

News and opinion from Bengal November – December 2018

Inequality in India is at its highest level for over 90 years (since income tax was introduced in 1922). The top 1% of earners have 22% of total income (as compared to only 6% in the 1980s. India has among the highest increase in income for the top 1% of the whole world. Lucas Chancel and Thomas Picketty conclude there has been a sharp increase in wealth concentration, particularly since 2012, and generally since market liberalization from the late '80s onward. By way of contrast, “In Russia the move from a Communist [*sic*] to a market economy was “swift and brutal” and today has a similar level of inequality as India. India pursued a very unequal way, but could probably have chosen a different path”.

Convictions for pogroms and murders after 30+ years

The Indian legal system sometimes takes decades to confirm a verdict. Victims cannot move on, nor can the guilty persons serve their sentence and restart their lives. The Delhi High Court has just upheld convictions and sentences of five years against 70 persons found guilty in 1996 for participating in arson and riot during the anti-Sikh pogrom which followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. 16 other ‘under trials’ had died during the intervening years. Some 3,000+ Sikhs were murdered during the pogroms orchestrated by the Congress Party in Delhi and many other locations. Few have been convicted, due to protection by persons embedded in the political power structure of the country.

In 1987 a unit of the Uttar Pradesh Provincial Armed Constabulary kidnapped and executed 42 men of the Moslem community near Meerut, following a relatively minor local disturbance. The men were lined up and shot on the bank of a canal into which their bodies were thrown. The Delhi High Court (again) found 16 former members of the PAC guilty of “targeted killing” of unarmed and defenceless people. A lower court had already acquitted the accused. One died during the re-trial. All 16 have been sentenced to life imprisonment, which often means no release in India.

Why did the UP Police kill 42 unarmed men? General prejudice against Moslems in a mostly Hindu force, and the fact that their commander thought he could get away with it. He almost did. If it is so hard to convict low-level persons of sectarian murders, how much harder to bring to trial a Chief Minister of a state who is complicit in mass murder, especially when he has become the Prime Minister!

Another “justice delayed” case, related to the above-mentioned anti-Sikh pogrom in 1984: a Congress party leader called Sajjan Kumar has been sentenced by the Delhi High Court to life imprisonment for his leading role in the massacre. While a few other instigators of the murderous mobs had been sentenced this century, Sajjan had been protected by political friends and corrupt police. The trial judge said he was guilty of a crime against humanity and will spend the rest of his life in prison. Another person allegedly involved in the killings, Kamal Nath, has just become the newly-elected Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh.

This week, a verdict was announced in a two-year-old murder case against a group of men accused of lynching a Moslem man and boy who were (legally) herding buffaloes to a market to be sold. For the purposes of *Hindutva* politics, buffaloes are included as holy animals – gods in fact – along with cows. The victims were beaten and hung from trees using the ropes which had been used to lead the animals. The killers were sentenced to life. They are appealing their case.

In a recent bout of violence in Uttar Pradesh, a Hindu mob came out to protest at the discovery of animal remains which they said proved cows had been slaughtered. In many states of India, it is now illegal to kill a cow, although many people have always eaten beef as part of their diet. The mob killed a Hindu police inspector who was doing his job in trying to disperse them, and another person. The alleged killers have been arrested. It is now apparent that the authorities in UP are giving equal weight to the ‘cow killing’ and the human killings.

The Government of a state ruled by the BJP has proposed that the Cow be declared “the mother of the nation” and a national animal.

Indian political parties are unable to remove from their leading ranks persons implicated in mass murder. Look at Narendra Modi, now PM of India. As Chief Minister of Gujarat he presided over the 2002 massacre of Moslems and was denied visas to visit UK and USA in the light of this... until he became PM in 2014.

Gender Wars

Gender wars are having an impact in India. Several noted male persons with film or media positions have recently been subject to #MeToo accusations of harassment or rape. Cases are underway.

The famous Hindu Sabarimala temple in Kerala had always barred “women of menstruating age” from entering its precincts, so as to avoid ritual pollution. (Some Hindus are as frightened of menstruating women as they are of Moslems). The Kerala Court ruled that such exclusion could no longer be justified, on grounds of gender equality. Thousands of angry males gathered at the temple site to prevent women from entering, and hundreds of police were sent to escort into the temple any woman brave enough to challenge the angry mob. Since then, even under heavy police escort, no such woman of “polluting age” has been able, or brave enough, to run the gauntlet at the temple. The state often (usually?) backs off from doing the right thing in the face of mass disturbance by the offending party.

