

60k teachers to skip May 2 counting of votes in rural polls

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bareilly/60k-teachers-to-skip-may-2-counting-of-votes-in-rural-polls/articleshow/82333807.cms>

Teachers unions in Uttar Pradesh -- including one affiliated to the RSS-- announced on Friday that they will boycott their poll duty on May 2, the day panchayat poll votes would be counted. UP Shikshak Mahasangh president Dinseh Chandra Sharma told TOI, "They (the government) are not at all bothered that we lost 706 teachers due to elections duty. The number could increase. After a final meeting, we have decided to strike work that day. They can take any decision they want. The lives of the teachers are more important than anything else." He added: "Nearly 75% of polling staff are teachers. How can they work inside the polling room where chances of getting infected are higher. Unlike policemen, teachers were not covered under the initial vaccination drive." The unions claim to have more than 60,000 teachers with them. Spokesperson of Akhil Bharatiya Rashtriya Shaikshik Mahasangh, Virendra Mishra, said, "This decision was taken on the call of teachers as we were flooded with requests to save their lives. They are very scared. Experts have said that Covid's peak will arrive in May." "All of us will boycott election duty if it is not postponed." Leaders of Madhyamik Shikshak Sangh were also present in the meeting. Ankur Tripathi, another union leader, has approached National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) against the state election commission. He alleged that teachers were forced to work in hazardous conditions and their lives were put at risk. On Tuesday, the Allahabad HC had sent a notice to the state election commission seeking explanation on Covid preparedness and the alleged deaths of teachers.

German government treads with caution on questions by Left Party on state of Indian democracy

<https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/german-government-treads-with-caution-on-questions-by-left-party-on-state-of-indian-democracy>

On 1 April, the German parliament published answers by the government to questions raised by the parliamentary group of Die Linke, a German political party, on human rights in India. Members of Die Linke—which literally translates to “The Left”—had asked the federal government 45 broad questions on its views and actions on several issues about India. These included questions concerning the discriminatory Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2019; the impact of last year’s lockdown to contain COVID-19 on Adivasi, Dalit and Muslim communities; the arbitrary arrests of human-rights defenders; the weakening of labour laws; the 2020 farm laws; and the growth of Hindu-nationalist organisations in Germany. In response to several questions, the German government said it was monitoring the situation in India closely and raising issues with the Indian government. The German government acknowledged that some issues raised by the Die Linke members were valid, but stopped short of condemning the Indian government.

“In the opinion of the questioners, things are bad for democracy and rule of law in India,” members of Die Linke wrote in a strongly-worded introduction to their questions. On 1 April, the Bundestag, the German parliament, published the introduction along with Die Linke’s questions followed by the answers in the same document. Michel Brandt, a member of the German parliament and a signatory to the questionnaire, told me, “India is seen as a strategic partner and as a major market for Germany, so they always think twice before admitting there has been a severe backslide in terms of democracy in the country.”

The 1 April report was signed by Die Linke’s parliamentary group. It specifically mentioned the names of nine signatories from the group as well, including Brandt. Brandt is in charge of India’s affairs as a part of the German Parliament Human Rights Committee. To substantiate their questions, the Die Linke members cited articles—by publications such as The Guardian, The Scroll, The Wire, The Caravan—and reports by advocacy groups and research organisations including CIVICUS, Project Polis and Amnesty International. They also quoted reports by Collective Against the Violation and Abuse of Civil and Human Rights, or CAVACH, a Germany-based activist group.

The introduction to the questions elaborated on the concerns of the Die Linke members about the political situation in India. They said that according to CIVICUS, which defines itself as a global civil-society alliance, “the civil society space continues to close and the quality of democratic processes has been decreasing” since Prime Minister Narendra Modi was elected in 2014. It noted that when Modi was the chief minister of Gujarat, he was “partly to blame for the escalation” of the anti-Muslim riots that took place in the state in 2002. Following the violence, the Die Linke MPs noted, Modi was unwelcome in the United States and some European countries for a few years.

