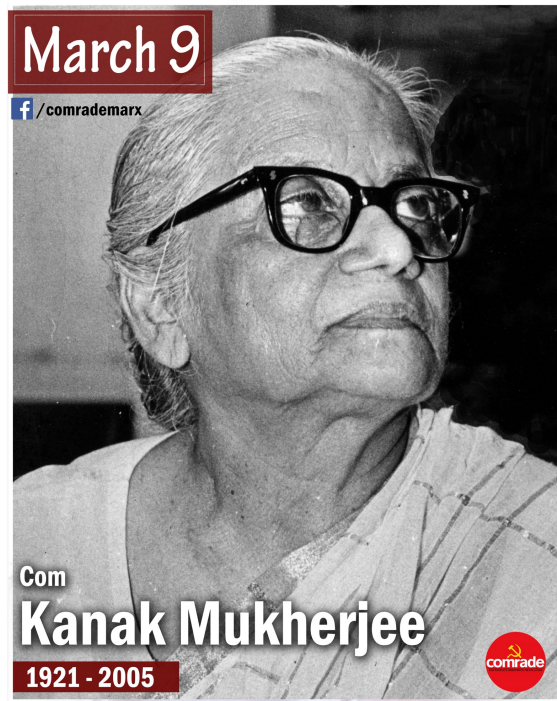
The strengthening of the communal and casteist forces in our country over the last few years has led to a severe setback for the struggle for women's emancipation. The Haridwar horror of venomous tirades against Muslim minorities and calls by so-called 'sants' to physical attacks against them has shocked all democratic, secular and patriotic sections in India and the world.

It is against this serious background that we are entering the New Year 2022. We will have to put in all our efforts to build a powerful women's movement to repel the assaults being launched by the Manuwadi forces. We have to reclaim our right to live a life with dignity, free from hunger, unemployment, fear and violence. Let us all march together in 2022 in defence of equal rights, democracy and secularism!

*From the Archives of AIDWA:*

**Kanak Mukherji's speech in Rajya Sabha on the Concremation of Roop Kanwar**

[Source: Rajya Sabha Archives]



*[The 19 year-old Roop Kanwar was burnt alive on the pyre of her husband Maal Singh at Deorala in Sikar district of Rajasthan on 4 September 1987 and the place was turned into a satisthal, a holy place by her in-laws and a temple was erected in her name. This horrific incident, meant to promote fanatic zeal and glorifying a terrible crime against a young woman as a supreme act of voluntary sacrifice was in utter violation of the Anti-Sati Act of 1829 to which Kanak Mukherji makes a reference and offers an instance of the mass resurgence of religious obscurantism in the 1980s. The huge protest movement led by AIDWA and other women's organisations against the apathy of the Rajiv Gandhi government at the Centre and the collusion of the Rajasthan state government led to their being branded by right-wing ideologues as westernised hussies violating the traditional spirit of India, eventually led to the Central Government to pass a second anti-sati Act, but the culprits in the case escaped without the due punishment and the shame of so-called sati worship in Deorala persisted!]*

*Kanak Mukherji's speech has burning relevance today insofar it sounds a warning against the unconstitutional behaviour of the people at the helm of the state who showed shameful indulgence first to Muslim fundamentalism in the Shah Bano case and then to Hindu fundamentalism in the Roop Kanwar case. Her speech also refers to the Babri Masjid-Ramjanambhoomi issue which was being whipped up around the same time by RSS-BJP without let because of such apathy from the top.*



*Since parliamentary archives record speeches in an unedited form, we have had to make a few silent emendations to make the text comprehensible.]*

SHRIMATI KANAK MUKHERJEE (West Bengal): Madam Deputy Chairman, we never thought that at the end of the 20th Century, before stepping to the 21st Century, we will have to discuss such antiquated, long abandoned past things, that we have to discuss 'sati'. Anyway, the recent most shocking event of gruesome murder of a teen-aged girl Roop Kanwar in the name of "Sati" has shaken the entire nation. This medieval barbarous practice and the subsequent ceremonies in its support put us to horrible shame as a civilized nation before the whole civilized world. It is a scar on civilization. It is a scar on our secular State as proclaimed in our Constitution.

