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Gandhi and Communal Harmony

Ram Puniyani

Indian society is going through difficult times. In the name of religion horrific violence is going on. In this violence, innocent people get killed and generally those guilty of violence are not punished. This violence is possible due to the hate which has been created in society, hate against religious minorities. This hate has been created by projecting a pattern of history, communal history, which revolves around the religion of the medieval kings. Contrary to this communal version of history propagated by communal forces, Gandhi has a very rational understanding of Indian history, and because of this understanding, he could talk of peace and unity.

Communal History

Muslim communalists assert that the Muslim Nation has existed in India since the time of Mohammad bin Kasim, who first won over Sindh in 8th Century. The Hindu communalists assert that this has been a Hindu nation since times immemorial, and that Muslims are foreigners. They also talk of atrocities of Muslim kings, and present the fight between Hindu and Muslim kings as battles between Hindus and

Muslims. Gandhi on the contrary disseminates an understanding which is more rational, non-sectarian and all-inclusive. In *Hind Swaraj* he points out,

The Hindus flourished under Moslem sovereigns and Moslems under the Hindu. Each party recognised that mutual fighting was suicidal, and that neither party would abandon its religion by force of arms. Both parties, therefore, decided to live in peace. With the English advent, quarrels recommenced.

... Should we not remember that many Hindus and Mohammedans own the same ancestors and the same blood runs through their veins? Do people become enemies because they change their religion? Is the God of the Mohammedan different from the God of the Hindu? Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal? Wherein is the cause of quarreling?

Moreover, there are deadly proverbs as between the followers of Siva and those of Vishnu, yet nobody suggests that these two do not belong to the same nation. It is said that the Vedic religion is different from

Jainism, but the followers of the respective faiths are not different nations. The fact is that we have become enslaved and, therefore, quarrel and like to have our quarrels decided by a third party.

This is precisely what the truth of history is. Battles between kings were for power and wealth while the average people interacted with each other and created syncretic traditions and culture. There also developed the religious streams which drew from each other and enriched the society as a whole. What is Indian culture? Is it Hindu? Is it Muslim or what? As such India is one of the few places where all religions have flourished without any discrimination. Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Sikhism are the major religions that people have been following in India for centuries. Some of these were born here and others came in and spread through different mechanisms, like the teachings of saints, Sufis, missionaries, etc. Islam mainly spread through the teachings of Sufi saints, and Christianity through missionaries working for charity in the arena of education and health. All aspects of culture had a rich sprinkling from people of different religions.

Perceptions and Reality

The popular perception of identifying communal violence with religion was criticised by the Mahatma. He was clear that religion should not be used for political goals or for violence, “The Hindu thinks that in quarreling with the Mussalman he is benefiting Hinduism, and the Mussalman thinks that in fighting a Hindu he is benefiting Islam. But each is ruining his faith.” (*Young India*, January 27, 1927, p. 31.)

For him the essence of true religion was the moral values of the religion, not the external issues related to rituals and symbols etc. He points out, “The essence of true religious teaching is that one should serve and befriend all. I learnt this in my mother’s lap. You may refuse to call me a Hindu. I know no defense except to quote a line from Iqbal’s famous song: *Majhab nahin sikhata aapas mein bair rakhna*, meaning, religion does not teach us to bear ill-will towards one another. It is easy enough to be friendly to one’s friends. But to befriend the one who regards himself as your enemy is the quintessence of true religion.” (*Harijan*, May 11, 1947 p. 146)

Religious Tolerance

His commitment to religious tolerance was infinite. He was for having respect for all human beings irrespective of their caste, colour, creed and religion. To overcome mutual suspicion and hate he was for interaction of communities at all levels, something which is very much needed even today. This is the only way to overcome mutual suspicion, “It is only when the Hindus are inspired with a feeling of pure love . . . that Hindu-Muslim unity can be expected. As with the Hindus so with the Mussalmans. The leaders among the latter should meet together and consider their duty towards the Hindus. When both are inspired by a spirit of sacrifice, when both try to do their duty towards one another instead of pressing their rights, then and then only would the long standing differences between the two communities cease. Each must respect the other’s religion, must refrain from even secretly thinking ill of the other. We must politely dissuade members of both the communities from indulging

in bad language against one another. Only a serious endeavour in this direction can remove the estrangement between us.” (*The Vow of Hindu-Muslim Unity*, April 8, 1919.) This seems to be as true today as it was nearly a century ago, or probably it is needed much more today than at that time.