The Die Linke members noted an escalation in authoritarian behaviour after Modi's re-election in 2019. "The police and the military violently oppose activists and protesters, human rights defenders," they wrote in the introduction. "Human rights defenders are being ... searched and harassed. Freedom of the press is increasingly restricted, and arbitrary arrests, violence, and torture and extrajudicial killings are common. The Indian Government uses a variety of draconian laws to operate under the guise of national security to silence government critics and human rights defenders." The document specifically mentioned the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act of 2019, the National Security Act and the Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act of 1978 as tools to restrict the civil spaces in India.

The German government responded to five questions about the deterioration of civic space and attacks on human-rights activists in India in one answer. The government said that it was observing the developments in India, which it identified as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious parliamentary democracy. "At the same time, poverty, traditional caste thinking and religious or ethnic prejudices can fuel human rights abuses," the German government noted. "The indigenous people (Adivasi), casteless people (Dalits), women and children as well as religious minorities (among others Christians and Muslims) are most often disadvantaged and are most often victims of human rights violations."

The German government mentioned that it was speaking to the Indian government on various forums on a case-to-case basis. "Individual cases are determined by the federal government, the German diplomatic missions and the European Union delegation in New Delhi and addressed to the Indian government," it said. The reply mentioned that the delegation of the European Union in Delhi had "expressed concern" about the human-rights activists arrested in the Bhima Koregaon case to India's National Human Rights Commission on four occasions between June 2018 and April 2020.

Brandt told me that the German government's strategy of focusing on individual cases was unsurprising. "The German government is generally very careful of criticising countries that have a geopolitical or strategic relevance," he said. "This is similar to how they deal with Bolsonaro's Brazil or the authoritarian government in the Philippines, where they will, if at all, only discuss individual cases while ignoring more structural and widespread problems in a country."

The Die Linke members of parliament also mentioned that Modi is a member of the "paramilitary" Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. They wrote that the RSS has an ideology "inspired by the fascist movements in Europe led by Mussolini and Hitler." In fact, Die Linke raised several questions regarding the RSS's activities, both in the Indian government and in Germany.

One such question was on whether the federal government shared the view of the Die Linke members that the BJP's politics—which the left party mentioned is significantly influenced by the RSS—had authoritarian traits. The members also asked whether the

German government saw a link between the BJP's ideology and the rise of communal tensions, hate speech and lynchings in India.

The government gave one evasive answer for three of the questions on the RSS. "The federal government stands up to all political and social actors in India for democracy, rule of law and human rights," it said. It added that Modi has spoken against religiously or ideologically motivated violence on several occasions, but did not refer to any specific instances to support this. The German government further mentioned that official crime statistics did not record a significant increase in hate crimes between 2010 and 2017. But it also wrote that the Indian government had not released any data regarding hate crimes in the country since 2018.

Brandt criticised this response. "The uncritical acceptance of the Indian government's data on hate crimes really shows the interest-driven benevolence that Germany shows towards India," he said. "That is completely not acceptable."

The federal government was careful in answering questions regarding the role organisations of the Sangh Parivar in Germany. The RSS's international wing, the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, has been active in Germany since 2014. It runs five shakhas in the county. The Die Linke members asked the federal government whether it had held any meetings with the HSS—the government replied in the negative.

The Die Linke members also asked the government whether the federal domestic intelligence agency, the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, was monitoring the HSS. The BfV is called the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution in English. It monitors far-right groups in Germany. At one point in time, it had reportedly put the Alternative for Deutschland under surveillance too. The AfD is a far-right German political party often described as Neo-Nazi. The federal government replied that it could not publicly announce if the HSS was under the BfV's scanner. Brandt told me that the government had separately informed Die Linke later that the HSS was not under the BfV's scanner.