Update: In early January 2019, two women in the banned age-group were escorted into the temple at dawn by the police, with support of the Chief Minister of Kerala and the Left Front government. The male guardians and their supporting mob were caught unawares and the women left before they could be challenged. One of the two was beaten up by her mother-in-law and hospitalized after returning home. The family did not approve her* action.

Kerala state was divided politically. A million+ women linked hands in a line stretching the full length of the state to support the women in the temple movement. An equivalent line of opponents was organized on a different day by the parties of the Right, and Hindu groups. I believe Kerala has the only mosque in India with a female Imam and where women and men perform *namaz* together in the same room.

* unclear if this refers to the woman who entered the temple, or her mother-in-law: either could have prompted the split opinion

I am reminded of how the Bangladeshi woman writer Taslima Nasreen was denied sanctuary in Kolkata, her refuge of choice from Bangladesh, because the so-called Communist government of the day was frightened of the 'sentiments' of Moslems in the city. There were, in fact, riots in a few neighbourhoods of Kolkata. Taslima wrote of Islam as an oppressive and misogynistic religion, and highlighted the oppression and killing of Hindus in Moslem-majority Bangladesh. Taslima was whisked away by the police from Kolkata to Jaipur on the other side of India. Soon after, she was driven out of Jaipur and forced to hide in Delhi (a desert for a Bengali), where she was more or less under house arrest and forced to keep a very low profile. India never gave her citizenship, which she desired. I believe she is now in exile in the USA where she has more personal freedom but much less cultural affinity. Her Bangladesh passport was revoked when she was expelled from there in 2004, and she became an unhappy refugee and citizen of Sweden. Of course neither of the two nasty, vicious Begums who lead Bangladesh's main political parties would have the guts or female empathy to let Taslima return to her own country.

Taslima's treatment in India is particularly scandalous because nothing was or is being done to right the wrong committed by the cowardly regimes of 10 and 15 years ago. A woman, Momota Bannerji, rules West Bengal with a slavish cult of personality and loves to ingratiate herself with the 'leaders' of the Moslem community because they deliver the votes she needs to remain in power for ever. Zero chance that she will let Taslima come home to Bengal. The politicians of this country are shallow and unprincipled, attuned to every 'sentiment' of their vote banks and every murderous mob torching a bazar.

The Air

The Doctor I visit in Kolkata for an occasional ailment which doesn't clear up on its own told me twice that I need to wear a face-mask against the air pollution. I agree with him in principle, but won't wear one because hardly any else does. We need them. In fact we need 50% of the motor vehicles of the city to be taken out of use immediately to give the particulate material in the air a chance to return within a "safe" limit. Delhi city administration took serious action in the last two years against their pollution, which was often over 500ppm in the winter. They banned cars from running on alternate days according to their number plates. Kolkata's air-quality in late 2018 is often worse than Delhi's. In Kolkata the authorities talk and do nothing substantive. Here they are still building flyovers and car parks.

The Times of India, which I confess to reading almost daily out of laziness (but only for 20 minutes because that's all it takes to read the skimpy and boring news they print) smugly asserts that the people worst affected by the smog are "joggers and early morning lakeside walkers". Bullshit! Worst affected, to my certain knowledge, is the colony of 50+ families which camps permanently in filthy conditions on the pavements beside Moulali Junction, possibly the busiest traffic intersection in the city. Several dozen young children live here, in the smoke and deafening noise of horns and engines, from the day their mum brings them back from the local maternity ward. I walk past them in the road several times a week. The kids don't bother to hassle me for money as a foreigner because I never give them any, and perhaps I don't look much like a foreigner, anyway.

As a postscript to the issue, I can report that a section of the waste collection staff of the Kolkata Corporation still burns rubbish in central locations to reduce the volume they have to transport to the vast dumping ground at Dhappa (The Dump), beyond the fashionable Eastern Metropolitan Bypass, out beyond Trump (Dump) Towers.

As I walk along through the rubbish-strewn Sealdah roadside fruit and veg. market in the evening, I can inhale the picturesque smoke of smouldering plastic and paper waste of the municipal transfer tip. Towards dawn, members of the pavement-sleeping fraternity wake up, collect piles of combustible rubbish left from the evening traders, light it and sit around warming their hands, knees and faces — just as they did 25 years ago. The authorities mull over the need to plant some trees. When they were in high school they were told that planting trees is good. The poverty of thinking and action is enough to make one despair.

