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Sadbhavana

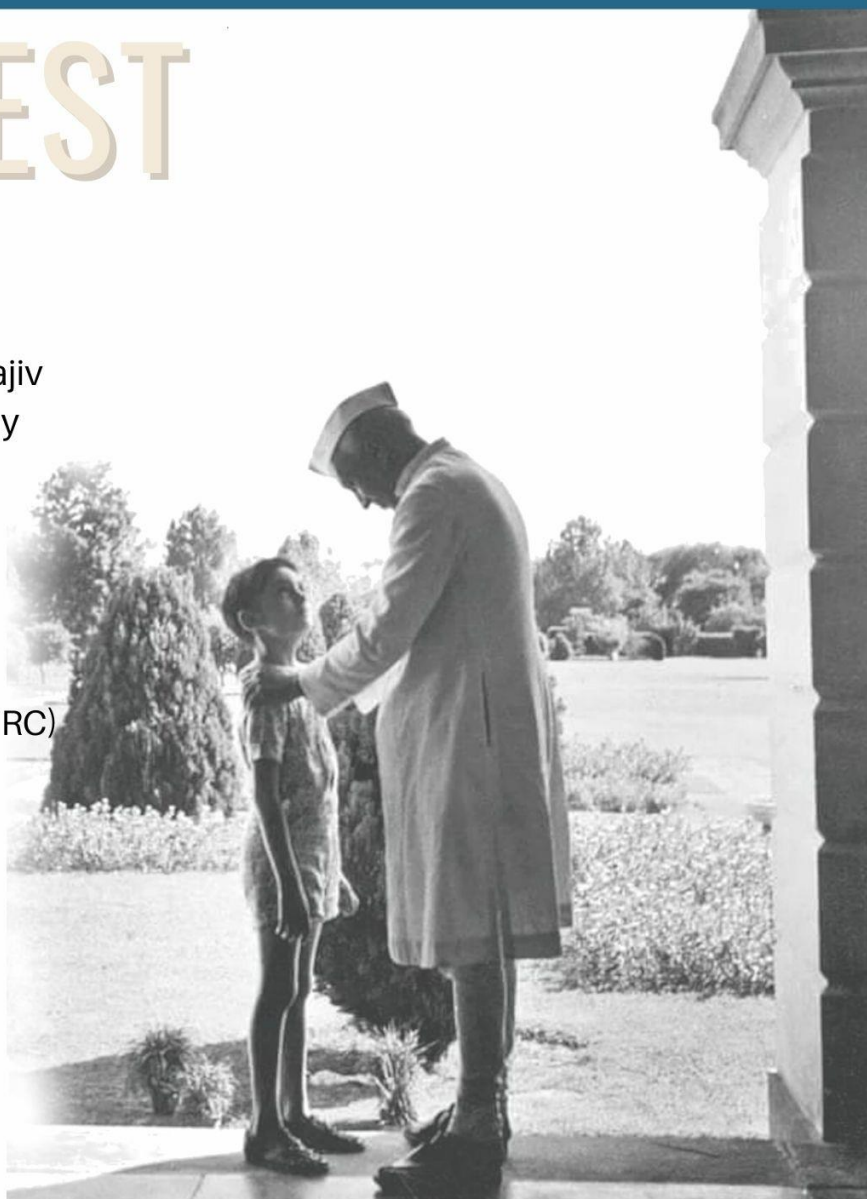
DIGEST

Remembering Rajiv
Gandhi - 21st May
2021

India National
Human Rights
Commission (NHRC)
Report

The Pyres in
Our Heart

How to Recover
from All This?



Sadbhavana Digest

Issue # 1, 21st May 2021

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Editorial

There come only a few moments in history, of the kind we face today. We are facing challenges far more fundamental than of policy and governance, of budgets and jobs, of incentives and regulations. We are being challenged to define what it means for us to share this planet, and its narrower human made parts and to create a society, polity, economy and ecology that works for all.

And "we" must remember that "all" are not just 7 billion human beings but an incredibly diverse and interdependent millions forms of living species, viruses and inanimate objects - mountains, rocks, water bodies, rivers, which are more live than the liveliest humans. The Homo sapiens need to stand up and answer for what they have done with the presumed evolutionary superiority of their 1.5 GB human genome, before it is obliterated by a mere 32KB strand of RNA, the n-Coronavirus-2019. Or by the fury of nature which is more and more frequently sending angry messages in the form of forest fires, floods, cyclones, earthquakes, and of course the pandemic.

So we have to dig into everything we learnt in ancient times about this question of harmonious living together, some of which we gave up along the way to settle for some local Pareto optimal, the greatest good of the greatest local number, accepting the prevailing pattern of control over resources. Why did we not heed Gandhi's Talisman, and commit to only that which will bring succour unto this last, or Antyodaya?

Why did we buy uncritically, the promise of every technology, looking away at the cost to society, the difficulty of regulating runaway tech powered by the animal spirits of capitalism and the impact of all this on the planet. How did we forget the wisdom of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" - all of creation is one family, instead captured and appropriated the planet for some not even all Homo Sapiens? Why did we let go the wisdom of the Native Americans in thinking through the consequences of a decision on seven generations? Why did we give up the balance of Yin and Yang for the baubles of state capitalism?

Finally in our own individual conduct, why did we forget the balanced pursuit of Purusharthas - Kaama, Artha, Dharma, Moksha, moving flexibly from one to the other, as we traversed our lifecycle? How did we forget the simple enormity of the Advait conclusion - Aham Brahmasmi? I am the Brahman, so we are all one!

Or similar tenets promoted by the Buddha in his Eightfold Path, or the path of universal love and compassion by the Abrahamic religions? Instead, as Eliot said, we let "unnatural vices be fathered by our heroism". Men becoming Supermen while perpetrating crimes against humanity in the name of idealism. Witness the parade from Hitler to Pol Pot, just in the last 100 years.

So from this issue on we start a wide format, multiple perspective, multi-media publication titled the **Sadbhavana Digest**. Each issue will carry articles on just three themes:

- Theme 1 - How can we relate to ourselves better, to our purpose for this Residence on Earth? ¹
- Theme 2 - How can we relate to other human beings better? And,
- Theme 3 - How can we humans relate to nature better?

The first issue has four sets of articles/poetry/music (in embedded weblinks), one set on each theme and finally returning to the first theme.

The first theme begins with a personal statement by the Editor. We then carry a brief tribute to late Shri Rajiv Gandhi, today being his death anniversary. The youngest Prime Minister of India. He was a great advocate for peace and reconciliation, and signed the following domestic peace accords during his tenure – the Punjab Accord, the Assam Accord and the Mizo Accord. Rajiv ji also organised a nationwide Sadbhavana Yatra in 1991 to stem the tide of communal and casteist forces. Internationally, he advocated peace and disarmament and was the visited China in 1988, after the hostilities in 1962. His efforts to bring peace in Sri Lanka, ironically, cost him his life as the implacable extremist groups did not want peace.

The second theme dwells this time on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which, though breached a thousand times, remains humanity's strongest statement and institutional mechanism on how we relate to ourselves? We include an audio file of recitation by the editor of Nobel Prize winning Irish poet Seamus Heaney's Republic of Conscience, which he wrote especially at the invitation of Amnesty International on the 25th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration. Then we look at the "real world" - the human rights situation in China and India using both international and national sources.

The third theme begins with the March 23, 2021 resolution of the UN Human Rights Council, dealing with Environment and Human Rights. It also carries an article by Jeet Singh, RGICS Fellow, which cites scholarly work of over 20 years stating the zoonotic diseases like COVID arise largely due to environmental degradation and habitat destruction of other species by humans.

We return to the first theme, to deal with the contemporary reality of the second wave of COVID, and its toll. We carry a number of poems and songs poetry about self and nature, using the river Ganga as a metaphor of life and death.

We hope you enjoy this new format **Sadbhavana Digest**.

¹ **Residence on Earth** (Spanish: *Residencia en la Tierra*) is book of poetry by Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. *Residence on Earth* came out in three volumes, in 1933, 1935, and 1947. Neruda wrote the book over a span of two decades, from 1925 until 1945. Here are life-affirming lines, mixed from two of Pablo Neruda's poems from the collection by the same name:

“Do you not hear the constant victory, in the human foottrace of time...

...Perhaps the Earth can teach us,

As when everything seems dead, And later proves to be alive. “

Theme 1: How can we relate to ourselves better, to our purpose for this Residence on Earth?

A Personal Statement by the Editor

I came back home a week ago after four weeks in hospital, where I was admitted due to COVID related severe lung infection on 16th April. I am recovering well by God's Grace and thanks to all the support and prayers of well-wishers and family members. I still need a low dose of external oxygen 24x7, which has been arranged at home.

Well, I have come out of all this to reaffirm that this universe we are born in is characterized by randomness, and the miracle and purpose of human life is to bring "order" to a part of the universe, however small. Order is anything that enhances human understanding – of both natural phenomena, and human behaviour, that reduces conflict and builds peace and spreads love and creates beauty and joy, in other words, Sadbhavana.

The second law of thermodynamics, however, teaches us that in creating x units of order in our little part of the universe, we always create y units of disorder or randomness elsewhere, and $y > x$. (Just as we create more heat from the exhaust of an AC outside the room, while we cool a room). So in the long run randomness increases. This is the Entropy law.

Then is it still worthwhile to create our little islands of Sadbhavana – where we create music, films or write poetry or plays, reinterpreting our maladies which only get worse; or engage in policy critique, drawing lessons that are ignored by the powerful; or set up a project to promote livelihoods for the poor, even as more become poor every day?

My answer is a resolute yes! For two reasons, one trivial and one lofty. The trivial reason is that if we don't work on creating Sadbhavana, we will still be up to some pretty mischief, so it's better to do the former.

The lofty reason is that life, and its building block, the DNA molecule is such an unlikely event to emerge out of the universe's randomness, that not to use its fullest potential seems like not listening to the Universe's urge. So we must create as much Sadbhavana as we can.

Sorry, got carried away. This is what happens when you have been lying on your back four weeks!

All good wishes

Vijay Mahajan

Remembering Rajiv Gandhi... 21st May 2021

"The Democratic Way of Nation Building requires Patience, Perseverance and a Spirit of Conciliation." "If it comes to die for what you believe in, I don't hesitate."



पंचायती राज और संचार क्रांति के जनक, आधुनिक सोच रखने वाले व युवा भारत की परिकल्पना करने वाले देश के पूर्व प्रधानमंत्री *भारत रत्न श्री राजीव गांधी जी* की

पुण्यतिथि पर उन्हें शत् शत् नमन...!! 🙏

Click on the link below to see a short video on the Sadbhavana Yatra by Rajiv ji.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDA8YHtP9d4>

Theme 2: How Can We Relate to Other Human Beings Better?

On this theme, there is perhaps no single document as comprehensive in range and as lofty in its idealism as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, much violated as it is in practice. So we begin by examining this 72 year old document.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

In summary the Declaration, adopted on 10th December, 1948, says:

All people everywhere have the same human rights which no one can take away. This is the basis of freedom, justice and peace in the world. This Declaration affirms the dignity and worth of all people, and the equal rights of women and men. The rights described here are the common standard for all people everywhere.

But in these times, we should read each and every article, of which there are 30.

Preamble

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law,

Whereas it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations,

Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms,

Whereas a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realization of this pledge, Now, therefore, The General Assembly,

Proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

Article 1

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 3

Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 4

No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6

Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Article 7

All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Article 8

Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

Article 9

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10

Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

Article 11

1. Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.
2. No one shall be held guilty of any penal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.