"The HSS were quite marginal in Germany until a recent influx of white-collar upper-caste Indians to Germany," Rosa B, an independent journalist in Germany and member of a collective called Berlin For India, told me. He asked not to be identified by his last name. "Normally, right-wing organisations like this in Germany work closely with the AfD," Rosa told me. "But I think the HSS is careful about their direct involvement with the AfD because they want to pretend they are only a cultural organisation. "

According to Rosa, the HSS had tried to curry favour with other political parties. A volunteer of CAVACH also made a similar remark. "The HSS has tried to ingratiate itself with various politicians in Germany," the CAVACH volunteer told me, requesting anonymity due to fear of repercussion. "In July 2020, they tried to hold an event alongside Sanne Kurz, a member of a state parliament of the Green party from Munich. When we heard about it, we submitted a detailed report to her outlining the links

between the HSS and the RSS and describing the ideology and actions of the RSS in India. She later cancelled the event.”

Kurz said HSS had not approached her to attend the event. She said that a mother of a kindergarten, “friend of my daughter” had approached her. “Only when the event was promoted I learned that ‘HSS’ hosts this event,” Kurz wrote to me. “A Google search from within Germany brought neither me nor my office to a conclusion [about] what that might be,” she said. Kurz said that in the summer of 2020, she had been an elected MP for just one and a half years, and that she has since learnt “that asking for a maximum of detail is always a necessity.” She told me that she had made clear to the organisers that she only participated in public events. “I was told that would be ok – however, they would not accept disturbance. Which made me a bit suspicious ... After I learned about HSS I understood their worries.”

When asked about the circumstances under which she withdrew from the event, she said she did not remember if CAVACH approached her. “In the end it came all down to time. – I was not available,” she said. Kurz added that she did not know if HSS was actively reaching out to German politicians. I asked the HSS about their activities in Germany, but they did not respond.

The Die Linke members also probed the German government about its view on the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Act of 2020, or the FCRA, that gave the Indian government more control over foreign donations to NGOs working here. The German government expressed concerns about the law, and pointed out that the work of “German development and human rights organisations” was seriously affected by it. “Some of these organisations fear considerable effects on their activities in India. This concern is shared by the Federal Government and was therefore impressed upon the Indian government,” the German government’s reply mentioned. It added that in October 2020, the European Union, Norway and Switzerland had also expressed concerns about the move to the Indian government through a letter.

The German government also gave insights on its views about the situation in Jammu and Kashmir post 5 August 2019, when the Indian state read down the erstwhile state’s special status amid a harsh military lockdown. The Die Linke members wrote in the introduction that “the militarisation of the region, extensive repression against opposition leaders and activists through arrests, denial of procedural law guarantees, preventing access to communication facilities and the massive restriction of freedom of press” were common in the Kashmir Valley after 5 August 2019. “While numerous communication services such as telephone, cellular, SMS were restored, the internet remained switched off or limited to 2G,” the introduction noted. It was in February 2021 that the government announced that 4G services were being restored in Kashmir.

For the most part, the German government’s responses to questions regarding the situation in Kashmir seemed to reiterate the Indian government’s position. “After 5 August, additional security measures have been adopted to protect the local population, especially in the Kashmir Valley, but rather has considerably restricted it for months”

after 5 August, the German government said. “But the Indian government continues to decrease these restrictions gradually.” It said that some political leaders who had been previously detained have now been released and that in November 2020 district councils were elected for the first time in the union territory.

The German government, however, seemed to ignore a few facts. Nearly half the erstwhile state did not vote in the November elections. Gunfights between the Indian army and militants had claimed multiple innocent lives. An Indian army officer had extra-judicially executed three civilians. In response to a question about the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, the German government noted that “NGOs report that human rights violations by representatives of the state ... are not adequately pursued or punished.”

The Die Linke members framed one section of their questions on the CAA and National Register of Citizens. Following the first round of the NRC in Assam, approximately 1.9 million people might be rendered stateless. The Die Linke members mentioned that at least 970 people are being held and in detention camps as a result of the NRC, of whom at least 29 people have died in the past few years. They also noted that at least 31 people died in nationwide demonstrations against the CAA.

The Die Linke members pointed to a study by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, a research institute in Delhi, to support a point about biases in the Indian police. The members said that the study “attested the police to have anti-Muslim prejudices as well increased willingness to use violence against (assumed) violent offenders.” Further, the members pointed to how members of the BJP and the Delhi police participated in the anti-Muslim violence in Delhi in February 2020.