Madam, to our utter disappointment, we see the Central Government and the State Government of Rajasthan dawdling over the event that indulged in such religious obscurantism and revival of decadent traditions for reasons best known to them. It is a shame to a pronounced secular State. First of all, I accuse the Central Government headed by the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi for indulging such a trend of revivalism. We are noticing that during the recent years, the Central Government and the ruling Party are continuously compromising with the communal, fundamentalist reactionary forces. The examples are there: passing of the Muslim Women's Bill, keeping the problems of Ramjanambhumi-Babri Masjid etc. unresolved. I am sure, if the Central Government did not pass the Muslim Women's Bill last year, the Hindu fundamentalists would not have raised their evil voice so loud. Since our Government is compromising with the fundamentalists, with the separatists, with the communal forces, with the divisive forces, that is why the Hindu fundamentalists have raised their voice and the Sankaracharya of Puri has said that it is also their democratic right. To burn woman is a democratic right? Where does our Constitution stand and where is the elementary right to live under the sun given by our Constitution? And that man is still a Dharam Guru and he is saying it in Puri.

Now, let us see what exactly happened there. After Roop Kanwar was burnt, her relatives and the interested people tried to show that she herself committed Sati. But the Women Journalists' team sent by the Bombay Union of Journalists revealed the truth. I would just quote four lines, from the Statesman of 20th October, 1987.

I quote: "The team was told that Maal Singh's body was brought back at about 9 a.m and preparations for "sati" began immediately. Roop Kanwar got an inkling of this and escaped from the house to hide in one of the barns in the surrounding fields. She was found out and dragged to the house and put on the pyre at 1.30 p.m.\* This is the story. Now, our friends have already mentioned that materialist interest, economic interest and business interest are lying behind this type of "Sati", this type of murder. Now, I quote a few lines from Raja Ram Mohan Roy. It is

published in Asiatic Journal 1819. This was the petition by Raja Ram Mohun Roy, signed by many other dignitaries, sent to Lord Bentinck and here he says: "Your petitioners are fully aware from their own knowledge or from the authority of credible eye-witnesses that cases have frequently occurred when women have been induced by the persuasion of their next heir, interested in their destruction to burn themselves on the funeral piles of their husband".

This is the economic interest view of Raja Rammohun Roy on that. Now, I say, many people say, even the Rajasthan State Government says, we have to pass an ordinance to check this practice. In this connection, I would like to quote Justice S. A. Masood in his article published on 25th October 1987 in "Aajkal" [a Bengali newspaper], he very wisely narrated the history of the law against Sati. I quote Justice Masood: "This inhuman, barbaric custom was prohibited on December 4, 1829 by Lord Bentinck. Even then the Hindu orthodox people appealed to the Privy Council. But on 11th July 1832 that appeal was rejected." Justice Masood has rightly reminded us that this historic law is still valid all over India and there is Indian Penal Code also to prevent such social crime as burning of women in the name of religion. After the Anti-Sati law passed in Bengal became applicable to British India, similar laws were passed in all the princely States in the next decades. I am not quoting the dates of such legislations as it would take more time. Then just after Independence, a legislation was passed incorporating all the States under the prevailing laws. With this historic law and the Indian Penal Code on hand, there is no excuse for the Rajasthan Government to fail miserably to prevent such criminal incidents.

Moreover, we are astonished to know that the Rajasthan State Government is a party to the crime. There is "Sati Mela" in Jhunjhunu in Rajasthan every year for which the State Government gives three State holidays, arranges for buses, open shops in the Mela and collects taxes also. In this way, it encourages religious fundamentalism. The Rajasthan State Government, a Congress-I Government, has a part in this kind of crime. Madam, similar examples can be given of Ministers and Government machinery indulging in these things. They go to the Mosque in Muslim areas, the Mandir in Hindu areas and the Church in Christian areas and mix up religion and politics. They are reviving the religious obscurantism of the past medieval days. So, may I ask the Government, what immediate and most stringent steps you are going to take to stop such barbarism forever?