Article 12

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

Article 13

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.
2. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

Article 14

1. Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.
2. This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 15

1. Everyone has the right to a nationality.
2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

Article 16

1. Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.
2. Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.
3. The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

Article 17

1. Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.
2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

Article 18

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 19

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 20

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.
2. No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

Article 21

1. Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
2. Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.
3. The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

Article 22

Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

Article 23

1. Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
2. Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
3. Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.

4. Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

Article 24

Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

Article 25

1. Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.
2. Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

Article 26

1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
3. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Article 27

1. Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.
2. Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

Article 28

Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

Article 29

1. Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.

2. In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.
3. These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 30

Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.²

As we read each Article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we can marvel at the simplicity of what is being asserted and the travesty of how many of these self-evident human rights have been violated in almost every nation, developing and developed, independent or subjugated, democratic or autocratic.

To bring ourselves to real world, let us look at two reports, put out by Amnesty International on the human rights situation in China and in India (so we can self-reflect and not just finger point). Both the documents are a bit long for a “digest” so we only give excerpts and let the reader click on the link to read the full document.

Excerpts: Amnesty International Report on Human Rights in CHINA 2020³

The year was marked by harsh crackdowns on human rights defenders and people perceived to be dissidents, as well as the systematic repression of ethnic minorities. The beginning of the year saw the start of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, which killed more than 4,600 people in China. People demanded freedom of expression and transparency after authorities reprimanded health professionals for warning about the virus. At the UN, China was strongly criticized and urged to allow immediate, meaningful and unfettered access to Xinjiang.

Stringent restrictions on freedom of expression continued unabated. Foreign journalists faced detention and expulsion, as well as systematic delays to and refusals of visa renewals. Chinese and other tech firms operating outside China blocked what the government deemed politically sensitive content, extending its censorship standards internationally. China enacted its first Civil Code, which received thousands of submissions by the public calling for legalization of same-sex marriage. Hong Kong’s National Security Law led to a clampdown on freedom of expression.

² <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

³ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/asia-and-the-pacific/china/report-china/>

Human rights defenders

Despite constitutional provisions and its international commitments and obligations, China continued its unrelenting persecution of human rights defenders (HRDs) and activists. Throughout the year, they were systematically subjected to harassment, intimidation, enforced disappearance and arbitrary and incommunicado detention, as well as lengthy terms of imprisonment. The absence of an independent judiciary and effective fair trial guarantees compounded such recurrent violations. Many human rights lawyers were denied their right to freedom of movement, as well as to meet and represent defendants and have access to case materials. HRDs and activists were targeted and charged with broadly defined and vaguely worded offences such as “subverting state power”, “inciting subversion of state power” and “picking quarrels and provoking trouble”.

Five years after the unprecedented crackdown targeting human rights activists and lawyers known as the “709 crackdown”, many lawyers remained in prison or under strict surveillance. On 17 June, human rights lawyer Yu Wensheng was tried in secret and sentenced to four years’ imprisonment for allegedly “inciting subversion of state power” after being held incommunicado for 18 months. Yu was tortured in detention and his health deteriorated drastically, according to his lawyer.

Autonomous regions: Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia

Severe and wide-ranging repression of ethnic minorities continued unabated under the pretence of “anti-separatism”, “anti-extremism” and “counter-terrorism” in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang) and the Tibet Autonomous Region (Tibet). Access to and from Tibet remained highly restricted, particularly for journalists, academics and human rights organizations, making it extremely difficult to investigate and document the human rights situation in the region. In Xinjiang, since 2017 an estimated one million or more Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other predominantly Muslim peoples were arbitrarily detained without trial and subjected to political indoctrination and forced cultural assimilation in “transformation-through-education” centres.

In Inner Mongolia, there were region-wide protests over a new “bilingual education” policy that would gradually change the teaching medium of several classes from Mongolian to Mandarin Chinese throughout the nine years of compulsory schooling. According to media reports, hundreds of people, including students, parents, teachers, pregnant women and children, were arrested for “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” solely because they participated in peaceful protests or shared information about protests on the internet. Human rights lawyer Hu Baolong was reportedly formally arrested on charges of “leaking state secrets overseas”.

Right to health

Government censorship obstructed the flow of vital information during the earliest weeks of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan. In the early stage of the epidemic, professional and citizen journalists, as well as health workers, were prevented from reporting on the outbreak... By 21 February, there were already more than 5,511 criminal investigation cases

against individuals who published information in relation to the COVID-19 outbreak for “fabricating and deliberately disseminating false and harmful information”, according to the Ministry of Public Security...

Freedom of expression

Internet censorship continued, driven partly by efforts to suppress information about COVID-19 and extreme lockdown measures. Medical professionals and activists were harassed by authorities for “making false comments” and “severely disturbing the social order” in Wuhan, the epicentre of the pandemic. Doctor Li Wenliang, one of eight individuals who tried to sound the alarm before the outbreak had been announced, was reprimanded by local police four days after he sent a warning message in a chat group asking fellow doctors to wear personal protective equipment to avoid infection. His subsequent death from COVID-19 unleashed nationwide outrage and grief on the internet, with demands for freedom of expression and an end to censorship. The authorities blocked hundreds of keyword combinations on social media and messaging apps. Online posts of dissent, sensitive hashtags related to the outbreak and demands for free speech were quickly deleted. Leaked notices indicated that authorities ordered people accused of “spreading rumours” to delete their social media accounts and posts...

In April, authorities placed new stringent restrictions on academic papers about tracing the origins of COVID-19, requiring them to be submitted to a task force appointed by the State Council for approval. On 13 July, law professor Xu Zhangrun, who published criticism of the government’s response to the COVID-19 outbreak, was released after six days’ detention. Xu was reportedly fired from his job at Tsinghua University one day after his release. On 19 August, Peking University announced a new set of rules for attending online webinars and conferences organized by foreign entities, as well as those in Hong Kong and Macau. The notice demanded that participants apply for and seek approval 15 days before an event.

China’s censorship and surveillance extended beyond its borders during the year.. On 12 June, teleconferencing company Zoom revealed that it had suspended the accounts of human rights activists outside China at the request of the Chinese government and suggested it would block any further meetings that the government considered “illegal”....

Freedom of religion and belief

Regulations, effective as of 1 February, stipulated that religious groups must “follow the leadership of the Communist Party of China... persist in the direction of sinicization of religion, and practise core socialist values”. The government sought to bring religious teachings and practices in line with state ideology and to comprehensively strengthen control over both state-approved and unregistered religious groups. Reports documented the destruction of thousands of cultural and religious sites, particularly in the north-west of China. The state’s repression of religion in Xinjiang and Tibet remained severe. People were arbitrarily detained for ordinary religious practices that authorities deemed “signs of extremism” under the “De-extremification Regulations”.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people

On 13 August, Shanghai Pride, China's largest and longest-running LGBTI festival, announced the cancellation of all future activities amid shrinking space for the LGBTI community. Activists faced harassment for speaking out against discrimination and homophobia. Online platforms, including microblogs and magazines, blocked and removed LGBTI-related content and hashtags. Despite various challenges and mounting pressure, members of LGBTI communities continued to fight for their rights. A university student reportedly filed an official complaint about references to gay and lesbian people as suffering from a "common psychosexual disorder" in a government-approved textbook. The court rejected the lawsuit.

Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

China's top legislature adopted the broadly-worded Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (the National Security Law). The local government escalated its crackdown on pro-democracy activists and opposition leaders and used national security as a pretext to interfere in the media and education sectors. The right to freedom of peaceful assembly was further curtailed by seemingly arbitrary enforcement of physical distancing regulations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Freedoms of assembly and association

Repression of the right to peaceful assembly persisted following the protests in 2019.^{[10](#)} Just three hours into a protest on New Year's Day, police declared an approved demonstration "unlawful" and gave the organizers and tens of thousands of largely peaceful protesters 30 minutes to disperse. The police then started firing tear gas and water cannons at protesters and arrested 287 people, including three human rights monitors. On 18 April, the authorities arrested 15 prominent pro-democracy leaders and activists for violating the Public Order Ordinance, a law frequently used to prohibit and end largely peaceful protests. They were accused of organizing and joining "unauthorized assemblies" that took place more than six months before their arrests.

Freedom of expression

National security was used as a pretext to restrict freedom of expression. Virtually anything could be deemed a threat to "national security" under the extremely vague provisions of the National Security Law adopted on 30 June without any meaningful consultation and coming into effect the next day. Giving the authorities new grounds to prosecute peaceful activities, the law created a chilling effect on free expression.^{[11](#)} By the year's end, the authorities had arrested 34 individuals for displaying political slogans, establishing overseas organizations to call for Hong Kong independence or supporting various political groups. The authorities also invoked the law's extraterritorial provision and issued arrest warrants against eight activists residing outside Hong Kong...

Chinese Official Version of Human Rights

In a speech to the U.N. Human Rights Council, China's foreign minister gave China's preferred spin to the concept.⁴

By Shannon Tiezzi, February 23, 2021

On February 22, 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi gave a speech at the 46th session of the United Nations' Human Rights Council. It was the first time a Chinese government official had addressed the U.N.'s top human rights body – and the speech contained important clues about Beijing's attempt to remake the very concept of human rights to better suit the Chinese Communist Party.

The CCP has been accused of large-scale human rights abuses since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. From the targeting of businesspeople and intellectuals in the early days of the PRC to the crackdown in Tibet in 1959 to the bloodshed of the Cultural Revolution, political persecution has been a hallmark of the CCP regime – with the 1989 military crackdown on protesters in Tiananmen Square as perhaps the most famous example. Today, the biggest blot on Beijing's human rights record is the ongoing campaign against Turkic Muslim groups, notably the native Uyghurs, in China's Xinjiang region. That particular outrage, which includes mass detentions, forced labor, and constant surveillance, caused the United States to accuse China of outright genocide.

Wang's speech on February 22 devoted a solid chunk to defending China's policies toward Xinjiang and Hong Kong, where a new national security law took effect last year. But more broadly, his remarks sought to shift the definition of "human rights" to one more suited to the CCP's strength, by focusing first and foremost on economic development and security.

Wang's proposition of "people-centered" human rights posits "people's sense of gains, happiness and security" as "the fundamental pursuit of human rights." In this formulation, economic prosperity tops the list, the nebulous concept of "happiness" replaces more concrete markers like racial and gender equality or freedom of religion, and security its elevated to a human rights priority.

Wang's full enumeration of human rights includes the concepts of "Peace, development, equity, justice, democracy and freedom." The order here – with peace and (economic) development at the top, and democracy and freedom at the bottom – is particularly notable. In this context, Wang held up China's claim to have eradicated extreme poverty in 2020 as "a milestone in our human rights achievement."

As Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said at a press conference on the same day as Wang Yi's speech, "China pursues a people-centered vision, regards the rights to subsistence and development as the primary, basic human rights, and works hard to promote the comprehensive and coordinated development of economic, social, cultural rights as well as civil political rights." China's emphasis on "economic" rights as taking precedence over "political rights" is why Beijing consistently brings up economic growth

⁴ <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/can-china-change-the-definition-of-human-rights/>

statistics to defend its human rights record. When Wang Wenbin argued that “Over the past 60-plus years, Xinjiang’s aggregate economy grew over 200 times, per capita GDP nearly 40 times, and people’s life expectancy from 30 to 72 years,” the implication is that this economic growth justifies whatever means Beijing used to get there.