The nastiness goes on and on...

BJP state governments are changing the names of well-known cities because the historic name accepted by all is of Islamic origin. Thus Ahmedabad, main city of Gujarat, is supposed to become the Hindu "Karnavati". Allahabad, a centre of Islamic culture and education in UP, is due to become the Hindu "Prayagraj". Faisabad will be changed to "Ayodhya" by the state government of UP, which is led by a shaven-headed *sadhu*. There are some legal challenges to these name-changes, which are holding them up. They are likely to be raised with renewed vigour during the coming Parliamentary general election as an issue to mobilize the Hindu vote, which is beginning to get tired of *Hindutva* and drift away from the BJP.

When Narendra Modi was still only the CM of Gujarat he decided to cement his bond with the Hindu electorate by causing to be erected the world's tallest statue. The subject is Vallabhbhai Patel, a Gujarati who was always in the Congress party and was Independent India's first 'home minister' under J H Nehru. He was known (by some media presumably) as "India's Iron Man". Modi decided to steal him from Congress and turn him into a nationalist icon by making in his image the largest humanesque statue in the world.

The poor farmers living in the vicinity of the Patel Statue don't like it. There is the vast mess of any large construction site in India, and disruption to rural life of hosting a great commercial and tourist facility where none should be. Crops are damaged by construction dust from the new roads, hotels and shopping malls. The farmers remain chronically short of water, even as it is canalled in to create a big lake near the statue.

In another footnote, the said lake has become home to a lot of crocodiles, whether they arrived by themselves, or were introduced to boost the Iron Man image, or maliciously by the farmers, the media has not clarified. The official view is now that the crocs are a hazard to the tourism of the spot and have to be moved. Conservationists are incensed. Seems like a no-win situation for cow- and crocodile-loving nationalists.

In another footnote, not to be outdone by Gujarat, the devout Hindu folk of UP are going to have their wildest dreams come true: a massive statue of the mythical Lord Ram (or the actually-existing incarnation of the supreme being) will be erected at Ayodhya / Faizabad. In the name of this god / guy, all the pogrom deaths in 1992 –93 can be loosely attributed. To establish a temple at his "birthplace", a large and venerable mosque was demolished illegally by a mob, egged on by the people who now rule India. They are frothing at the bit for a Supreme Court verdict to give them the permission to build their temple on the site of the now-gone mosque (as they hope, before the coming election, so as to stir up the somewhat tepid Hindu vote-bank). Lord Ram will probably be sitting down so will not need to be as high as the statue in Gujarat, but he'll be pretty massive as you would expect for a supreme deity.

Jobs

India's railway network recently received 19 million applications for 63,000 jobs as cleaners and track maintenance workers

A Footnote about Cows

West Bengal is one of the few states of India where one imagines that people with a strong inclination to eat beef can still do so without much danger (unless they happen to do it too publicly near the office of a cow-loving organization). This would include most Moslems, Christians and some 'low caste' Hindus and some 'Tribals'. In parts of the main Hindu 'cow belt', the cow problem is becoming acute. A cow can live for over 20 years. It gives milk productively for about five years. Half its offspring are males which yield no milk. Due to the habit of cow-owners releasing the animals to fend for themselves, there are now approximately 5 million stray cows – the Government calls them "homeless" – roaming the streets, byways and fields of Mother India. In parts of UP, they have been causing such damage to crops in the fields that mobs of farmers began to drive herds of cows into Gov't Schools and offices, to draw attention to their losses. This was not popular with the Gov't, which caused some people to get arrested. It seems more funds will be made available for the sheltering and feeding of unproductive cows, and bulls.

Buses in Kolkata

Since I first came to Kolkata, I have tended to travel on buses quite a lot. You can't really cycle far in Kolkata because the authorities discourage it and road conditions are unsuitable, except within small localities. The metro has had only one route – north to south – since I arrived. The new east-west metro looks another two years off, judging from the chaotic construction site for the new station just outside Sealdah railway station.

Some new, and relatively comfortable, buses appeared in Kolkata a few years ago. These have not aged well and were always heavily outnumbered by a more traditional type of bus, shorter, higher and more in a vernacular style of bus and truck building which might call to mind the construction of gypsy caravans in Europe.

