[**Sermons from left s pulpit**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1607645/sermons-from-lefts-pulpit)

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WHAT’S common between the ongoing assault on the farmers’ protest and the arrest of Disha Ravi, the 21-year-old climate activist from Bengaluru, and, simultaneously, the 100-hour raid by revenue sleuths on the offices of newsclick.in, a credible news portal run by a leftist activist who was jailed during the emergency by Indira Gandhi?

One possible connection could be that all three are critical of two businessmen close to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Even Rahul Gandhi has caught on. “Hum do, hamarey do”. (We two, and our two) That’s his chant these days, implying that four men are running the Indian government — the prime minister, the home minister and, presumably, the two business tycoons.

Moreover, a circular has been sent out to public-funded institutions, colleges and universities to henceforth clear the names of foreign participants as well as the agenda for any online seminar or academic discussion. Coming on top of already undermined academic freedoms, it aims to control discussions that inevitably scour issues like the neoliberal economic agenda ascribed to the Modi government and its alleged preference for tweaking policies to accord with the interests of his crony capitalist friends. Tight control of online academic discussions would also rein in growing overseas criticism of the government’s divisive sociopolitical path.

A report in the *Indian Express* of Feb 6 gives a hint of why Disha was arrested a week later. She is accused of preparing a “toolkit” for global protesters about what they could do to show solidarity with the farmers. The toolkit was first noticed when it was briefly flashed by the global environmental activist Greta Thunberg.

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According to the Express report the toolkit urges divestment from “monopolists and oligopolists like Adani-Ambani”, and to organise protests “on-grou­­nd” “near the closest Indian embassy, media house or your local government office on Feb 13 and 14”.

For the farmers, the Ambani-Adani reference has cropped up without a pause in their critique. What may have newsclick.in’s Prabir Purkayastha done among his other exposés of the Modi government to invite the wrath? He has supported the farmers’ struggle, of course. However, it seems to be his interest in the business backstage that riled some quarries more directly. His piece titled ‘The ugly truth of WhatsApp’s user data privacy’ is a case in point.

“The biggest WhatsApp partner in India is Reliance’s JioMart, which is, therefore, the largest beneficiary of WhatsApp’s customer data. Facebook had secured approval for its payment app — WhatsApp UPI — in November last year, soon after Facebook pumped $5.7 billion in the Reliance Jio platform. While giving approval, the Indian regulator — NPCI (National Payments Corporation of India) — had asked that WhatsApp data be kept separate from Facebook. It does not appear from its App Store declaration that Facebook followed this regulatory requirement. Its new policy of sharing data with Facebook is another violation of the NPCI’s directive.”

Modi has used a term for social and political activists which echoes the Nazi description of Jews — ‘parasites’. These parasites presumably include the 83-year-old Jesuit priest who works among the impoverished tribespeople of Jharkhand and other assorted intellectuals and lawyers. They have been locked up because they can see a nexus between the Hindutva project and Modi’s neoliberal economic mission.

The ‘activist-parasites’ had once sadly worked with Hindutva while retrieving democracy in 1975-77. Several JNU students — both leftist partisans and free-spirited liberals — were rounded up by Indira Gandhi’s dragnet and released after a few days in prison. Purkayastha and D.P. Tripathi were jailed for the entire term of the emergency. Both were members of the then pro-China communist party the CPI-M’s student’s front, the SFI. The pro-Soviet communists and the Shiv Sena supported the emergency. Such are the delightfully wayward sidebars in India’s political journey.

Tripathi had the affable camaraderie of a raconteur that comes easily to rural folk of Uttar Pradesh who migrate to universities. Purkayastha was schooled in the Bengali heartland of heady fervour. Tripathi knew more about India by watching its socially regressive but politically restive rural springboards. He double-guessed his comrades’ low-yield yearning for social change, and found a less daunting way to the same objective by joining Rajiv Gandhi’s powerful kitchen cabinet. After Gandhi’s death, he became a Rajya Sabha MP from Sharad Pawar’s Nationalist Congress Party. As a representative of a ‘bourgeois party’, Tripathi yet found himself in a great situation of helping peace initiatives with Pakistan. He was the go-to man (in the footsteps of the late Nirmala Deshpande) to arrange a visa for Faiz’s daughters or to host Fahmida Riaz and in arranging public meetings to boost a democratic cause.

Purkayastha’s troubles are no different from others who have suffered for standing their ground against injustices and corruption. Mandeep Punia, a journalist who writes for the outspoken Caravan magazine, was released on court orders after he was picked up from the farmers’ protest. Two other journalists from Kerala haven’t been so lucky, and remain in jail for being ‘nosy’ about the horrific rape of a Dalit girl in Uttar Pradesh by privileged caste men.

Nothing could be more ironic for Purkayastha though. The CPI-M has chosen to anoint West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee as its principal enemy in the elections due there in April. It has broken ranks with former allies including the CPI-Marxist Leninist that otherwise did exceedingly well by joining hands with Lalu Yadav’s party in the Bihar elections recently.

But look at the facts again. The assault on India’s academic freedoms began with the first non-Congress government backed by the left. The Janata Party had Hindutva ideologues within its fold and they banned history textbooks under the CPI-M’s nose in 1978. Today, the leftist pulpit’s battle cry is ‘Ram today. Left tomorrow’ in West Bengal. The farmers, the journalists, the ‘parasite-activists’, jailed and those still free, as well as the academics are left bewildered.

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