As for the human right to “security,” another common refrain from Beijing – repeated by Wang Yi on Monday – is that its actions in Xinjiang are a justified response to terrorist activity. Chinese authorities counter accusations of rights violations by pointing out that there have been no terrorist attacks in Xinjiang since 2017, and that providing this human right to security is worth whatever cost it may carry in the Western sense of human rights – for example, freedom of speech, religion, and association.

By promoting a redefinition of human rights to include economic and physical security, China is essentially hoping to shift the goalposts so it can better compete with the liberal democracies (and particularly the United States) for the moral high ground of human rights protection. As Wang Yi put it in his speech, “Human rights are not a monopoly by a small number of countries, still less should they be used as a tool to pressure other countries and meddle in their internal affairs.” Wang Wenbin was more blunt: China wants the UNHRC to “reject interference in other countries’ internal affairs and double standards under the pretext of human rights.”

While human rights advocates in the United States and Europe may be aghast at the shifting definition of human rights, Beijing’s formulation is attractive to a large number of countries – particularly other authoritarian-inclined governments. After all, China’s repeated re-election to the Human Rights Council, according to Wang Wenbin, “testifies to the international community’s recognition of China’s human rights cause.”

All this raises the question of how the Human Rights Council will function in coming years. Will it increasingly adopt China’s new definition of human rights, which quietly sidelines civil and political rights in favor of development-focused emphasis? As the coup in Myanmar – and the lack of global action thus far – proves, this question has serious stakes that extend far beyond China.

Excerpts: Amnesty International Report on Human Rights in INDIA 2020⁵

Freedom of expression was guaranteed selectively, and dissent was repressed through unlawful restrictions on peaceful protests and by silencing critics. Human rights defenders, including students, academics, journalists and artists, were arbitrarily arrested, often without charge or trial. Despite a Supreme Court ruling to reduce prison overcrowding to curb the spread of COVID-19, the authorities continued to incarcerate many who were critical of the government. The authorities failed to adequately investigate or punish perpetrators of violence based on caste, sex and gender, and carried out reprisals against those who reported rape and caste-based crimes. There was widespread impunity and lack

⁵ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/asia-and-the-pacific/india/report-india/>

of accountability for murders and attacks carried out by vigilante mobs and police officers against religious minorities. Swift and extreme restrictions were placed on freedom of movement in response to the pandemic, leaving thousands of migrant workers stranded without adequate food and protection. Some restrictions to curb the pandemic also threatened the right to privacy.

Background

In December 2019, the government passed the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) enabling irregular migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan to obtain Indian citizenship, excluding Muslims. The discriminatory nature of the CAA sparked peaceful protests across the country, which were met with arbitrary arrests and detention and widespread demonization of those protesting. The government's strategy to curb COVID-19 included a punitive lockdown at very short notice, lack of transparency in disbursing relief funds, threats to privacy, and demonization of religious minorities.

Arbitrary arrests and detentions

Seven human rights activists – Father Stan Swamy, Jyoti Raghoba Jagtap, Sagar Tatyaram Gorkhe, Ramesh Murlidhar Gaichor, Hany Babu, Gautam Navlakha and Anand Teltumbde, were arrested by the National Investigation Agency (NIA), India's main counter-terrorism agency, for their alleged involvement in violence during the Bhima Koregaon celebrations near the city of Pune in 2018. Those arrested worked with marginalized groups, including Adivasi (Indigenous) communities, and had criticized government policies. The government accused them of breaching the Penal Code by “waging war against the country” and having links with the banned Communist Party of India (Maoist)...

At least nine students peacefully protesting against the CAA were arrested and jailed under counter-terrorism and sedition laws. Many other anti-CAA protesters were subjected to intense intimidation and harassment from the police. Meanwhile, the authorities ignored violence and hate speech by the supporters of the CAA against those protesting draconian counter-terrorism laws, including the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and National Security Act. Safoora Zargar, a research scholar who was three months' pregnant at the time, and Umar Khalid, a former student union leader, were among those arrested. Safoora Zargar was later released on bail.

On 26 June, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights called on India to immediately release human rights defenders who had been arrested for protesting against the CAA. However, the majority remained in detention at the end of the year...

Freedoms of expression and assembly

New restrictions were imposed on freedoms of expression and assembly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. On 24 March, Prime Minister Modi imposed a nationwide lockdown, comprising mandatory 'stay-at-home' quarantine under the Disaster Management Act, a draconian law which gives the government sweeping powers in disaster situations. Breaches of the lockdown resulted in arrests and detentions. Even before the pandemic, freedom of

assembly was restricted, including by burdening civilians with recovering the cost of damages to public property after peaceful protests turned violent.

A year after the government revoked the special status of Jammu and Kashmir and split the state into two union territories, the clampdown on civil liberties and restrictions on communications services continued. Political leaders such as Farooq Abdullah, Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti, who were administratively detained in 2019, were released in 2020. However, the union government continued to silence those who demanded accountability and imposed a harsh media blackout...

During the nationwide lockdown imposed after the COVID-19 outbreak, more than 50 journalists were arrested or charged under emergency laws for spreading “misinformation” or “fake news”. On 7 April, Uttar Pradesh police lodged a First Information Report (FIR) against journalist Prashant Kanojia for allegedly making “objectionable remarks” about Prime Minister Modi and Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on social media. Shortly afterwards, the Uttar Pradesh police registered another FIR against The Wire, a daily news website, and its editor Siddharth Varadarajan for reporting that Yogi Adityanath had attended a public religious event after the nationwide lockdown was announced.

On 28 September the government amended the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA), banning large NGOs from passing to grassroots NGOs funds received from foreign donors. The new amendments also required all FCRA-registered non-profit organizations to limit their administrative expenses to 20% of donations (from the earlier 50%). This amendment was likely to force NGOs to reduce staff, potentially reducing human rights work.

On 30 September, Amnesty International India was forced to halt its operations after the government froze its bank accounts without notice. The organization was forced to lay off all its staff and pause all its campaign and research work. This occurred shortly after Amnesty International India had published briefings demanding accountability for grave human rights violations carried out by the Delhi police and the government during the Delhi riots and in the Jammu and Kashmir region...

Unfair trials

The courts, particularly the Supreme Court, failed to monitor the government’s response to the COVID-19 crisis in a timely manner. On 13 March, even before the national lockdown was imposed, the Supreme Court declared that the courts – for public health reasons – would function at reduced capacity. Between 23 March and 4 July, the Supreme Court only took up cases of “extreme urgency”, barring physical hearings and relying on video conferencing facilities...

Unlawful attacks and killings

In February, communal violence broke out in the capital, New Delhi. According to government data, 53 people – mostly Muslims – died in the riots, and more than 500 were injured. In the build-up to the Legislative Assembly elections in Delhi, held on 8 February, several political leaders made hate speeches against the anti-CAA protesters. On 27 January,

referring to the protesters at Shaheen Bagh, the Delhi epicentre of peaceful sits-ins against the CAA, the Union Minister of State for Finance, Anurag Thakur, encouraged the crowd to chant “shoot the traitors of the nation”. On 28 January, Parvesh Verma, Member of Parliament for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) claimed that the protesters from Shaheen Bagh would enter citizens’ homes and “rape your sisters and daughters and kill them”. In another speech on the same day, he promised to “not leave even one of [the mosques] standing” after the BJP’s election win in Delhi.

These speeches were followed by violence on university campuses against those protesting against the CAA. Hate speeches by political leaders continued after the Delhi elections, followed by widespread violence in the North East district of Delhi. On 23 February, BJP leader Kapil Mishra called on Twitter for people to rally against a women-led protest in Jaffrabad in North East district of Delhi, urging people to “prevent another Shaheen Bagh”. At the rally, he warned the police of dire consequences if the protesters did not vacate the site. Communal violence erupted shortly after his speech.

Excessive use of force

The police used unlawful force and committed various other human rights violations, abusing laws to intimidate people and silence dissent on behalf of the union government. During the February communal violence in Delhi, members of the Delhi police pelted stones alongside rioters, tortured people in custody, dismantled sites of peaceful protest and stood by as rioters attacked peaceful protesters and destroyed public and private property. No independent investigation was launched into these acts.

On 19 June, low-income workers P. Jayaraj and his son J. Bennicks were picked up for questioning by the Thoothukudi police in Tamil Nadu for keeping their small shop open during lockdown. The two men were allegedly tortured to death in police custody.

Impunity

The police continued to carry out unlawful killings – some amounting to extrajudicial executions – with impunity. In July in Kashmir, three young labourers in an apple orchard were unlawfully killed by members of the Indian army. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, which governs the use of force by security personnel in Kashmir, grants virtual immunity to members of the security forces from prosecution for alleged human rights violations. Uttar Pradesh police had earlier claimed in a tweet that since 2017 it had killed 103 “criminals” and injured 1,859 others in 5,178 “police engagements” – a common euphemism used by state actors for alleged extrajudicial executions.

Hate crimes including violence against Dalits, Adivasi (Indigenous) communities and religious minorities were also committed with impunity. In September, a Dalit woman was allegedly raped and murdered by a group of dominant-caste men in Hathras district in Uttar Pradesh, and cremated by the Uttar Pradesh police without her family's consent. The accused men were arrested only after nationwide protests. Later, several FIRs were registered by the Uttar Pradesh police against protesters for criminal conspiracy and sedition.

Right to health and livelihood

The handling of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed weaknesses in the public health care system. It also resulted in unsafe and poor working conditions for those who lack adequate social and economic protection, such as community health care workers and religious minorities.

The government accused members of the Muslim Tablighi Jamaat minority of spreading COVID-19, and as a result, health care facilities denied access to Muslims. Instances of hospitals refusing Muslim pregnant women and cancer patients surfaced in April 2020. In the months following the nationwide lockdown of March, social media and WhatsApp groups were flooded with calls for social and economic boycotts of Muslims, alongside fake news stories and other misinformation...

The Supreme Court delayed a hearing in a public interest case urgently seeking transport, food and shelter for migrant workers who were left stranded for over a month by the sudden imposition of the lockdown. On 7 April, as many migrant workers were walking to their distant homes in the absence of government-sponsored or public transport, India's Chief Justice, S.A. Bobde, stated while hearing the petition that the Supreme Court "did not want to interfere with the government decisions for the next 10-15 days". At least 200 migrant workers were killed in road accidents while walking long distances home in other districts or states during the lockdown. In May, after intense public pressure, the government began running special trains for stranded migrant workers. However, many died from a lack of food and water on these trains, including a four-year-old child who died of hunger...

India National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) Report⁶

The NHRC issued 12 advisories on various Human Rights issues to union ministries, states and UTs for implementation and compliance which are being received now. The advisories are as under: 1. Rights of Women 2. Rights of LGBTQI+ 3. Rights of Mental Health 4. Business and Human Rights and Future Responses. 5. Human Rights of the Prisoners and Police Personnel and Future Responses. 6. Informal Workers and Future Responses. 7. Rights of Elderly Persons 8. Combating Human Trafficking 4 9. Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on human rights and future response 10. Food 11. Disability 12. Children.

The NHRC, India filed an application for intervention and directions along with suo motu writ petition No.6 of 2020 in the Supreme Court of India on the challenges and miseries of migrant labourers, who had been stranded in different parts of the country after the nationwide lockdown. The Apex Court admitted the NHRC intervention. Some Important enquiries conducted:

⁶ <https://nhrc.nic.in/document/2020-21-year-end-review>

1. Violation of Students' Human Rights in Jamia Milia Islamia, University, Delhi During the anti – CAA protests in Dec 2019, in JMI University, a team of Investigation Division carried out a spot visit on the complaint of alleged human rights violations. After a thorough enquiry the Investigating team found the incident to be of law and order issue that involved violence, unlawful gathering of mobs, anarchy etc & submitted a report in August 2020.