The German government evaded taking a stand on these issues. Regarding a question on the human-rights dangers posed by the CAA, the government wrote, “The criticism of the change in the law that has been raised in public debate is primarily aimed at that belonging to a certain religion leads to a preference for naturalisation. This is seen as a violation of the country’s secular constitution.” It mentioned that to its knowledge, the Indian government was not currently pursuing the NRC project.

The Die Linke members posed another set of questions to the German government on the Indian state’s actions during the COVID-19 pandemic. It noted that during the pandemic, “the human-rights situation in India continues to deteriorate.” The members emphasised that the 2020 lockdown particularly affected women, Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim communities as well as informal-sector workers. They pointed out that “some states in response to corona-induced economic recession suspended occupational health and safety laws and extended the working day from 8 to 12 hours.” According to the Die Linke members, the suspension of the laws lowered health and safety standards.

In response to a question about the suspension of labour laws, the federal government said that German companies will not only have to respect Indian law, but also meet their

obligations under the German law in their supply chains. It mentioned that an alliance of 49 textile companies had written a letter to Modi on 21 July 2020, expressing concerns that the removal of labour laws. The German government said that India has not yet responded to the letter and that Germany has not held talks on the letter either. Responding to a question about the Indian units of German companies, the government said that it would be illegal for any German company in India to discriminate “on the basis of national and ethnic origin, social origin, sexual orientation, age, gender, political opinion, religion or worldview.”

The 1 April document briefly mentions the 2020 farm laws that Indian farmers have strongly opposed. The Die Linke members wrote that an estimated 131 farmers have died while protesting against the law. In their view, the farm laws were brought in “in an undemocratic manner and without adequate parliamentary debate.” According to them, these laws could have “serious effects such as hunger and malnutrition.” But the German government did not take a stand on the laws. It said that to its knowledge “agricultural experts judge the reform as adequate.” The federal government added that it hoped that the Indian government would “continue the ongoing discussions and endeavour to further develop the reform that has been initiated.”

In light of its other observations, the Die Linke members expressed concern that according to the research institute Bonn International Center for Conversion, the German government continued to approve arms exports to India. “Furthermore, in the northern states paramilitary groups implement the interests of the Indian government using German machine guns and pistols,” they wrote. They also mentioned that according to a BICC study, during missions of paramilitary groups, “there are often significant human rights violations.”

In replies to the questions on arms export to India, the German government said, “The federal government is pursuing a restrictive and responsible arms export policy.” It added, “The Federal Government decides on arms exports on a case-by-case basis and in the light of each individual situation after careful examination including considerations of foreign and security policy ... Respect for human rights in the recipient country plays a prominent role in the decision-making process.”

The Die Linke members wrote in the introduction, “From the perspective of the questioner, there has to be a rethinking of the German cooperation with the Indian government in which human rights over economic and geopolitical interests are placed.” But overall, it did not appear that the German federal government was on the same page. Brandt, however, appeared keen on pursuing the matter further. “The Hindu nationalist movement troubles us deeply,” he said. “The German government needs to recognise and address the human rights problems in India and act accordingly.”

Anti-fascist groups, human-rights organisations and members of progressive political parties have been taking a keen interest in India since 2019, Rosa told me. According to him, this interest was propelled by two incidents. “Firstly, in July 2019, the German ambassador visited the headquarters of the RSS,” he said, referring to Walter J Lindner,

the German ambassador to India. The second occurred in October that year when a group of 27 members of the European Parliament visited Kashmir in what looked like the Indian government's attempt to garner international support for reading down Article 370. The group comprised two members of the European Parliament from the AfD.

Rosa said that when the CAA was passed later that year, Germany saw "major protests against the fascist nature of the Indian government." He told me that Berlin for India organised seven or eight demonstrations against the CAA and in solidarity with the protesters in India. CAVACH was born out of the CAA movement in December 2019 too. "Several such organisations that started taking shape across Europe constituted by the Indian diaspora following the passage of the CAA and police brutality against students," a second volunteer of the CAVACH told me. Rosa said that in January and February this year, marches were held in Germany to express solidarity with those protesting the 2020 farm laws in India.