Secondly, what steps you are going to take to stop any glorification of such criminal acts as raising Sati Temple, organising Dharma Raksha Samiti and propagating medieval barbarism? Then why are you not dismissing the State Government for its utter failure in maintenance of law and administration and for indulging in religious obscurantism? Madam, may I ask the Government, will you stop collection of any money to commemorate the vile act of murder and will you confiscate all the money



which has already been collected in the name of Roop Kanwar Temple—at least Rs. 90 lakhs have been already collected? Interested business people have sent their money, lakhs of money, to make the village Deorala a holy place so that they can earn money from it. So, use all this money for social welfare purposes. Now I ask why the most important public media, the TV and radio, are not working to educate people against the medieval feudal decadence. Will you please see to it that State and religion are actually separated, that Government or political parties, MLAs or MPs or any such responsible public figures do: not stand compromising with such dangerous religious revivalism? This is a direction of our Constitution itself. Religion is a personal affair. You have every right to follow any religion you like. The State and Government have nothing to do with your religion. They have no business either to encourage or to discourage any religion. But unfortunately here for immediate political gain, for getting votes Government is hobnobbing with religious practices and religious authorities. State and religion should be separate. That is the modern conception of a democratic and secular State.

Today the entire nation, all right thinking people, stand against this heinous crime against civilization, crime against humanity, crime against our Constitution. It is a crime to take away one's elementary right to live under the sun. Madam, you are an honourable woman; you can feel the heart of a mother, of a sister and of a wife. You can imagine what remains of the dignity of a woman, the dignity of the conjugal relation between man and wife after this act of sati. I request you to feel the hearts of the mothers, sisters and wives of this country.

Now, this is not a question of women only. It concerns the entire society. We have to save society from this extremely barbarous practice. We have to save society from extinction. We have to save our culture. We have to save our civilization from destruction. When we are in the forefront in the world for establishing peace, for restoring human dignity, when we are already at an advanced stage in the world to maintain world peace, it is ironical and paradoxical that in the name of religion our wheels of progress and civilization are in the reverse gear. This act of burning a woman alive puts us all to shame. Perpetration of this barbaric practice only leads to humiliation of the entire society.

Therefore, Madam, we have to save our civilization from such decay and destruction. We have to educate our people. We have to raise our voice against this heinous crime. I request you to ensure that government takes every possible stringent measure to end this barbarous custom. Government should also ensure that there is no glorification whatsoever of this practice in any form, directly or indirectly. Nobody should be allowed to propagate this barbarous medieval practice. This practice is only indicative of social decay, decay economically, socially and politically. What a tragedy that after 158 years of prohibition of this custom we have come to discuss this issue in Parliament now, in a civilized parliament; what a

tragedy that such an incident has been permitted in the most civilized nation, in the most democratic and secular country! This barbarous practice should have been a thing of the long, long, past, of the feudal and medieval age. This concerns the entire nation. We have all to stand up against this crime, we have all to raise our voice against this practice, Madam, through you I give this call to the nation, to all right thinking people. What an irony that the Government at the Centre and the Government in the State are either indulging in or encouraging this kind of practice! With these words I conclude.

## *Homage to Pramila Pandhe*

-Brinda Karat, Patron, AIDWA



*[This is a transcription of Comrade Brinda Karat's speech in homage to our beloved leader Pramila Pandhe at the memorial meeting organised by AIDWA in Delhi on 20 November, 2021.]*

There are so many dimensions to Pramila-di's life. It is not for us to compartmentalise it. There are certain things that I believe we can discuss today as we commemorate her which are extremely relevant for our movement.

Pramila-di was born in a region of Maharashtra where there was a strong cultural presence of Hindu fundamentalists and anti-reformists. Pramila-di's own father was greatly influenced by Bal Gangadhar Tilak. He was a freedom fighter, however, his understanding was that Hindu revivalism is correct and social reform is wrong. He was in favour of child marriage. Pramila-di's entire family was influenced by him, and so, Pramila-di took her first political steps with the RSS.