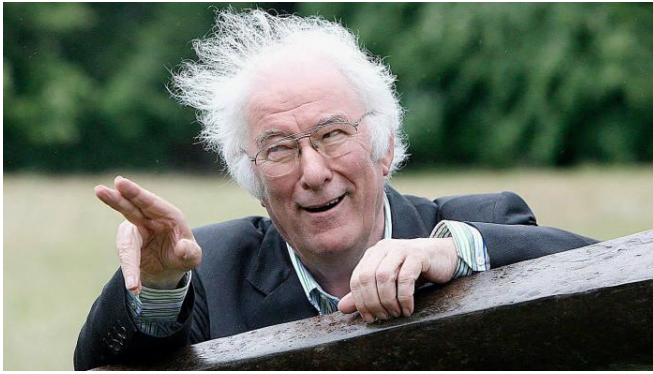
2. Clash between Police and Students of Aligarh Muslim University, UP During the anti-CAA protest violations reported in the campus of AMU, Aligarh, U.P. in Dec. 2019, the Hon'ble High Court of Allahabad, in a writ petition, entrusted the enquiry to NHRC regarding the allegations of human rights violations during the incident. The team submitted its report in April 2020. The Investigating Team found that no student was under illegal detention and that the action of the police in controlling the situation was justified. The enquiry report was submitted to the Hon'ble High Court of Allahabad which was accepted, in toto.

3. Enquiry into case of Delhi riots in Feb, 2020 A suo-motu cognizance was taken by the Commission on the incident of wide spread riots in North-East district of Delhi and a spot enquiry was ordered immediately to ascertain whether the role of police was fair and impartial and judicious in dealing with the situation irrespective of the religion of the people of that area. After conducting the spot enquiry by the Investigation Division submitted its report in April 2020. The Commission recommended compensation and rehabilitation of victims of the riots (both dead and injured), directions to Commissioner of Delhi Police to carry out the investigation of the criminal cases expeditiously on merits, advised Police to carry out the special drive to trace and seize illegal weapons proliferating in the north east part of Delhi. The other recommendations included strengthening of the intelligence gathering and professional handling of the law and order situation by Delhi Police & Para Military Forces.

From the Republic of Conscience – Poem by Seamus Heaney

This poem was written by the Nobel Prize winning Irish poet Seamus Heaney, (1939-2013), an Irish poet, playwright and translator. His work often deals with the local surroundings of Ireland, particularly in Northern Ireland, where he was born and lived until young adulthood. He received the 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature. The poem was written at the specific request of the head of Amnesty International Ireland, Mary Lawlor, to mark International Human Rights Day in 1985. In 1985 when Mary Lawlor, approached Seamus J Heaney and requested him to write a piece, she handed him a dossier filled with stories of the prisoners both, men and women, who had suffered torture, imprisonment and silence. Amnesty International's highest award – the Ambassador of Conscience– is inspired by this work. In his introduction, Heaney said about his poem:

“I took it that Conscience would be a republic, a silent, solitary place where a person would find it hard to avoid self-awareness and self-examination; and this made me think of Orkney. I remembered the silence the first time I landed there. When I got off the small propeller plane and started walking across the grass to a little arrivals hut, I heard the cry of a curlew. And as soon as that image came to me, I was up and away, able to proceed with a fiction that felt workable yet unconstrained, a made-up thing that might be hung in the scale as a counterweight to the given actuality of the world.”



When I landed in the republic of conscience
it was so noiseless when the engines stopped
I could hear a curlew high above the runway.

At immigration, the clerk was an old man
who produced a wallet from his homespun coat
and showed me a photograph of my grandfather.

The woman in customs asked me to declare
the words of our traditional cures and charms
to heal dumbness and avert the evil eye.

No porters. No interpreter. No taxi.
You carried your own burden and very soon
your symptoms of creeping privilege disappeared.

II

Fog is a dreaded omen there but lightning
spells universal good and parents hang
swaddled infants in trees during thunderstorms.

Salt is their precious mineral. And seashells
are held to the ear during births and funerals.
The base of all inks and pigments is seawater.

Their sacred symbol is a stylized boat.
The sail is an ear, the mast a sloping pen,
the hull a mouth-shape, the keel an open eye.

At their inauguration, public leaders
must swear to uphold unwritten law and weep
to atone for their presumption to hold office –

and to affirm their faith that all life sprang
from salt in tears which the sky-god wept
after he dreamt his solitude was endless.

III

I came back from that frugal republic
with my two arms the one length, the customs
woman having insisted my allowance was myself.

The old man rose and gazed into my face
and said that was official recognition
that I was now a dual citizen.

He therefore desired me when I got home
to consider myself a representative
and to speak on their behalf in my own tongue.

Their embassies, he said, were everywhere
but operated independently
and no ambassador would ever be relieved.

Here is a link to poem “From the Republic of Conscience” being recited by the Editor

<https://rgfindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/From-the-Republic-of-Conscience.mpeg>

Theme 3 - How Can We Humans Relate to Nature Better?

And finally, the two themes, 2 and 3 unite, in Geneva at the UN Human Rights Council, which adopted the following resolution. [Readers impatient with UN-ese may skip to the very end where the action items have been highlighted in **bold** by us]

UN HRC Resolution 46/7... Human rights and the environment⁷

Human Rights Council Forty-sixth session 22 February–23 March 2021

The Human Rights Council, Guided by the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, Reaffirming the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, and recalling relevant international human rights treaties and other relevant regional human rights instruments,

Reaffirming also all its resolutions on human rights and the environment, the most recent of which are resolutions 37/8 of 22 March 2018, on human rights and the environment, and 45/30 of 7 October 2020, on realizing the rights of the child through a healthy environment, and relevant resolutions of the General Assembly and the Commission on Human Rights,

Reaffirming further General Assembly resolution 70/1 of 25 September 2015, entitled “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, in which the Assembly adopted a comprehensive, far-reaching and people-centred set of universal and transformative Sustainable Development Goals and targets,

Recalling the outcome of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 2012, and its outcome document entitled “The future we want”,¹ which reaffirmed the principles of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development,

Reaffirming that all human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated,
* State not a member of the Human Rights Council. 1 General Assembly resolution 66/288, annex. United Nations A/HRC/46/L.6/Rev.1 General Assembly Distr.: Limited 17 March 2021 Original: English A/HRC/46/L.6/Rev.1 2 Recalling the outcome of the first part of the fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly, held online in February 2021, and looking forward to the second part of the fifth session, to be resumed in Nairobi in February 2022,

Recalling also the Paris Agreement, adopted on 12 December 2015 by the parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, in which they acknowledged in the preamble that they should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations with regard to human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, the empowerment of women and intergenerational equity,

⁷ <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/LTD/G21/065/30/pdf/G2106530.pdf?OpenElement>

Noting the Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights, which calls for, inter alia, creating space for young people to participate in shaping the decisions that will affect their future, including but not limited to environmental protection, protecting human rights defenders and environmental activists, particularly young people, women and girls, and raising awareness and enhancing education that prepares young people for the future they face, including climate change-related curricula at all levels of primary and secondary education,

Taking note of the outcomes of the twenty-fifth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and encouraging States to consider, among other aspects, respect for and the promotion of human rights at the twenty-sixth session, to be held in Glasgow, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, from 1 to 12 November 2021,

Taking note also of the outcomes of the fourteenth session of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, and encouraging the Parties to take into consideration a human rights-based approach in the context of conserving, restoring and sustainably using biodiversity in the post-2020 global biodiversity framework expected to be adopted at the fifteenth session, to be held in Kunming, China,

Recognizing that degradation and loss of biodiversity often result from and reinforce existing patterns of discrimination, and that environmental harm can have disastrous and at times geographically dispersed consequences for the quality of life of indigenous peoples, local communities, peasants and others who rely directly on the products of forests, rivers, lakes, wetlands and oceans for their food, fuel and medicine, resulting in further inequality and marginalization,

Recognizing also that sustainable development and the protection of the environment, including ecosystems, contribute to human well-being and to the enjoyment of human rights, including the rights to life, to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, to an adequate standard of living, to adequate food, to safe drinking water and sanitation and to housing, and cultural rights,

Recognizing further that, conversely, the impact of climate change, the unsustainable management and use of natural resources, the pollution of air, land and water, the unsound management of chemicals and waste, the resulting loss of biodiversity and the decline in services provided by ecosystems may interfere with the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, and that environmental damage can have negative implications, both direct and indirect, for the effective enjoyment of all human rights,

Recognizing that, while the human rights implications of environmental damage are felt by individuals and communities around the world, the consequences are felt most acutely by those segments of the population that are already in vulnerable situations, as well as women and girls,

Recalling the importance of women's and indigenous peoples' rights to have access to and to use land to increase opportunities for climate change adaption and mitigation, as

recognized by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in its Special Report on Climate Change and Land,

Recognizing the benefits of seeking to mitigate and minimize the negative effects of pollution and other forms of environmental degradation in situations of armed conflict and A/HRC/46/L.6/Rev.1 3 post-conflict contexts, and expressing its deep concern at the threats posed to the effective enjoyment of human rights by persons in vulnerable situations, including children, women and girls, youth, persons with disabilities, older persons, indigenous peoples, local communities, refugees, internally displaced persons and migrants,

Recognizing also that the exercise of human rights, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information, to participate effectively in the conduct of government and public affairs and the right to an effective remedy, is vital to the protection of a clean, healthy, safe and sustainable environment,

Reaffirming Human Rights Council resolution 40/11 of 21 March 2019, in which the Council recognized the contribution of human rights defenders working in environmental matters, referred to as environmental human rights defenders, to the enjoyment of human rights, environmental protection and sustainable development, urges all States to take all measures necessary to ensure the protection of the rights and safety of all persons, including environmental human rights defenders, and underscores the responsibility of all business enterprises, both transnational and others, in accordance with the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, to respect human rights, including the rights to life, liberty and security of human rights defenders, including environmental human rights defenders,

Noting the World Health Organization “Manifesto for a healthy recovery from COVID-19”, which aims at creating a healthier, fairer and more sustainable world while investing to maintain and resuscitate economies hit by the effects of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic,

Recognizing the positive, important and legitimate role played by children and by child- and youth-led movements that defend human rights relating to a healthy environment, and welcoming the work of the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment in engaging and consulting with children,

Recognizing also the importance of gender equality, gender-responsive action to address climate change and environmental degradation, the empowerment, leadership, decision-making and meaningful participation of women and girls, and the role women play as managers, leaders and defenders of natural resources and agents of change in safeguarding the environment,

Recognizing further the particular vulnerability of children to the effects of environmental harm, including to air pollution, water pollution, climate change, exposure to chemicals, toxic substances and waste, and loss of biodiversity, and that environmental harm may interfere with the full enjoyment of a vast range of the rights of the child,

Mindful that the growing risk of emerging infectious diseases of zoonotic origin may be caused by human actions that damage ecosystems and biodiversity, stressing that biodiversity is important for the enjoyment of a wide range of human rights, and expressing concern that the loss of biodiversity caused by human activities can be threatening to the enjoyment of those rights and have a major impact on health and livelihoods,

Reaffirming that States have the obligation to respect, protect and promote human rights, including in all actions undertaken to address environmental challenges, and to take measures to protect the rights of all, as recognized in different international instruments and reflected in the framework principles on human rights and the environment, and that additional measures for those who are particularly vulnerable to environmental harm should be taken,