"Many of these were the coordinated efforts of anti-fascist groups, Dalit studies collectives and other organisations," he told me. "It is part of a broader network building leftist indigenous resistance to global fascism. It stands against Modi as much as against the Brazilian or Turkish government." Rosa and CAVACH volunteers said that the Die Linke members' questions were a result of their activism.

"People in Germany are not as keenly aware of the situation in India as they are about, say, Palestine," Rosa told me. "And I think that stems from the fact that most of the South Asians here are recent migrants, most of them upper-caste people in white-collar jobs." He said that things were changing in Germany though. "Now we do have Indians from Bahujan backgrounds here, many who work as gig-workers, precarious workers. They are already being tied into left politics here. There is also a sizeable Tamil and Kashmiri diaspora, all of whom will stand against Hindutva."

The second CAVACH volunteer agreed. "There is a clear growing awareness about the authoritarian nature of the Indian government, even among politicians in Germany," the second CAVACH volunteer said. "Members of the Greens, Die Linke and the SPD—Social Democratic Party of Germany—"do keep informed about the situation there. Even others do know, but these are the parties that are likely to value human rights more than the viability of India as a major trade partner."

The activists mentioned that people in Germany are more cautious when distinguishing between authoritarianism and fascism. "I think unlike in other countries, both activists and politicians are more scared of referring to Nazism or Fascism," the first CAVACH volunteer told me. "This is because the horrors of that period are known in detail, and people are wary of using that word flippantly." The May Day demonstration is a major event in Berlin every year. Rosa told me that this year the May Day demonstration is being led by mig-antifa, an antifascist movement representing the rights of migrants in Europe, and will represent South Asian workers. "Germans have largely ignored what is going in India till now, or at least called it authoritarian while being too scared to use the 'f-word,'" Rosa told me. "That is changing very quickly."

Obsessed with power games, Centre & Kejriwal govt ignored Delhi hospital issues flagged with NHRC last year: Ajay Maken

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/obsessed-with-power-games-centre-kejriwal-govt-ignored-delhi-hospital-issues-flagged-with-nhrc-last-year-ajay-maken/articleshow/82332847.cms>

All India Congress Committee (AICC) general secretary Ajay Maken has welcomed the stern intervention by the Supreme Court bench which on Friday asked the Centre and the Delhi government to shoulder the responsibility, without indulging in politicking, in effectively tackling the grave Covid-19 situation in the national capital, including non-availability of adequate oxygen and other medical requirements.

“The Supreme Court bench comprising Justices DY Chandrachud, S Ravindra Bhat and L Nageswara Rao, has made the absolutely right and much-needed intervention to make the Centre and the Delhi government to, finally, act to deal with the appalling Covid-19 situation in Delhi. I hope and pray the intervention of the SC will make the Centre and the Delhi government to end their mindless power games and start addressing the concerns of the people, especially those struggling to find medical care in Delhi,” Maken told ET. The senior Congress leader from Delhi also said he had moved a petition with the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) when Delhi was grappling with the first outbreak of the Covid-19 last year, seeking its intervention to make the Centre and Delhi governments to take steps to reinforce medical facilities. “In my petition to the NHRC last year, when Delhi was hit by the first wave of Covid-19, I had complained about inadequate oxygen beds, ICUs and testings in Delhi hospitals. I felt the inadequate medical facilities prevailing in Delhi hospitals in dealing with the Covid-19 situation did amount to a complete violation of the basic human rights of the people of Delhi. On 10, June 2019, NHRC issued notices to both the Centre and the Delhi government, asking them to look into the issues I had raised in my petition”. Maken lamented that Delhi, which has six super speciality hospitals of the Central government, over 12,000 beds in government hospitals and despite having many important private hospitals, failed to see any concrete efforts from the Centre or state government to reinforce Delhi medical infrastructure to prepare it to meet the requirements to tackle the pandemic. “Both the Centre and the Delhi government had then kept reassuring the NHRC about taking adequate steps. With the Covid cases (of the first wave) coming down on its own by late last year, the NHRC closed the case on January 18. But, going by the extremely grim situation in Delhi now, it is absolutely clear that both the Centre and Delhi did nothing either to learn from last year’s experience or, to reinforce the medical infrastructure in Delhi. All that the Centre and the Delhi government have been doing was indulging in petty power-games and in passing the buck to each other. The attitude of the Centre and the Delhi government is both unacceptable and highly irresponsible,” Maken said.