The main issue with buses is the way they are driven. In 2017 no less than 14,951 cases of rash driving were notified against buses and minibuses in Kolkata. 77 people were killed in accidents involving a bus. In the first 11 months of 2018, a further 67 people died. To keep a sense of proportion, trucks killed 74 people in 2017, out of 329 fatal accidents. Trucks are neck-and-neck with buses. And buses are often neck-and-neck on the roads as they try to overtake each other, which accounts for many of the head-on or glancing-blow accidents.

Bus crews get part of their wage according to the takings of their bus. Therefore they race to be first at a particular stop. But the 'bus stop' is a fluid concept, as buses cruise along busy stretches of road picking up passengers anywhere, until the crew judge that the bus is full enough. They then speed off like maniacs. Similarly, buses don't depart from their primitive and filthy 'bus stand' until they have enough passengers. They don't leave at any fixed time. They spend at least 10 minutes at Howrah Station bus stand with the engine running, slowly crawling forward on the clutch, among a dense mass of other crawling buses, to show any potential rider that the bus is on the point of departing.

There is danger inside the bus, too, without occurrence of any external collision. Erratic driving, and particularly sudden braking, is hazardous for the passengers, many of whom stand, hanging onto overhead bars and handles. I feel lucky to have never suffered more than a minor bruise or slightly wrenched wrist on a suddenly braking bus.

I have no figures for the number of prosecutions and convictions for dangerous driving among bus drivers. It is very low indeed. If a bus is involved in a 'person accident', it is almost always abandoned by the crew who scarper to save themselves from possible lynching by the angry mob which gathers at the spot. The bus will eventually be removed from where it is blocking the traffic by another driver from the company... if the mob has not burned it. In the absence of an absconding driver, the company is liable to be charged for negligent driving.

The authorities and the media constantly lament the accidents and dangers of this unruly scene. However, the cowardice of the authorities, in the face of any powerful influence

group with connections to the ruling party, is legendary. There is also the lack of focus and staying-power to implement a necessary but controversial decision, even one that benefits most citizens.

Footnote: I mention that ordinary buses do not go to the swanky, newish airport terminal. There are buses nearby, but not to the door of Arrivals where taxis swarm. You have to walk a way for a bus which is an air-conditioned (switched on in the winter, too) bus, charging 3 or 4 times more than the normal fare, and going to only a few select places. After all, if you are rich enough to be flying you could obviously afford a taxi and why would you demean yourself by not taking one?

The Chief Minister of West Bengal, the vain, all-knowing and all-interfering Momota Bannerjee, famously said a few years ago "I want Kolkata to be like London". The situation with the buses, mirrored in many other aspects of municipal life, indicates why Kolkata cannot be London, even the London we know with its many unresolved issues.

The cult of personality and dynasties

The big political news in India this last few days is the announcement by Priyanka Vadra-Gandhi that she is entering active politics for the Congress Party, led by her younger brother Rahul, and previously by her mum, father, granny, great granddad, etc. Priyanka's hubby is a big property developer with criminal cases for corruption standing against him, but no matter. Priyanka physically resembles her granny Indira, cast in the woman's imperious, bossy mould. She has been tasked with restoring the Congress party's electoral fortunes in the 30+ parliamentary seats of eastern UP. The Congress has in recent years been almost eliminated from the electoral map of Uttar Pradesh, India's largest and most challenging state.

The lacklustre image of her brother, Rahul, was considerably boosted recently by the Congress' success in winning the state elections in three large Hindi speaking states: Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chattisgarh. My feeling is that BJP with Modi as PM are likely to be back in power after the coming General Election, but with a much reduced majority.

Momota Bannerjee, with a gaggle of other regional party leaders, has an aspiration to replace the BJP by a coalition in the coming vote (with or without the participation of the Congress Party is an open question). Momota, along with several other leaders of regional parties, fancies being PM of India. With Congress as the biggest opposition party, this would be problematical.