Noting that more than 155 States have recognized some form of a right to a healthy environment in, inter alia, international agreements or their national constitutions, legislation or policies,

1. Welcomes the work undertaken by the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, including in the implementation of his mandate, the comprehensive, transparent A/HRC/37/59, annex. A/HRC/46/L.6/Rev.1 4 and inclusive consultations conducted with relevant stakeholders, his thematic reports, and the undertaking of country visits;
2. Takes note with appreciation of the reports of the Special Rapporteur on human rights and the global water crisis: water pollution, water scarcity and water-related disasters³ and on the theme “Human rights depend on a healthy biosphere”, and also takes note of the recommendations therein;
3. Welcomes the work of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the issue of human rights and the environment, including its support for the United Nations Environment Management Group and the Secretary-General’s Call to Action for Human Rights, its collaboration with United Nations Environment Programme and other key partners, its engagement with multilateral environmental agreements, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and the Convention on Biological Diversity, to advance respect for and the protection and promotion of human rights when taking environmental action, when appropriate, and its efforts to promote an equitable and sustainable response to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic;
4. Notes with appreciation the work of the United Nations Environment Programme, the Office of the High Commissioner and the United Nations Development Programme in the implementation of the strategic interventions developed under the Secretary-General’s Call to Action for Human Rights, in particular area 5;
5. Decides to renew the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment for a period of three years;

6. Requests the Special Rapporteur, in fulfilling the mandate:

(a) To continue to study the human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, in consultation with Governments, relevant international organizations and intergovernmental bodies, including the World Health Organization, the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Development Programme, and relevant multilateral environment agreements, human rights mechanisms, local authorities, national human rights institutions, indigenous peoples and civil society organizations, including those representing local communities and other persons in vulnerable situations, women, children and youth, the private sector and academic institutions;

(b) To continue to identify, promote and exchange views on good practices relating to human rights obligations and commitments that inform, support and strengthen environmental policymaking, especially in the area of environmental protection, and in that regard to disseminate and consider updating documents elaborated by the previous mandate holder, as appropriate;

(c) To work on identifying challenges and obstacles to the full realization of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment and protection gaps thereto, including in the context of sustainable development and the Sustainable Development Goals;

(d) To continue to contribute to and participate in, where appropriate, intergovernmental conferences and meetings relevant to the mandate, including at the United Nations Environment Assembly and events relating to the fiftieth anniversary of the Stockholm Declaration adopted at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment;

(e) To develop a dialogue, liaise and collaborate with all relevant stakeholders with a view to enhancing public awareness of the human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment; 3 A/HRC/46/28. 4 A/75/161.

A/HRC/46/L.6/Rev.1 5

(f) To conduct country visits and to respond promptly to invitations from States;

(g) To apply a gender perspective by, inter alia, considering the particular situation of women and girls and identifying gender-specific discrimination and vulnerabilities when addressing climate change and environmental degradation, strengthening and promoting women's and girls' leadership, decision-making and their full, equal and meaningful participation, and addressing good practices where women and girls act as agents of change in safeguarding and managing sustainably the environment;

(h) To work in close coordination, while avoiding unnecessary duplication, with other special procedures and subsidiary organs of the Human Rights Council, relevant United Nations bodies, agencies, funds and programmes, including the World Health Organization, the United Nations Environment Programme, and the United Nations Development Programme, the treaty bodies and international and regional organizations, and multilateral environmental agreements⁵, taking into account the views of other stakeholders, including

relevant regional human rights mechanisms, national human rights institutions, civil society organizations and academic institutions;

(i) To submit an annual report, including conclusions and recommendations, to the Human Rights Council and to the General Assembly;

7. Calls upon all States, United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, other international organizations and non-governmental organizations, the private sector and national human rights institutions to cooperate fully with the Special Rapporteur, including by providing all necessary information related to the mandate to enable him or her to fulfil the mandate; .

8. Requests the High Commissioner to ensure that the Special Rapporteur receives the resources necessary to enable him or her to discharge the mandate fully;

9. Requests the Special Rapporteur, in collaboration with the Office of the High Commissioner:

(a) To convene, prior to the fifty-second session of the Human Rights Council, an expert seminar on the role of human rights and environmental conservation in the prevention of future pandemics;

(b) To invite States and other relevant stakeholders, including academic experts, civil society organizations and treaty bodies, to participate actively in the seminar;

(c) To invite relevant experts of United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, other international organizations and conventions to participate in the seminar;

(d) To submit to the Human Rights Council, at its fifty-second session, a summary report on the above-mentioned seminar, including any recommendations stemming therefrom, for consideration of further follow-up action;

10. Stresses the need for enhanced cooperation among States, the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Development Programme, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the Office of the High Commissioner, the World Health Organization and other relevant international and regional organizations, agencies, conventions and programmes, in accordance with their respective mandates, including by regularly exchanging knowledge and ideas and building synergies in the protection of human rights and the protection of the environment, bearing in mind an integrated and multisectoral approach;

11. Notes the launch of the One Health High-Level Expert Council in November 2020 by the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the World Organization for Animal Health and the United Nations Environment Programme to collect, distribute and publicize reliable scientific information on the links between human, animal and environmental health in order to assist public officials in making appropriate decisions to address future crises and to inform citizens;

12. Calls upon all States to conserve, protect and restore healthy ecosystems and biodiversity and to ensure their sustainable management and use by applying a human rights- A/HRC/46/L.6/Rev.1 6 based approach that emphasizes participation, inclusion, transparency and accountability in natural resource management;

13. Calls upon States parties to intensify their efforts to advance the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity and to enhance their national biodiversity strategies and action plans;

14. Appeals to all States to consider adopting and implementing national measures that respect and protect the rights of those who are particularly vulnerable to the loss of healthy ecosystems and biodiversity;

15. Encourages States to apply a precautionary approach based on available scientific evidence in decisions that could harm ecosystems and biodiversity;

16. Decides to remain seized of the matter, in accordance with its annual programme of work.

The Answer My Friend, Is Blowing in the Wind

(Title courtesy Bob Dylan, Nobel Prize winner for Literature, 2016. If you would like to listen to the song, just click on <https://youtu.be/G58XWF6B3AA>)

In the article below, Jeet Singh, Fellow, Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies argues that the COVID-19 Crisis Was Caused by Environmental Degradation: The Single Solution to both the Pandemic and the Economic Downturn is Green Recovery. But Who Is Listening?

While various scientific studies are underway to know the origin of the SARS Cov-2 (COVID-19), the World Health Organization has recently admitted that the available evidence suggests that the SARS Cov-2 (COVID-19) has zoonotic sources ⁸(diseases transmitted from animals). This zoonotic outbreak is exceptionally big in terms of its global spread, fatality and its social and economic impacts.

The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated the world economy. In 2020, due to the pandemic and shutdown of economic activities all across the globe to contain the spread of SARS Cov-2 virus, the global economy into a severe contraction. According to an estimate the global economy shrank by 4.5 percent last year, which was the deepest recession since the Second World War. Further, it pushed millions of people into extreme poverty⁹. To put this number in perspective, global GDP was estimated at around 87.55 trillion U.S. dollars in 2019 – meaning that a 4.5 percent drop in economic growth amounts to almost 3.94 trillion U.S. dollars in lost economic output globally.

⁸ WHO COVID-19 Situation Report- 94, 23rd April 2020, Accessed from: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200423-sitrep-94-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=b8304bf0_4, Accessed on 15.6.2020

⁹<https://www.statista.com/topics/6139/covid-19-impact-on-the-global-economy/>

The Government of India in revised its estimate of the reduction in the GDP in 2020-21 to 7.2 percent, due to the lockdown which brought the economy to a grinding halt¹⁰. To overcome these economic challenges, the government of India announced a stimulus package in the month of May 2020. Moreover, various other policy decisions have been taken at the central and state level to boost economic growth. It is worth questioning whether these policy decisions are in the right direction to deal with an extraordinary crisis emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Various experts believe that the current economic crisis is different from previous major crises. The origin of zoonotic outbreaks lies in the increasing anthropogenic activities and massive change in land use across the globe. So the urgency of the sustainable economic growth in this crisis is much more than ever to prevent any such zoonotic outbreak in the future. The latest Petersberg Climate Dialogue held in April 2020 attended by environment ministers of 30 different countries including India advocated for green recovery from the current crisis¹¹. Similarly, in a recent interview to the media by chief economist of IMF, Ms. Gita Gopinath has asked member nations of IMF to push environmental friendly economic activities for equitable and sustainable recovery¹².

History suggests that recovery from major economic crises including the oil crisis of 1973 and 1979, fall of USSR in 1991, Asian financial crisis of 1997 and global financial crisis of 2008 led to faster growth in the rate of environmental degradation due to aggressive industrialization and growth¹³. Such growth will only create space for more zoonotic outbreaks in the future. Therefore, it is important to deal with the current crisis differently.

Environmental Degradation and the Spread of Zoonotic Diseases

In the last more than one century hundreds of zoonotic diseases have jumped from wildlife reservoirs to human settlements. Many of these diseases have posed a serious threat to the life and livelihood of common people. For many zoonoses, we don't have clear evidence how they spilled over from wildlife reservoirs. But scientists across the globe have investigated sources of some of the zoonoses and the way by which they transmitted to human settlement. Ostfeld (2009) in one of his studies about two zoonoses namely West Nile Virus (WNV) and Lyme Disease (LD) found strong correlation with destruction of natural habitat of various wild species and the spill over of these two diseases. The study found that the biodiversity loss resulted in habitat destruction and fragmentation, pollution, invasion of exotic species and direct human exploitation.

¹⁰<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1693232#:~:text=India%20is%20expected%20to%20have,in%20FY%3A2019%2D20>

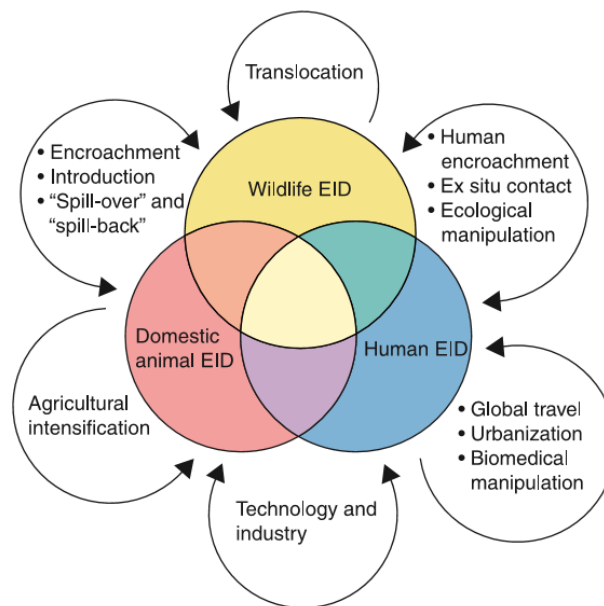
¹¹ IISD, announcements are not enough- concrete steps for post-pandemic green future, May 12, 2020, accessed from: <https://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/guest-articles/announcements-are-not-enough-concrete-steps-for-post-pandemic-green-future/>, Accessed on June 16, 2020.

¹²The Print, Targeted policies, managing debt, green economies, June 9, 2020, Accessed from: <https://theprint.in/economy/targeted-policies-managing-debt-green-economies-gita-gopinaths-covid-survival-guide/438472/>, Accessed on June 19, 2020.