'UNION, STATE OBSESSED WITH POWER GAMES'

Centre, Kejriwal Ignored Hospital Issues Flagged With NHRC: Maken

Our Political Bureau

New Delhi: All India Congress Committee (AICC) general secretary Ajay Maken has welcomed the stern intervention by the Supreme Court bench which on Friday asked the Centre and the Delhi government to shoulder the responsibility, without indulging in politicking, in effectively tackling the grave Covid-19 situation in the national capital, including non-availability of adequate oxygen and other medical requirements.

"The Supreme Court bench comprising Justices DY Chandrachud, S Ravindra Bhat and L Nageswara Rao, has made the absolutely right and much-needed intervention to make the Centre and the Delhi government to, finally, act to deal with the appalling Covid-19 situation in Delhi. I hope and pray the intervention of the SC will make the Centre and the Delhi government to end their mindless power games and start addressing the concerns of the people, especially those struggling to find medical care in Delhi," Maken told ET.

The senior Congress leader from Delhi also said he had moved a petition with the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) when Delhi was grappling with the first outbreak of the Covid-19 last year, seeking its intervention to make the Centre and Delhi governments to take steps to reinforce medical facilities.

"In my petition to the NHRC last year, when Delhi was hit by the first wave of Covid-19, I had complained about inadequate oxygen beds,

**RAISED ISSUE IN 2020**

In my petition to the NHRC last year, when Delhi was hit by

the first wave of Covid-19, I had complained about inadequate oxygen beds, ICUs and testings in Delhi hospitals: Maken

ICUs and testings in Delhi hospitals. I felt the inadequate medical facilities prevailing in Delhi hospitals in dealing with the Covid-19 situation did amount to a complete violation of the basic human rights of the people of Delhi. On 10, June 2019, NHRC issued notices to both the Centre and the Delhi government, asking them to look into the issues I had raised in my petition".

'UNION, STATE OBSESSED WITH POWER GAMES'

Centre, Kejriwal Ignored Hospital Issues Flagged With NHRC: Maken

Our Political Bureau

New Delhi: All India Congress Committee (AICC) general secretary Ajay Maken has welcomed the stern intervention by the Supreme Court bench which on Friday asked the Centre and the Delhi government to shoulder the responsibility, without indulging in politicking, in effectively tackling the grave Covid-19 situation in the national capital, including non-availability of adequate oxygen and other medical requirements.

"The Supreme Court bench comprising Justices DY Chandrachud, S Ravindra Bhat and L Nageswara Rao, has made the absolutely right and much-needed intervention to make the Centre and the Delhi government to, finally, act to deal with the appalling Covid-19 situation in Delhi. I hope and pray the intervention of the SC will make the Centre and the Delhi government to end their mindless power games and start addressing the concerns of the people, especially those struggling to find medical care in Delhi," Maken told ET.

The senior Congress leader from Delhi also said he had moved a petition with the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) when Delhi was grappling with the first outbreak of the Covid-19 last year, seeking its intervention to make the Centre and Delhi governments to take steps to reinforce medical facilities.

"In my petition to the NHRC last year, when Delhi was hit by the first wave of Covid-19, I had complained about inadequate oxygen beds,



RAISED ISSUE IN 2020



In my petition to the NHRC last year, when Delhi was hit by

the first wave of Covid-19, I had complained about inadequate oxygen beds, ICUs and testings in Delhi hospitals: Maken

ICUs and testings in Delhi hospitals. I felt the inadequate medical facilities prevailing in Delhi hospitals in dealing with the Covid-19 situation did amount to a complete violation of the basic human rights of the people of Delhi. On 10, June 2019, NHRC issued notices to both the Centre and the Delhi government, asking them to look into the issues I had raised in my petition".