Pramila-di was born in 1927. When she was 10 years old, she was engaged with the RSS. I have asked her about this, and she told me, in those days, one way for girls to be able to step out of their homes was to join the RSS. They would do *prabhatferis* (morning processions), playing cymbals. They received social sanction from their families for participating in these activities.

Pramila-di grew up with that kind of an atmosphere. Today if we look and see what is Hindutva, what BJP is doing, and we compare that with the 1920s, then it can't be a comparison of course, but it can be a basis for analysing the social

environment. The movement for social reforms and how Pramila-di incorporated that into her life and waged a political struggle independent of her environment and upbringing is a big lesson for all of us.

We can say, oh this one belong to a political family so of course they are political. But in Pramila-di's case, what was the politics? From a very young age, Pramila-di challenged that politics. She met communist teachers and she was influenced by them, along with that whole generation of her family, by Marxism, by the Bolshevik revolution, and socialism. Then from one stream of the nationalist movement, which nurtured regressive ideology as far as women are concerned, Pramila-di shifted totally to the absolute opposite stream.

Ambedkar rightly said that it is still easier to wage political struggles. But fighting against regressive social norms and ideologies is very difficult. This is particularly true for women as these social norms influence women at every stage of their lives.

One aspect of her life from which I learnt so much was Pramila-di's immense personal courage which she transformed into her political strength. We can be personally courageous and fight the police, and RSS women may also fight the police. But to convert personal courage into the opposite of what your background has taught you and to become a communist is something to be noted.

Even Gandhiji's *andolan* after all encouraged women to come out during the freedom struggle, but there was social sanction if you were with Gandhi. If you came out with communists, it was something entirely different.

The independent stand that Pramila-di could take is something that all of us can learn from. Many of us come from Left families, many of us have partners who are also within the same movement, but to be able to come to the conclusions yourself and to make decisions independently as Pramila-di did, I think that is a wonderful example.

Pramila-di not only in her politics, but also in her personal life, had to deal with so-called widowhood. She remarried, to a man of her choosing. I say 'so called' because why should there be such a term as widowhood? In our credential form, we used to put the term widow. Once Susheela Gopalan asked me, after comrade AK Gopalan's death, what is this? In an AIDWA form you are using the term widow, why? I am a single woman, that's how I will be treated. Since then we have never used that term.

The second issue on which we need to learn from Pramila-di is how do you combine the struggle of working women, women in offices and factories, with the struggle of the larger women's movement.

At the time, post emergency, Pramila-di joined CITU centre and used to work with them. She also had a close relation with the Delhi unit. There were two party members who worked in the Welfare Board. Those two went to the CITU centre and said women workers are being treated very badly, so you need to come and intervene.

Pramila-di along with Vimal-di first went and had a meeting with the women and then that is how the first all women's union in Delhi, organized by the CITU centre, was formed in Talkatora road. We need to look at the experience of that struggle, and the leadership which Pramila-di gave at different levels. I think it is something extremely relevant for us — her methods of organising, which were the methods that were later brought to the AIDWA office, were completely non-bureaucratic.

If anyone was an enemy of dictatorial methods, it was Pramila-di. She would never ask people to make multiple rounds of the office or refer to a dozen different people for any work. She maintained personal relations with each woman and would immediately help them out.

Because she had personal relations, she understood right then that the organisation's task is not just to help out women in such work, but women's place in social structures needs to be understood for the movement to go forward.

Her way of unionising was to look at those women as workers primarily, but also at their identity as women in a patriarchal society. Therefore, the next logical step was to link up with women's organisations that could deal with those issues. So the link between the trade union and the Delhi JMS was strengthened.

In the class approach that Pramila-di had, she understood clearly how social structures become a part of a working woman's life. In that sense, many of AIDWA's founding leaders such as Sushila Gopalan, Vimal Ranadive, Ahilya Rangnekar, all of them became part of class struggles and trade unions and along with them led joint struggles with the women's movement.