¹³EPW Engage, Economic Stimulus packages and environmental sustainability, May 08, 2020, Accessed from: <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/covid-19-crisis-economic-stimulus-packages-and-environmental-sustainability>, Accessed on June 18, 2020.

A working group of experts on Land Use Change and Disease Emergence in its report in 2004 found that anthropogenic land use changes worldwide drive a range of zoonotic outbreaks (Jonathan A. Petz et al, 2004). Therefore, Ostfeld (2009) in his article based on study of MNV and LD diseases concluded that the richness of biodiversity works as a buffer against transmission of zoonotic diseases. There are a number of examples worldwide to show that anthropogenic activities have instigated outbreaks of zoonotic diseases. Nipah virus first crossed over from fruit bats to pigs and from pigs to humans. Similarly, relocation of fruit bats due to destruction of forest in Australia infected horses and then infected horses transmitted it to veterinarian examining a sick horse (Robin A Weiss et al, 2004).

Fig: Common Causes of Zoonotic Spillover and Spill-back



Source: Peter Daszak et al, 2000

A team of scientists led by Peter Daszak surveyed major zoonotic outbreaks in the world to understand their emergence. They also tried to gather information about factors associated with emergence of zoonotic outbreaks. The study found that human activities such as extension of farming, translocation of infected species, dispersal of infected host, spill-back from domestic animal and translocation of naïve animal are few documented factors behind emergence of diseases like Avian malaria, Ebola, Cryptosporidiosis in Europe and Canine distemper in Africa (Daszak, 2000). An expert group led by Dr. Jonathan A Patz listed major drivers of infectious diseases (zoonotic) outbreaks to suggest actionable policies. The group found that anthropogenic activities such as agriculture encroachment, deforestation, road construction, dam building, irrigation, wetland modification, mining, rapid urbanization and degradation of coastal zone causes a cascade of factors that exacerbate spillover and spill back of infectious diseases (Jonathan et al, 2000).

Unlike early researches on hotspots of emerging infectious diseases, the latest and updated research by experts associated with Eco Health Alliance have warned that no area in the world is safe from emergence of new zoonotic outbreaks (Allen et al 2017). The probability of emergence of new infectious diseases is also high in areas where anthropogenic activities are rampant. New zoonotic diseases in any area may occur “either from ‘spillover’ or cross species

transmission or simply by extension of geographic range into new or changed habitat (Jonathan et al, 2000).”

Various studies have revealed that the land use change in many ways across the globe is the main factor associated with the emergence and re-emergence of zoonotic pathogens. The joint conference of WHO, FAO and OIE in 2003 on the challenges of zoonoses recognized numerous social, technological, ecological and microbial factors associated with the emergence and spread of zoonotic pathogens. The conference further divided these factors into primary risk factors and amplifying risk factors. The conference recognized that the ecological factors such as change to agricultural production, environment pollution, changing consumption patterns and increasing human-animal contact as primary risk factors (OIE, 2004).

Woolhouse et al (2005) in their study categorized risk factors for zoonotic outbreaks into 10 categories and prioritized them based on their ability to instigate zoonotic outbreaks. They also found that the land use change is the most influential factor for emergence and re-emergence of zoonotic infections. Likewise a latest study by Eco Health Alliance also concluded that the “global disease emergence is linked directly to human-induced drivers like land-use change and interaction between humans and wildlife in highly bio diverse regions of the world¹⁴.”

Continued Environmental Degradation during COVID Pandemic in India

Various media reports during the nationwide lockdown in April and May 2020 documented regeneration of nature and natural resources due to drastic decrease in the number of anthropogenic activities. Some reports suggest that quality of water in many rivers improved significantly, the sky witnessed significant improvement due to decrease in air pollution and movement of wildlife and birds observed all across the country. When experts and people in general were welcoming these changes in the environment, the government was busy in sanctioning forest and wildlife clearances to more anthropogenic activities in some of highly bio diverse forests in India.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the issues of sustainable growth in the centre stage of many national and international policy discussions. It has been argued that not only for the revival of the economy but to attain global climate change goals and prevention from other zoonotic diseases in the future, we must think of green recovery. However, in the contrast we have seen a number of hasty environmental clearances to many controversial and ecologically adverse developmental projects in the last two and half months in India. According to the data available on the website of MoEF&CC, from April 2020 to 15th June 2020, the government of India provided stage-I forest clearances to 249 projects. Similarly, the government has provided stage-II forest clearances to 232 projects in this period¹⁵. Few leading environmentalists and conservationists have criticised the government for its decision of

¹⁴ Eco health Alliance: <https://www.ecohealthalliance.org/2017/10/global-disease-hotspots-2-0>, Accessed on: 1.6.2020

¹⁵ PARIVESH, MoEF&CC, Accessed from: <https://parivesh.nic.in/compareanalytics.aspx>, Accessed on June 17, 2020.

forest and wildlife clearances to some highly controversial projects¹⁶. The Etalin hydropower project in Arunachal Pradesh, projects in the Bhagwan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary in Goa and coal mining in Dehing Pakai Elephant Reserve in Assam are few of them.

The Etalin hydro-power project seeks to divert 1150.08 hectares of land and the falling of more than 2.78 lakh trees in one of the most bio diverse zones of the Himalayan region in the Dibang Valley of Arunachal Pradesh. While the project will displace around 100 families, it will affect many others indirectly. Moreover, the biodiversity rich area will be threatened by this project.

A study carried out by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) on the request of Forest Advisory Committee (FAC) found that the proposed project will adversely affect habitat of 159 species of butterflies, 113 species of spiders, 11 species of odorates, 31 species of reptiles, 230 bird species and 21 mammalian species. The project will also endanger 413 species of plants¹⁷. The proposed site is 10 to 14 km away from the Dibang Wildlife Sanctuary. The commencement of the Etalin project will also fragment habitat of tigers living in the Sanctuary. The FAC in its meeting on April 23, 2020 has approved the diversion of the forest land for the project; however it has asked the Union Ministry of power to consider the relevance of the project as it has been delayed by more than 6 years.

The North Eastern Coalfields (NEC) was in controversy for illegal extension of its coal mine in the Dehing Patkai Elephant Reserve in Assam. The extension of coal mining will fragment the habitat of elephants living in this rainforest of north-eastern India. Despite several controversies, the National Board of Wildlife in its meeting on April 24, 2020 approved extension of the open cast coal mining by the North Eastern Coalfields. This extension will change land use of 98.59 hectares of crucial elephant habitat¹⁸. Similarly the NBWL has cleared three different developmental projects in the Bhagwan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary and Mollem National Park.

These two reserve forests in Goa are integral part of biodiversity rich Western Ghat forest. These projects include widening of national highway, laying of transmission line and doubling the existing railway line. These three projects will convert more than 134 hectare of forest land resulting in fragmentation and destruction of habitat of wildlife species such as tigers, dhole, mouse deer, pangolin and many other wildlife and plant species¹⁹.

¹⁶The Week, Environmentalists question clearances given during COVID-19 lockdown , Accessed from: <https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2020/05/13/environmentalists-question-clearances-given-during-covid-19-lockdown.html> Accessed on June 15, 2020.

¹⁷ PARIVESH, MoEF&CC, Minutes of the meeting of the forest advisory committee held on April 23, 2020, Accessed from: http://forestclearance.nic.in/writereaddata/FAC_Minutes/51111121912211FACminutes23April20_compressed.pdf, Accessed on June 16, 2020.

¹⁸ The Wire, India's Environment Ministry Unlocked Many Protected Areas During the Lockdown, Accessed from: <https://science.thewire.in/uncategorised/indias-environment-ministry-unlocked-many-protected-areas-during-the-lockdown/>, Accessed on 15 June, 2020.

¹⁹ The Wire, India's Environment Ministry Unlocked Many Protected Areas During the Lockdown, Accessed from: <https://science.thewire.in/uncategorised/indias-environment-ministry-unlocked-many-protected-areas-during-the-lockdown/>, Accessed on 15 June, 2020.

The government is worried about revival of the economy. Approval for long pending projects in the forest area in the last few months can be justified by the government's effort to revive the economy. However, the question is, whether these measures will help to revive the economy in a more sustainable manner?

Future of the Trade-off between Environment and Growth in India

The Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) is a mandatory process under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 for all new developmental projects including extension and modernization of existing projects. The purpose of the EIA is to minimise the environmental cost by imposing restrictions and ensuring implementation of the environmental plan for compensating environmental loss. The latest EIA notification issued by the government of India in 2006 increased the scope of EIA and brought in many projects under the ambit of EIA notification. The notification was amended subsequently to fill policy gaps since then. Now to consolidate all those subsequent amendments to the EIA notification of 2006 and incorporation of few more amendments, the MoEF&CC has issued a new draft of EIA notification in March 2020. The draft is being put in public domain for comments and suggestions. However, various environmentalists have questioned the timing of issuance of the notification for public consultation. Experts have also criticised new amendments proposed in the draft to expedite the process of the environmental clearance for development projects.

Amendments to the EIA notification of 2006 to consolidate subsequent amendments and further strengthening of environment regulation are highly required. While the new draft notification is appreciated for its attempt to consolidate all changes promulgated after 2006, it is also criticised for several dilutions to undermine environmental cost of a development project. These dilutions will have a long lasting impact on our environment, sustainability and national commitments related to climate change negotiations. Experts have cautioned that the proposed amendments would accelerate anthropogenic activities resulting in faster destruction of forest and wildlife habitat.

History tells us that after every major economic crisis, the world accelerated the destruction of nature and the environment to revive the economy. Perhaps, this is the easiest way to respond to any economic crisis. Today, when the entire world is looking for the revival of the economy, there is a high chance of more and faster environmental degradation. In the last few months various proposed projects in and around highly bio diverse areas have been granted environmental clearances signalling that India is heading towards the conventional method of economic revival. Proposed changes in the EIA rules by the MoEF&CC further indicate that more destruction of nature will be allowed in the name of economic growth.

Conclusion

The global transmission of zoonotic SARS Cov-2 and the revival of nature due to global lockdown and industrial slowdown have an important life giving message to mankind. So it is up to us whether we want to learn from it or not. The pandemic and its consequences are

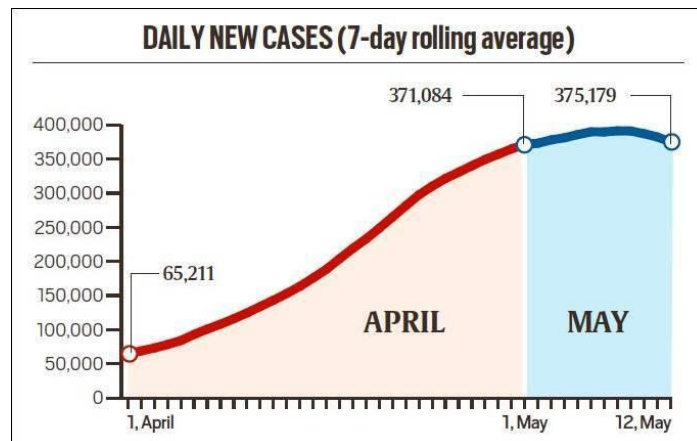
enough to learn that the over exploitation of nature, destruction of forest and fragmentation of wildlife habitat for various purposes will lead to more zoonotic outbreaks in the future. The lockdown and slow down of industrial output across the globe adopted by governments to contain the spread of COVID-19 resulted in a wildlife boom and significant improvement in the environment. This also tells us that our daily production, consumption and habits have serious environmental consequences. If not anything else, to be free from the danger of any such zoonotic outbreak in future, we must change the way we live and behave.

