

Anti-Fascist Rally and Convention: Democracy Will Win Kolkata January 2024



How Inequality and Majoritarian Fascism feed each other?



As part of the Financial Accountability Network India, we participated in the anti-fascist rally and convention in Kolkata on the 22nd and 23rd January 2024. Thousands gathered from across the country and marched the streets of Kolkata on the day of consecration of temple at Ayodhya. They marched in protest against the communal fascists who had demolished the mosque that once stood at the same site. They marched against the attempt to blur the boundaries between the state and religion. The march was also an occasion for the democratic forces to yet again resolve to stand by the values of the constitution - equality, fraternity and secularism. Organized by more than 200 democratic organizations, the march was a resounding rebuttal of the saffron agenda of the government and was an effort to foreground that the majority of the people in Bengal and also in the country still do not subscribe to the divisive politics of hate and hindutva. Hawkers and street vendors from across the country in their hundreds participated in the March under the banner of the National Hawkers Federation demanding an end to divisive politics. The rally ended with the likes of Harsh Mander, Nadeem Khan, Teesta Setalvad, Dipankar Bhattacharya, Shaktiman Ghosh and others addressing the massive gathering at the Netaji indoor stadium where the joint march had culminated.



This was also an occasion to foreground how inequality and crony capitalism in fact end up feeding communal fascism. It was this connection that the Financial Accountability Network was expected to expose in the convention held in the aftermath of the rally in a session organised on the 23rd of January. The session was addressed by prominent social activist and crusader of peace Harsh Mander; Nancy Pathak and Anirban Bhattacharya both of whom work in Centre for Financial Accountability and are part of the Financial Accountability Network India.



In the session, the speakers spoke at length about the extent of inequality and the grotesque ramifications we are seeing in the country. Two contrasting reports last year in fact give us the real divide that matters. India has been ranked at 111 out of 125 countries in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2023, further lowering its position to 107 (out of 121 countries) in 2022. India was also the only country among the world's top 10 ultra-high net worth nations that recorded an increase in its ultra-wealthy population in 2022 as per World Ultra Wealth Report 2023.

Harsh Mander called this one of the most heartless and cruel eras in world history when we have the means, the money and the resources to ensure that none in the world stays hungry and yet we have embraced a model of development wherein only a handful have disproportionately massive wealth. He said how only 98 families in India held more wealth than 555 million Indians!

The speakers were able to connect the dots and show that the bigger the gap between the top and the crores at the bottom, the shriller will be the hate-mongering and majoritarian hyperboles, the deeper will be the discrimination against Muslims as the "enemy" and the fusing of state and religion. The more unequal we become as a country, the more will be the need for a false sense of pride and a pliant media that would obscure the real divides and play up the false ones. Anirban Bhattacharya said how majoritarian politics and crony capital thereby serve each other's purpose as a hateful narrative keeps the people sedated, while a handful loot the country's resources.



The pandemic that pushed 23 crores more Indians below the national minimum wage has given way to a time of crushing price rise and burning fuel prices that weigh heavily on the poor while the corporates have been given gifted a substantial tax rebate. With 1,319 individuals now possessing INR 1,000 Crore or more, we are witnessing a remarkable surge in super rich, up by 76% over the last five years. This, while the gross savings of Indian households stood at 5.1% of GDP, the lowest in at least 23 years and unemployment pushed the youth into despair!

The prices of food and fuel today have far outpaced the earnings of an average construction or agricultural worker. While on average 30 farmers have committed suicide, many due to their inability to repay loans, we have seen corporate debtors being given write-offs in astronomical figures. Nancy Pathak in fact explained in detail the manner in which in the name of "write-offs" and "haircuts" the big corporates are being allowed to swindle lakhs of crores of public money and make a mockery of public finance.

As Nancy remarked, 'The NCLT's approval of a resolution plan for Reliance Communications Infrastructure Ltd., valued at a mere Rs 455.9 Crores against a colossal admitted claim of Rs 47,251 Crores, is emblematic of a system seemingly indifferent to corporate responsibilities. That is more or less the same amount as the value of the necklace (Rs. 451 crores) gifted to her daughter-in-law by Nita Ambani.' These raise critical questions about the IBC's alignment with pro-corporate interests. This discrepancy places financial institutions like SBI, Bank of Baroda, Syndicate Bank, and Punjab National Bank in a precarious position, having to accept a staggering 90%+ haircut!

While the corporates are given tax rebates and "incentives", it's a tragedy that social expenditure is being frowned by the government as "revdis" or "freebies". Any demand for increased spending on people meets with the refrain of budgetary constraints. All three speakers however strongly advocated for a wealth tax on the ultra-rich. They said we can counter both the alarming inequality and raise the revenue necessary for welfare expenditure simply by instituting a wealth tax on the top 1%. This would in fact be in line with the prescription of the constitution that clearly states that the government ought to work against the concentration of wealth and resources.



The venom of hatred being spewed today and the grotesque inequality being allowed to perpetuate through the economic policies of the government both take us further away from the ideals of the Constitution. The ones who are the most at the receiving end are Dalits, Adivasis, minorities and women who are historically marginalised. In the meeting held at the anti-fascist convention in Kolkata, FAN India Was able to articulate the demands of the Tax the Top Campaign that argues for a wealth and inheritance tax on the super-rich. A stall was also put up in the convention wherein literature pertaining to inequality and taxing the rich was shared with the public and also a postcard campaign was carried on by means of which people wrote to the finance minister about the need to immediately institute a wealth tax on the ultra-rich.

Some of the other sessions in the convention threw light upon the landscape of the oil, gas and petrochemical industry and how crony capitalism thrives on it and how plastic politics play out and its undue burden on street vendors instead of targeting the FMCG giants. Sessions were also held on the plight of the street vendors in the age of e-commerce and "smart" cities; the saffronization of education and the threat of NEP; the distortion of history; Dalits and gender rights under attack and so on. The convention saw spirited and broad participation of people from all walks of life and from diverse sections - students, unorganised workers, natural resource-based communities, women, marginalised Dalit-advansi groups, minorities, intellectuals, unions and so on.