If today there is compartmentalisation of any kind, we need to draw lessons from Pramila-di's life and break it. One of the problems which is arising is that women of different sections — peasant women, working class women, organise under their own class demands. How do we then take up the issues that impact them as women? Certainly the primary responsibility must be on that particular organisation to which they primarily belong. But we want to build a united political movement, and I don't mean 'party' political. I mean a movement which hits at the ruling classes' politics against women. That is what we have to build.

We learn from Pramila-di and her pioneering work with the Social Welfare Board union employees struggle that she led how to link up these issues without diluting the class aspect.

Thirdly, how do we approach women? I understand that all women, such as all of you who are sitting here, there will not be anyone here who would not have waged some kind of struggle in her personal life. What does that struggle teach us?

In Western women's liberation movement there is a slogan of sisterhood. Sisterhood sounds good, we are all sisters. But there are divides within this sisterhood. For instance, what about an upper caste sister and a Dalit sister? If someone from an upper caste family is attacking a Dalit sister, will the upper caste sister stand with her? Or if a Muslim woman is being attacked, will a Hindu woman stand with her in sisterhood?

The sisterhood that AIDWA talks about and what Western women's movement talks about is drastically different. We look at caste, class, etc, and we say, you build a sisterhood that stands against such kind of exploitation, then you call it sisterhood.

In Pramila-di's life and in the core of her work, we see that feeling of sisterhood in her struggle, her radical change, her socialism, against the oppression against Dalits, on minority issues. She lived it in her work. There were no compartments at all inspite of the fact that she came from an upper caste orthodox background.

So that sisterhood, based on AIDWA's understanding, when it is brought to the office, it translates into a non-bureaucratic approach. This was very important. Because if others are going outside then somebody has to be there to watch your back to make sure everything is properly organised and committed to a politics.

Pramila-di's politics was very clear, and she used to say things clearly and directly. Sometimes I would tell her, Pramila-di, maybe we should be softer. But we have to understand her nature — soft, loving, concerned, motherly, sensitive, but political to the core. Without that politics, Pramila-di was not Pramila-di.

The same uncompromising politics gave Pramila-di strength. Everyone faces difficult times in their lives. Both Pramila-di's children, her son and daughter, I remember... At the time of 1978 emergency, Pramila-di called us to her home. Asha Lata and I went there. She said to me, this is my daughter Ujjwal, from now on she is going to be in every struggle of the working class.

As mothers, are we encouraging our children to become political activists? Of course we can't force our children. But at least those values, are we encouraging them? Pramila-di did. That was another great quality. And it is with that that she

could bear the terrible grief and loss of both her children, and her husband, our most beloved comrade MK Pandhe.

She had a wonderful sense of humour. After dropping Pramila-di to the hospital, I had to go to Jharkhand, and she passed away when I was out of Delhi. I was on the way to the airport in Ranchi and the comrade with me was telling me that once Pramila-di asked him while they were travelling in Patna, what is the name of this road? He said this is Mahatma Gandhi marg. Pramila-di responded, everyone walks on Gandhiji's road but no one is going to walk on the path Gandhiji laid out!

She was full of fun. Once in one of the AIDWA celebrations, we got Comrade Pandhe and everyone together. After a serious political session, we had a celebration. As AIDWA always does, we all started dancing. It was in the Vittal Bhai Patel House lawns.

We got comrade Pandhe also to dance with us. Then Pramila-di called me. She said, "Wah Brinda! You have managed to make comrade Pandhe dance. But he has never danced with me!" Then we took her, and for the first time, Pramila-di, Comrade Pandhe and all of us danced together.

When I look back, they were the most wonderful couple. The most wonderful, for our party, and for all the younger people, they were an ideal communist couple. They suited each other, they both had the same sense of humour, they both loved to travel. Comrade Pandhe used to tell me, one of the best moments for him was when he would take leave and go on holiday taking all his grandchildren along.

So they were also full of fun and they imparted that to all of us who had the privilege and honour and happiness to work with both of them. When I look at Pramila-di's life, when we celebrate her life, we remember so many aspects of her life, her political life, her ideological struggle, her personal courage, and most of all, her sweet and generous nature. Even when she was suffering, when anyone went to see her she would say, thank you so much for coming. Why did you take the trouble to come and see me?