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The Devastating Second Wave of COVID-19

Even as this issue was being planned, India was hit by a deadly second wave of COVID-19. This time it had a special sting – the variant was highly infectious and often got everybody living under the same roof, so that many families saw multiple members sick at the same time. The graph below shows how sudden was the rise in all India COVID cases.²⁰



As cases increased, shortages developed – of testing, of hospital beds, of oxygen and later even of hearses and cremation ground time slots. As a result, many public aprks were converted into cremation grounds.²¹



²⁰ <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/peak-of-covid-second-wave-in-sight-but-end-may-still-be-far-away-7314259/>

²¹ <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-in-pics-public-park-in-delhi-turns-into-cremation-ground-as-bodies-pile-up/381434>

The Pyres in Our Heart

Last month, the multiplying pyres on parking lots of overflowing crematoriums in the Delhi, blazed through the world. Social commentators quoted the poet and said April is the cruellest month. Today, the pyres are raging in my heart, and this month “May,” always dangling hope only to dash them to the ground, is surely, for me the cruellest.

In the last four days, I lost 3 close friends, all under 60, the youngest barely 35. Yesterday, I who had not even shed tears at my Dad’s funeral, broke down and cried. You see, each of my friends, were special: they were not just alternative people talking about building an alternative world—they were engaged in building an alternative world right in the middle of our impossibly ugly world. They were the unseen, unsung heroes of a better India. And they were all victims, no, not of the virus, but of India’s inability to prioritize public health. Last year, even with a pandemic in full swing, India spent 8 times more on its military than on public health . . . I oscillate between rage and sadness, helplessness and sadness.

Last night, I did not sleep. Like millions in the country, and I admit that we are the privileged millions, I spent hours begging on all my social media networks, for an item that may help my friend who was battling for his life in an intensive care unit. Our effort was no less herculean than that of Hanuman’s who carried a whole mountain back for that one medicinal herb to save Laxman. One doctor, my cousin, when importuned by me, took one look at my friend’s prognosis and shook his head. But I was undeterred. For as long as there is breath in the body, surely there is a will to live, and as long as there is a will, there is hope. For crying out loud, the guy was just in his thirties and fit with no co-morbidities. I reached out to high-school friends that I had not bothered much to stay in touch with. But this time, I was wise enough not to give out the prognosis that my friend had a raging fever due to secondary infections that were ravaging all his main organs. One was the Chief Operating Officer in a major hospital in the same city, where my friend lay. “I am in a warzone,” he sighed, “but I will see what I can do.”

We swing between hope and hopelessness, hope and helplessness . . . A pilot friend agreed to bring the item on a flight from Bangalore that night. That flight got cancelled. More volunteers arranged for another airlines from Delhi to deliver the item to us the next morning. I got the news in the middle of the night that my friend passed away. And as I write these words, the flames are licking at his mortal remains in a government crematorium.

Of all the ignominies and injustices, we have suffered, surely this too counts: Not being able to receive the body of someone you loved and cremate it with the honour and respect they deserve . . . but this is like war, I remind myself. Like in all wars, these are random, senseless, unnecessary deaths. And as in all the conflict-ridden pockets of the world, Kashmir, Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq, I, and all Indian families, now live in the terror of uncertainty not knowing who will be affected next.

Like those scavenging for wood in Delhi, I gather and salvage the remaining resources of my heart. Whatever reserves of strength I have left. For my brother warns, that while the number of cases may be slowing down, the number of deaths is bound to rise in the next two weeks . . . and we have more friends and family members, in hospital beds in different cities, breathing through ventilators. And yes, they are the lucky ones . . . as long as one’s luck still holds.

Author’s note: I have chosen to remain **anonymous**, for ultimately, it is not about the pyre that I had to build or the grave that I may have to dig. It is the fact that by now, every Indian household, has lost someone that they cared for, and that needs to be acknowledged and honoured.

Uncountable Corpses on the Banks of the Ganga

Dainik Bhaskar's front-page story on deaths in UP²²

'There is not even a metre distance between the bodies buried in a distance of about one kilometre.'

By [NL Team](#) 18 May, 2021

This was *Dainik Bhaskar's* front-page headline today in its Delhi edition, on the grim situation in Uttar Pradesh's Shringverpur ghat. The story followed *Bhaskar's* ground report from last week where 30 of its reporters had reported on "over 2,000 bodies" either floating or buried along a 1140 km stretch of the Ganga.

In today's report, the paper's journalist Amrish Shukla wrote that the situation was so grim that "as far as the eyes can see, one could spot corpses spread along the Ganga". "There is not even a metre distance between the bodies," he wrote, "buried in a distance of one kilometre."



Source: <https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fscience.thewire.in%2Fhealth%2Fbodies-float-down-the-ganga-as-nearly-4000-more-die-of-covid-19-in-india%2F&psig=AOvVaw2jUqU79U1ZQc1BlvQiR9-o&ust=1621492243684000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CAIQjRxqFwoTCJC369KP1fACFQAAAAAdAAAAABAD>

Cremations from Prayagraj, Pratapgarh, Sultanpur and Faizabad take place at this ghat. Local priests who perform the last rites told the newspaper that while they'd see eight or 10 bodies a day before, they now see "60 or 70" every day. "Some days, more than 100 corpses come," the paper quoted one of the priests as saying. "More than 4,000 dead bodies have come here in a month."

The report noted that since the second wave of Covid began, the ghat has seen a shortage of wood for cremations. As a result, exorbitant prices are being charged by wood contractors.

²² <https://www.newslaundry.com/2021/05/18/uncountable-corpses-on-banks-of-ganga-dainik-bhaskars-front-page-story-on-deaths-in-up>

Parul Khakar's Poem in Gujarati: Shabvahini Ganga

In response to this horrific story, Parul Khakar, a well-known Gujarati poet wrote this 14 line poem²³

The original Gujarati: Shabvahini Ganga

એક અવાજે મડદાં બોલ્યાં 'સબ કુછ ચંગા-
ચંગા'
રાજ, તમારા રામરાજ્યમાં શબવાહિની ગંગા.
રાજ, તમારા મસાણા ખૂટયા, ખૂટયા લક્કડભારા,
રાજ, અમારા ડાઘૂ ખૂટયા, ખૂટયા રોવણહારા,
ધરેધરે જઈ જમડાંટોળી કરતી નાચ કઢંગા
રાજ, તમારા રામરાજ્યમાં શબવાહિની ગંગા.
રાજ, તમારી ધગધગ ધૂણતી ચીમની પોરો
માંગે,

રાજ, અમારી ચૂડલી ફૂટે, ધડધડ છાતી ભાંગે
બળતું જોઈ ફીડલ વગાડે 'વાહ રે બિલ્લા-
રંગા'!
રાજ, તમારા રામરાજ્યમાં શબવાહિની ગંગા.
રાજ, તમારા દિવ્ય વસ્ત્ર ને દિવ્ય તમારી
જ્યોતિ
રાજ, તમોને અસલી રૂપે આખી નગરી જોતી
હોય મરદ તે આવી બોલો 'રાજા મેરા નંગા'
રાજ, તમારા રામરાજ્યમાં શબવાહિની ગંગા.

Into English by Salil Tripathi

Don't worry, be happy, in one voice
speak the corpses
O King, in your Ram-Rajya, we see bodies
flow in the Ganges

O King, the woods are ashes,
No spots remain at crematoria,
O King, there are no carers,

Nor any pall-bearers,
No mourners left
And we are bereft
with our wordless dirges of dysphoria

Libitina enters every home where she
dances and then prances,
O King, in your Ram-Rajya, our bodies
flow in the Ganges

O King, the melting chimney quivers, the
virus has us shaken
O King, our bangles shatter, our heaving
chest lies broken

The city burns as he fiddles, Billa-Ranga
thrust their lances,
O King, in your Ram-Rajya, I see bodies
flow in the Ganges

O King, your attire sparkles as you shine
and glow and blaze
O King, this entire city has at last seen
your real face

Show your guts, no ifs and buts,
Come out and shout and say it loud,
"The naked King is lame and weak"

Show me you are no longer meek,
Flames rise high and reach the sky, the
furious city rages;
O King, in your Ram-Rajya, do you see
bodies flow in the Ganges

²³ <https://thewire.in/the-arts/parul-khakar-gujarati-poem-ganga-bodies-covid>

Hindi translation by Ilyas Sheikh

एक साथ सब मुर्दे बोले 'सब कुछ चंगा-
चंगा'
साहेब तुम्हारे रामराज में शव-वाहिनी गंगा
खत्म हुए शमशान तुम्हारे, खत्म काष्ठ की
बोरी
थके हमारे कंधे सारे, आँखें रह गई कोरी
दर-दर जाकर यमदूत खेले
मौत का नाच बेढंगा
साहेब तुम्हारे रामराज में शव-वाहिनी गंगा
नित लगातार जलती चिताएँ
राहत माँगे पलभर

नित लगातार टूटे चूड़ियाँ
कुटती छाति घर घर
देख लपटों को फ़िडल बजाते वाह रे
'बिल्ला-रंगा'
साहेब तुम्हारे रामराज में शव-वाहिनी गंगा
साहेब तुम्हारे दिव्य वस्त्र, दैदीप्य तुम्हारी
ज्योति
काश असलियत लोग समझते, हो तुम
पत्थर, ना मोती
हो हिम्मत तो आके बोलो
'मेरा साहेब नंगा'
साहेब तुम्हारे रामराज में शव-वाहिनी गंगा

Stand by the poet!

Two days after Khakkar posted her Shabvahini Ganga poem, pro-BJP trolls announced that the poet had removed the poem from her Facebook page. However, The Wire can confirm that the poem is very much there, although since her account is now private, it can only be seen by Khakkar's friends. And Khakkar's friends say she is certain that she will not withdraw it.

Meanwhile, the Gujarati Lekhak Mandal (writers' forum), consisting of more than one thousand writers and poets of Gujarat, has spoken out in support of the poet who has dared to speak up. Manishi Jani, president of the Gujarati Lekhak Mandal and former president of the Navnirman Andolan, issued a communiqué to the forum on May 13 that subtly referred to the BJP IT cell trolls. Parul Khakkar is being inundated with abuses and excessive trolling for her poem.

Return to Theme 1– How Do We Relate to Ourselves in These Times

How to Recover from All This? Use the Healing Power of Music and Poetry

To recover from this shocking news, where shall we turn? We can find plenty of succour in the folklore and culture around the Ganga. Let us point you to the song in the film Siddhartha, where the boatman sings.

O Nodire Ekti Kotha Shudhai, theme song from the film Siddhartha in Bangla

<https://gaana.com/song/o-nodire-ekti-kotha-shudhai>

Lyrics and Music by Hemanta Mukhopadhyay and the original was sung by Hemant Kumar.
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ও নদীরে,
একটি কথা শুধাই শুধু তোমারে
ও নদীরে,
একটি কথা শুধাই শুধু তোমারে
বলো কোথায় তোমার দেশ
তোমার নেই কি চলার শেষ
ও নদীরে...

তোমার কোনো বাঁধন নাই
তুমি ঘর ছাড়া কি তাই
তোমার কোনো বাঁধন নাই
তুমি ঘর ছাড়া কি তাই
এই আছে ভাটায়
আবার এই তো দেখি জোয়ারে
বলো কোথায় তোমার দেশ
তোমার নেই কি চলার শেষ
ও নদীরে...