Momota Bannerjee and her one-woman party, the so-called Trinamul (grassroots) Congress Party, are entrenched in West Bengal after eight years in power, as entrenched as the previous Left Front government, which ruled for 34 years. Momota's portrait is everywhere. In the small lane where I live in central Kolkata, there are at least six larger-

than-life portraits of the leader, with exhortations to do this and attend that rally. They are seldom taken down, unless to be replaced with a new one. A bus ride of, say, 10kms through the city will bring the traveller in sight of thousands of such placards. Opposition parties also have such placards, but much fewer in number, and featuring a greater range of leaders. Momota's nephew Abhishek Bannerjee is becoming a common sight on posters too, indicating his closeness to "big sister". Momota is in fact known as "Didi" meaning "big sister" either with affection or with irony. Her supporters, and no doubt many public officials, are desperate to please her. I heard from a friend with a relation in the police near Asansol, that in a recent local election there, opposition candidates were recorded as having won ZERO votes. This in a locality where the BJP is quite strong, and there are remnants of the Left Front parties. Booth-capturing, ballot-box stuffing, tampering with voting machines: is this true? Seems feasible to me.

In Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina has just won her third general election in a row, by a landslide. Just such tactics were used, with widespread intimidation and arrest of opposition candidates. As in the case of West Bengal, so in Bangladesh: the ruling party was likely to win comfortably in any case. But the leaders and their sycophantic followers become greedy, drunk on the fruits of office and blind to the consequences of their behaviour.

Dhrubotara and Child Labour-Free [CLF] Bricks



The two small Dhrubotara (Pole Star) schools I support with the help of several benefactors, continue to do their work with the 'tribal' children of two villages. I have just sent a 5-page report about them to those who donate to them. If you are interested, please inform and I

will forward it to you. Their website will soon be updated jon@yahoocoin.com [this button is Jon's personal e-mail address, as his focus one needs resetting].

In the report, I mentioned the advancing mechanization of agriculture in Bengal. In the last two years, rice-harvesting machines have taken half of all the harvest-related labour of the landless labour class at the two villages. The traditional work and social relations of a thousand years are disappearing before our eyes, in a few short years.



Similarly, I just sent a February 2019 newsletter concerning the *CLF Bricks Campaign* I have initiated with the help of 20+ crowdfunders. Rahul Das who gets a very modest salary to promote the CLF Bricks Campaign is a useful guy, far more attuned to digital and social media methods than I. In his mid-twenties and well-educated, there is a possibility Rahul will leave to pursue a PhD abroad. Not until his successor is appointed and inducted, I hope. In the newsletter, I have explained briefly what we have been doing towards eliminating child labour in the kilns, and protecting the livelihood of the families. It is a complex issue and it is unlikely that the Gov't could eliminate child participation in brick-making any time soon, even if it wanted to. But it doesn't care about this, anyway. Our approach is to look for occasional brick kilns where the owner feels he can exclude children from work. We will direct 'ethical' consumers of bricks to such CLF sources. We have one such brick kiln identified and on board, and hope to have others soon. An association of 25 brick kiln owners in one area is thinking about whether to adopt a similar pledge for owners not to employ children.

In addition, we help small NGOs who want to run open-air schools at kilns to prepare their applications and budgets.

The approx. 15 organisations we have approached to sign our CLF Bricks PLEDGE have mostly ignored our correspondence. These include the Loreto Sisters in Kolkata, in whose brickfield schools project I worked for nine years. We salute the small NGO *Friends of Kolkata's Elderly* [FOKE], the first to sign the PLEDGE. Another NGO, the *Hope Foundation*, Irish-inspired and quite big in Kolkata, is thinking about signing after we met the Director.

One of the largest real estate developers in Kolkata had a meeting with Rahul, in which he asked them to buy their bricks from CLF sources only. They are not able to oblige. They

informed Rahul quietly that they do not control the supply of their construction materials: control is in the hands of mafias with links to a certain political party. The company feels reluctant to rock the boat in its risky line of business, for such a nebulous concept as CLF bricks. We will focus on smaller institutions, especially those which have a foreign connection.

Postscript

The short Bengali winter was hardly here before it is almost gone again. The local cool season is merging into Bengal's spring – Boshonto Kal. Nights remain pleasantly cool at 15 degrees, but days are up to 30 degrees. Red flowers are coming on the Polash trees. Urban crows are noisily building their nests in the Neem tree next to my flat in Sealdah. Soon new leaves and flowers will come on the large mango tree which also brushes the windows of the flat. I have never seen the full-grown mangos as I don't stay here during their season. As always, I look forward to returning to England in about six weeks [actually, March 20th] to chill winds, daffodils and all the endearing seasonal features of more sharply-defined seasons.

If you are in England, I look forward to seeing you in 2019. Please drop in on me in my new home at Lymington. If you are coming to Kolkata in the next six weeks, I will see you there.

Best, JON