She knew how to give love, and it really was from her heart.

Dearest Pramila, we learnt so much from you, we celebrate your life. AIDWA will never forget you. Our movement will never forget you. We will strive to keep alive the legacy you left for us in the hearts of every AIDWA member.

Long live Comrade Pramila. Comrade Pramila zindabad!



## **'Jai Bhim' - A powerful film against age-old tribal oppression**

-Manjeet Rathee, CEC, AIDWA (with inputs from Madhu Garg)



Written and Directed by T. J. Gnanavel and produced by Jyothika and Suriya, 'Jai Bhim' ('Long Live Bhim', a slogan used by followers of Babasaheb Bhim Rao Ambedkar) is one of the most powerful films to have come out of Tamil cinema, with its scathing attack on the various 'power structures' in our society that constantly work to oppress Dalits, minorities and other marginalised sections including the women among them in a most brutal manner. The film, based on actual events in Tamil Nadu in the 1990s, depicts the endless struggles of the Irular tribal community against the state-backed might of an inhuman police force who do not hesitate to implicate defenceless tribal people on false charges and resort to worst kinds of violence against them to save their own tainted and corrupt faces. It strengthens the belief of the ordinary people, especially of the deprived sections, to fight against these everyday injustices with courage and demonstrates that the power of the Constitution lies only in the proper implementation of law. The film is a bold portrayal of how these hegemonic structures and authorities refuse to recognize the tribes and other marginalized sections as citizens and deny them every opportunity for their growth and development. They are even deprived of basic citizenship facilities like aadhar card, ration card and voter card. Lawyer Chandru, who successfully fights Sengkani's case in the film, asserts in one of the scenes in the court that the Irular tribal community, in spite of being born and bred in Tamil Nadu, are not even allowed to live in their own villages today.

The film begins with tribal couple Sengkani (Lijo Mol Jose) and Rajakannu (Manikandan) leading a peaceful and dignified life and dreaming of a happy future.

One day, Rajakannu is summoned to the village headman's house to catch a snake, but soon after, he and all those close to him, are picked up by the police in connection with a burglary at the headman's house. The police unleash a reign of terror on Rajakannu and his relatives, subjecting them all to relentless third-degree torture, compelling them to accept responsibility for the burglary. Then, one night, the cops claim that Rajakannu and his associates have escaped. The pregnant Sengkani, desperately fighting a lonely battle, does not know whom to turn to for help, until a literacy teacher from the village, Maitreyi, advises her to meet a human rights lawyer in Madras High Court, called Chandru (played by Suriya). Chandru is believed to be an upright lawyer who can empathise with the pain of the downtrodden and the voiceless. In a gripping courtroom drama that follows, as Sengkani fights her case against the police to get justice for her husband's custodial torture and death, the cruel and manipulative face of the police and other power structures stands totally exposed. On account of the strong arguments by lawyer Chandru in favour of Sengkani and the tribal community, the Court is forced to constitute an investigation committee headed by IG Perumal Swami, who visits the tribals to inquire about the truth and is aghast to hear of the cases of police torture on innocent people of the community. Sengkani is finally able to get justice due to Chandru's commitment to the cause of the tribals, and to the impartial inquiry by the investigation committee.

The very opening scene depicts a police officer segregating the suspected criminals in the police station on the basis of their caste. He asks: "which people are you?" If they are Dalits or from a Tribal community, they are made to stand in a separate group and slapped with false charges, while the suspects from dominant and intermediate caste groups are given a free hand. The police repeatedly enter into the huts of Irular tribal community at odd times without any warrant and insult them, not even sparing their women from various kinds of sexual violence. Seeing that the tribal people are not ready to submit before the high-handedness of the police and dominant caste groups, one of the policemen threatens them with the words: "How long do you think it'll take us to set your house on fire?" The deep prejudice of the upper caste people against this community branding them as natural thieves and criminals is satirically answered by advocate Chandru when he argues in the court that thieves exist in every community, but there are far bigger thieves sitting in the top positions of our institutions causing much more harm to society.