এ কূল ভেঙে ও কূল তুমি গড়ো
যার একূল ওকূল দুকূল গেল
তার লাগি কি করো
এ কূল ভেঙে ও কূল তুমি গড়ো

র একূল ওকূল দুকূল গেল
তার লাগি কি করো

আমায় ভাবছো মিছেই পর
তোমার নেই কি অবসর
আমায় ভাবছো মিছেই পর
তোমার নেই কি অবসর
সুখ দুঃখের কথা কিছু

কইলে না হয় আমরা ...
বলো কোথায় তোমার দেশ
তোমার নেই কি চলার শেষ
ও নদীরে...

একটি কথা শুধাই শুধু তোমারে
বলো কোথায় তোমার দেশ

তোমার নেই কি চলার শেষ
ও নদীরে...

ও নদীরে...

Here's an English translation, courtesy Prof Somnath Ghosh:

²⁴ This link was arranged by Masud R Khan. https://www.smule.com/song/hemanta-mukhopadhyay-o-nodire-ekti-kotha-shudhai-karaoke-lyrics/672906952_1859648/arrangement

O River
I have only one question to ask
Where do you come from?
Isn't there any end to your travel/flow?
O River
You have no ties; no attachments
Is it because you have no home/abode?
One moment you are at ebb
Another moment I see you in full tide
Where do you come from?
Isn't there any end to your travel/flow?
O River

You break one bank, you create another
But those who have nothing –
Neither this bank nor that –
What do you do for them?
Why do (falsely) take me to be stranger?
Don't you have time to share your joys
and sorrows with me?
O River,
I have only one question to ask...
Where do you come from?
Isn't there any end to your travel/flow?
O River

Bhupen Hazarika the renowned singer from Assam has sung another song on the Ganga. This is obviously as the Ganga is perceived in Bangladesh, where Ganga's main distributary is called Padma. Likewise the main distributary of the Brahmaputra is called the Jamuna and the two flow into each other and form the Meghna river which eventually flows into the Bay of Bengal

O Ganga Aamaar Maa, sung by Bhupen Hazarika

Click here to listen to it: <https://youtu.be/7WQCITNz31g>

The appeal of the Ganga is all India – for centuries, thousands of pilgrims have come from southernmost India to Kashi for a holy dip in the Ganga.

ॐ (Ganga) Malayalam poem by Madhusoodanan Nair

Here is a recitation of his well-known Malayalam poem by Madhusoodanan Nair:

<https://youtu.be/36Ut2k2rd4I>

Sorry, we could not find an English or Hindi translation. Just call your "Mallu" friend and ask!

नदियाँ | By Kedarnath Singh recited by Kartikeya Khetarpal

For a flavour of how contemporary Hindi poet Kedarnath Singh has dealt with the age old theme of rivers, explore the link below, courtesy Nayi Dhara Radio on YouTube

<https://youtu.be/36vl8ik5LJg>

Or we can dig deeper, for the wisdom of our ancient times: Snaan Mantra

If we want even more succour let us listen to this invocation of the Ganga in the revered Snaan Mantra, also referred to by Kartikeya Khetarpal above.

Click on the link below:

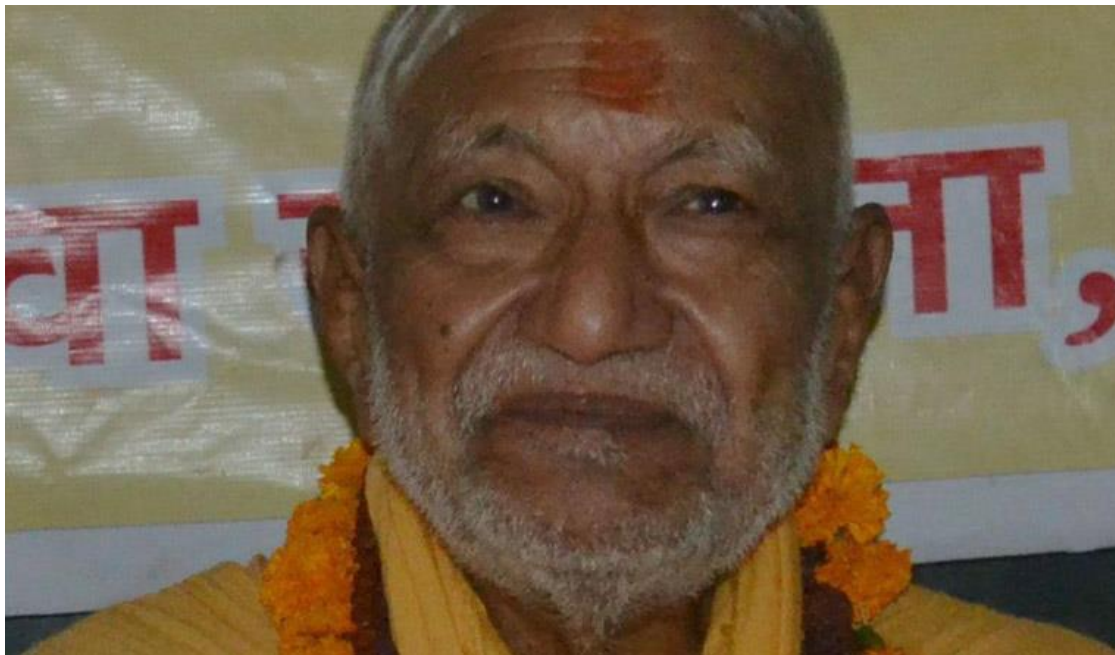
<https://gaana.com/song/snaan-mantra-4>

We conclude this issue of Sadbhavana Digest with a tribute to two individuals who worked all their lives for the cause they believed in.

Swami Sanand, the Seer who Fasted to Death to Save the Ganga

By Faizi Noor Ahmed October 11, 2018 17:31 IST²⁵

Environmentalist Swami Sanand, who was on a fast-unto-death to save the river Ganga, died of a heart attack at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Rishikesh, on Thursday. The 86-year-old seer who had been on a fast since June 22 as a protest against the government's indifferent attitude towards the Ganga, had shunned all forms of fluid intake from October 9. On Wednesday, the Haridwar administration forcefully admitted him to AIIMS.



Known as 'Gangaputra', G.D. Agarwal alias Swami Gyan Swaroop Sanand, had always been at the forefront of the fight for environmental protection. Born to a family of farmers in Kandhla district of Muzaffarnagar, Swami Sanand studied civil engineering at IIT Roorkee and was the first member secretary of Central Pollution Control Board. With a PhD from Berkeley in the US, he was the head of department of civil and environmental engineering at IIT Kanpur for two decades. Like him, his students went on to become prominent names in the field of environmental activism. Anil Agarwal, the founder of Centre for Science and Environment, Delhi. Despite such a glorious career at his disposal, he chose the spiritual path and embraced sanyas at Sri Vidya Mutt, Varanasi, in 2014.

Swami Sanand fasted at the Matri Sadan ashram in Haridwar, demanding a law for the conservation of the Ganga; there are others too attempting to draw attention to the cause in ways of their own. Rajendra Singh, his student and environmental activist, has been leading a 105-day-yatra from Gaumukh in Uttarakhand to Gangasagar in West Bengal for

²⁵ <https://www.theweek.in/leisure/society/2018/10/11/swami-sanand-the-seer-who-fasted-death-save-ganga.html>

the cause of a free flowing and clean Ganga. Bachendri Pal, first Indian woman to scale the Everest, is on a month-long rafting expedition to raise awareness on the issue. Matri Sadan ashram, on the banks of the Ganga, has been witness to several sustained efforts for the cause. The agitation had claimed lives of two of its sanyasis in the past, one being Swami Nigamanand who died fasting in 2011.

An environmental activist till his last breath, Swami Sanand went on his first fast in 2008, leading to subsequent ones in 2009 and 2010 against hydroelectric projects at Bhairon Ghati, Lohari Nagpala and Pala Maneri, and was able to stall them all. In fact, the project at Lohari Nagpala was almost complete when former prime minister Manmohan Singh scrapped it in 2010. He got the government to declare 125km stretch of the Bhagirathi river an eco-sensitive zone. In 2012, when he went on his fourth fast, he had to be admitted to a hospital in Delhi. In 2013, he spent 15 days in jail because of his fifth fast.

Swami Sanand believed that the Narendra Modi government would go a step further for the cause of river conservation as was apparent from the setting up of a separate ministry for Ganga. His perception, however, changed and he claimed that every action of the government is a gain for the corporates, and that the people in power have done nothing for Ganga.

In a letter dated August 5, 2018 to PM Modi, Swami Sanand listed the following four demands:

1. The government should bring the draft bill prepared by Ganga Mahasabha in 2012 for discussion in the Parliament immediately and get it passed. If the bill is not passed, Article 1 to 9 from Chapter 1 of the draft should be implemented by the presidential ordinance.
2. The government should cancel all under construction and proposed power projects on the rivers Alaknanda, Dhauliganga, Nandakini, Pindar, Mandakini and Ganga.
3. Deforestation, slaughter and all types of mining activities should be completely stopped specifically in Haridwar Kumbh region.
4. A Ganga Bhakta Parishad should be constituted provisionally with 20 members nominated by the PM, under oath of acting only in the interests benefiting the river.

Swami Sanand maintained a firm belief in the sanctity and healing properties of Ganga, with his research at IIT Kanpur to support it. He was of the view that rejuvenation does not suggest mere purification, but a restoration of the flow, quality and clarity of water to its original form. He had said that the government has delayed the cleaning of Ganga and intends to exploit the vote bank just by constructing sewerage under the Namami Gange Yojana. He had rejected Union Minister for Water Resources and Ganga Rejuvenation Nitin Gadkari's plea to end the agitation as he found nothing substantial in Gadkari's assurances.

And now, with the seer's death, Ganga has lost one its strongest warriors.

Tribute to Shri Sunderlal Bahuguna, 9 January 1927 – 21 May 2021

Veteran environmentalist Sunderlal Bahuguna dies of COVID²⁶

Sunderlal Bahuguna, the eminent Gandhian environmentalist and leader of the Chipko and Tehri dam movements, leaves behind a legacy that will be difficult to live up to



Veteran environmentalist and architect of the *Chipko Movement* Sunderlal Bahuguna died May 21, 2021, *Press Trust of India* reported. He had been admitted to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in Rishikesh, Uttarakhand after having contracted the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

Bahuguna was one of the leaders of the Chipko movement, fighting for the preservation of forests in the Himalayas. *Chipko* means ‘embrace’ or ‘tree huggers’ and this vast movement was a decentralised one with many leaders usually being village women. Often, they would chain themselves to trees so that loggers could not cut down forests. These actions slowed down the destruction, but more importantly they brought deforestation to the public’s attention.

From 1981-1983, Sunderlal Bahuguna led a 5,000-kilometre march across the Himalayas, ending with a meeting with late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who then passed legislation to protect some areas of the Himalayan forests from tree-felling. Sunderlal Bahuguna was also a leader in the movement to oppose the Tehri dam project and in defending India’s rivers. He also worked for women’s rights and the rights of the poor. His methods were Gandhian, making use of peaceful resistance and non-violence.

The Chipko Movement received the 1987 Right Livelihood Award, also referred to as the Alternative Nobel Prize, “...for its dedication to the conservation, restoration and ecologically-sound use of India's natural resources.”

“क्या हैं, जंगल के उपकार

मिट्टी, पानी और बयार

मिट्टी, पानी और बयार

जिंदा रहने के आधार”

²⁶ <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/environment/veteran-environmentalist-sunderlal-bahuguna-dies-of-covid-77038>