The film director also exposes the manner in which Dalits and people from tribal communities are exploited for their labour. Rajakannu earns a living by making bricks for his oppressors, but he cannot build a house for himself. He is called upon every time there are rodents (or snakes) in the fields, but is not allowed even to speak with a dominant caste member — he gets shooed away by a lady, when he says they come from the same village. When they ask for land pattas, people from the dominant castes mock at them saying "Do you need pattas to build palaces?"

They are deliberately denied voting rights because no one would like to go and beg for their votes in their huts. Women are molested as if it makes no difference to anyone, men are killed like rodents, and Irulars are subjected to all this agony because they happen to be born in that community. The film does not make its leading man a traditional larger than life hero, or a Messiah. The director is more interested in making the audience realise the enormity of pain that Irulars went through in the 90s and still continue to face in many parts.

The real hero of this film is Sengkani (Lijo), a pregnant woman, who is looking for her husband while her first born girl is by her side. The cruel realities of caste dynamics turn her into a resolute woman fighting steadily for justice, and refusing to bow down to the system of dominance that has exploited them for so long. She is courageous enough to no longer allow them to break her spirit. The last scene of the film, where Sengkani's daughter is shown reading a newspaper along with lawyer Chandru, strongly evokes Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar's message: "Educate, Agitate, Organize." The film does not have anything that is unnecessary-- neither songs nor fight sequences, nothing that can take away the intensity or the relatability of the story to real life. Every dialogue and expression is measured and meaningful, heightened by the brilliant performances coming from all its cast members.



Lawyer Chandru, the real-life model on whom the character played by Suriya is based, became one of the most respected judges in the legal circuit and is known for his judgements that have touched the lives of so many poor and downtrodden people in society. He pronounced a whopping 96,000 verdicts in his sparkling career, including a verdict that secured employment for 25,000 poor women in the

midday meal scheme. He was associated with left-wing politics from his early days; that is why one finds the photos of Karl Marx, Periyar and Ambedkar in Chandru's cabin in the film.

The director of the film publicly stated that the CPI (M) in Tamil Nadu played an active role in attaining justice for the tribal community during the real case on which this film is based. Com K.R Govindan stood firmly with Rajakannu's wife, Parvati (her real name) for 13 long years, in spite of all the threats and temptations. Similarly, Com R. Rajmohan and Com. Balakrishnan, who is currently the state secretary of Tamil Nadu CPI (M), played a leading role in the whole struggle. The teacher in the film, Maitreyi, was also part of the Literacy movement run by Tamil Nadu Science Forum, whose in-charge, Com. G. Ramakrishnan provided crucial guidance in the case. What is not so widely known is that Lawyer K. Chandru, while fighting the case, donated the sum of Rs 5000/- given to him by the court as a cost fee to our beloved leader Maithili Shivaraman whom we have lost recently, to help the poor. This shows how in Tamil Nadu CPI (M), and AIDWA have been playing a decisive role in the fight against cast disparities and untouchability.

It's a realistic, issue-based film that hits hard at the inherent oppressive nature of hierarchies and hegemonic structures and is a must watch for all those who believe in equality and social justice. The film justifies faith in the struggle for a dignified life for all marginalized sections.

## *Women's Struggles across the World*

### **After 12 years of far-right rule, progressive forces return to power in Honduras with first woman president**

-Surangya, AIDWA, Delhi



“I think that the electoral victory of Xiomara Castro as president of Honduras is something quite significant and important for the Honduran people. It is an important symbolic victory as well as strategic and political,” Bertha Zúniga Cáceres stated in an interview following the Libre party’s victory in the Honduran presidential elections held on November 28.

Zúniga is the coordinator of the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH). COPINH was among the first organisations to take to the streets in protest after the coup d’état in Honduras in 2009. It is an important organisation that highlights the political presence of indigenous communities in the country and fights for their rights.

“In terms of the symbolic importance, the fact that a country as sexist as Honduras has for the first time in its history, and only a few years after women gained the right to vote, elected a woman as president is a very important achievement.

“The other, is because she is not just any woman, but a woman who has committed herself to demands, struggles and processes from many feminist sectors.

“This is important in a country where one of the worst elements of the situation of Honduras today is that women’s rights have been attacked, vilified, and violated, especially with regard to violence, femicides, and sexual and reproductive rights. So this is really a significant change,” Zúniga further explained.



Zúniga's mother Berta Cáceres was assassinated in 2016 when she was leading a struggle against the construction of a hydroelectric dam on the Gualcarque River. This river is an important resource for the indigenous Lenca community, who also consider it to be sacred.

However, Berta's murder was not just because of her part in this particular struggle. It was an attack on her larger political struggle of going to the roots of the structural problems in Honduras, discussing those with the communities, and leading a process of refounding Honduras on the basis of those discussions. This process involved mobilising on the streets in rejection of the coup and directly confronting the state's repressive forces.

In these discussions, there was a specific focus on mobilising against privatisation and dispossession of indigenous people from their territories. Berta was a part of all these important political processes that took place in Honduras after the coup, and she linked them to the struggle against racism, patriarchy, and capitalism not just in the ruling classes, but also within the communities. Because of this thought of hers, and because of her capacity to organise, Berta Cáceres was assassinated.

Racism, patriarchy, and capitalism are the kind of characteristics that have marked the 12 years of the coup regime led by the far-right National Party. For the last 8 years, Honduras has been under the dictatorial rule of president Juan Orlando Hernández whose term ends on January 27.

On the 10 year anniversary of the coup, Camilo Bermúdez from COPINH talked about its impact on the people and the social policies of the country.

“The hardest hit in Honduras after the coup in 2009 were of course the poor and working class. All of the social policies, welfare policies for the most impoverished in Honduras faced a massive set back. The communities in remote areas that have always been abandoned by the Honduran state were also affected because the coup initiated a period of deepening of the neoliberal model, opening the door to the pillaging of the territories with extractive projects.”

Bermúdez further stated, “With regards to the social reality, if you look at the numbers on a macro level, we can see that criminality greatly increased since the coup. The most evident expressions of violence such as assassinations, homicides, crimes against women, shot up to the point where Honduras became the most dangerous country in the world.”

January 25 in Honduras is celebrated as Women's Day. On this day in 1955, Honduran women won the right to vote and participate in the country's democratic process. In January 2021, however, women across Honduras claimed that there is nothing to celebrate. Just a few days before this, on January 21, the National Congress of Honduras approved a constitutional reform that permanently outlawed abortion in the country. The amended article criminalises women who terminate their pregnancy along with anyone else involved in the abortion process.

To mark Women's Day, women and other marginalised genders demonstrated against the passing of this reform along with protesting the increasing number of femicides, rapes, and other forms of violence against women.

The issue of abortion majorly polarised these elections with Xiomara Castro and other members of the Libre Party facing vicious, hateful attacks for being in favour of reproductive rights.



The banner reads: "Yes to life, no to Xiomara. #I am not a Killer"

The outcome of the elections on November 28 is a culmination of all these struggles and movements that the people of Honduras have been leading since the coup 12 years ago, and even before that.

The Libre Party government led by president-elect Xiomara Castro has already presented a 100 day plan with 30 points of action which holds a lot of promise for people's organisations like COPINH. This includes not approving any new extractive projects which snatch away land from indigenous communities. It also includes working to provide social justice and justice for human rights defenders who were martyred in their struggles.

The most important promise of this new government is perhaps to bring in a new National Constituent Assembly which can enact deep reforms in the constitution. This is a long standing demand of the people which is necessary to create a legal framework that recognises the right of indigenous people, women, for the demilitarisation of the country, for sexual and reproductive rights, and for recognition of LGBTQI communities.

Back in 2009, when the coup took place against the left-leaning government of Manuel Zelaya, he had proposed a referendum for forming a constituent assembly for enacting much needed reforms in the constitution. The people of Honduras now



hope to continue the process which was violently interrupted by imperialist forces back then.

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