“India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it. The introduction of foreigners does not necessarily destroy the nation; they merge in it. A country is one nation only when such a condition obtains in it. That country must have a faculty for assimilation. India has ever been such a country. In reality there are as many religions as there are individuals; but those who are conscious of the spirit of nationality do not interfere with one another’s religion. If they do, they are not fit to be considered a nation. If the Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in dreamland. The Hindus, the Mahomedans, the Parsis and the Christians who have made India their country are fellow countrymen, and they will have to live in unity, if only for their own interest. In no part of the world are one nationality and one religion synonymous terms; nor has it ever been so in India.” (*Hind Swaraj*)

Tolerance and Diversity

As Gandhi was working in a plural atmosphere with a respect for diversity he could see the need for mutual tolerance in a practical way. Each other’s way of eating, worship and other things which are different have to be respected by the other, “Mutual toleration is a necessity for all time and for all races. We cannot live in peace if the Hindu will not tolerate the

Mohammadan form of worship of God and his manners and customs, or if Mohammedans will be impatient of Hindu idolatry or cow-worship. It is not necessary for toleration that I must approve of what I tolerate. I heartily dislike drinking, meat-eating and smoking, but I tolerate all these in Hindus, Mohammedans and Christians even as I expect them to tolerate my abstinence from all these although they may dislike it. All the quarrels between the Hindus and the Mohammedans have arisen from each wanting to force the other to his view. (*Young India*, February 25, 1920)

He could reconcile faith in religion with Indian nationalism. He gave due respect to a person's religion while ensuring that Indian nationalism is the first identity of that person, "Nationalism is greater than sectarianism. And in that sense, we are Indians first, and Hindus, Mussalmans, Parsis, Christians after." (*Young India*, January 26, 1922)

At the same time Gandhi was clear that religion is a personal matter, not to be brought into the political space. "If religion is allowed to be, as it is, a personal concern and a matter between God and man, there are many dominating common factors between the two which will compel common life and common action. Religions are not for separating men from one another, they are meant to bind them. It is a misfortune that today they are so distorted that they have become a potent cause of strife and mutual slaughter." (*Harijan*, June 8, 1940)

In today's times where so much violence is taking place in the name of religion, Gandhi's teachings on Hindu-Muslim unity can show the path towards a peaceful society.

Why Universal Basic Income is Fraught With Serious Problems

Prabhat Patnaik

With Congress president Rahul Gandhi's announcement recently at Raipur that his party had taken a "historic decision" to introduce an income guarantee scheme for the poor, and with the general anticipation that the Narendra Modi government's last budget will also announce an income support scheme in some form, at least for "farmers", the idea of a "universal basic income" for the Indian population is once more in the air. This idea was mooted two years ago in the Government of India's Economic Survey, though it was meant only for discussion and represented the views not of the government itself but rather of the chief economic advisor of that time who, in turn was giving expression to an old World Bank prescription.

We must start with a distinction. Though the term "universal basic income" is bandied about, the proposals made on the question usually refer to what should more aptly be called a "targeted income top-up scheme", i.e, a scheme where certain segments of the population are given a certain amount of extra income support, on top of what they are already presumed to be earning, in order purportedly to bring them up to a certain minimum level of income. This was true of the *Economic Survey* discussion. And even Rahul Gandhi's phraseology, namely "income guarantee", suggests that he, too, has in mind a targeted income top-up scheme rather than one that actually ensures a basic income for all.

While even this may at first sight appear a welcome move, it is fraught with serious problems. The first question to ask is whether this scheme would be in addition to the subsidies and the welfare schemes already in existence, or whether it would replace such existing welfare expenditures.

Again, most suggestions in this regard visualise a replacement, implicitly if not explicitly, of existing schemes, in which case what appears at first sight as income guarantee would cease to be so in reality. Not only would an income support calculated on the basis of existing prices and price subsidies be obviously inadequate when such subsidies are withdrawn, but even if the calculations do incorporate the effect of the withdrawal of such price-subsidies, they would still be inadequate in the absence of guaranteed *delivery* of goods and services.

The amount of income support, for instance, may be calculated on the assumption that the public distribution system (PDS) would be withdrawn, and that everybody would have to pay the open market price for foodgrains; but income support calculated even on this assumption would still not be enough if foodgrains are not actually delivered to the people. The PDS, in other words, does not just provide subsidised foodgrains to some; it also ensures that foodgrains are actually delivered to many. The withdrawal of PDS would leave people without

assured food delivery, and cash income support would not *per se* bring them adequate foodgrains.

More generally too, the proposition that cash support can substitute for provisioning in kind, that, for instance, a payment to parents to cover the expenses of a child's mid-day meal can adequately replace the mid-day meal scheme itself, is wrong. The mid-day meal scheme serves multiple objectives, not just satisfying hunger but also ensuring proper nutrition, and overcoming social divisions among children. These multiple objectives cannot be fulfilled if parents are simply handed cash to pay for their children's meals. Hence, if the cash income support scheme is to be in lieu of existing welfare schemes, and there is a great danger of this happening for financial reasons, then that would be entirely undesirable. A cash income support, if it is to be meaningful, must be in addition to the existing welfare schemes; and these schemes must also continue to grow alongside such support.

Likewise, income support for "farmers" is often mooted as a substitute for the provision of a minimum support price for crops. This really amounts not to an offer of support to "farmers", but rather to a rolling back of support: it means that the government merely hands out a certain sum of money to "farmers" and then washes its hands of them and leaves them to the mercy of market price fluctuations.

A distinction is often drawn between "merit" and "non-merit" subsidies, and it is suggested that the income support scheme should be financed by cutting down "non-merit" subsidies. But many have estimated that the so-called "non-merit subsidies" have already been so

curtailed that any further curtailment in them would hardly generate much funds, certainly not enough to finance an income support scheme. More importantly, however, even this distinction between merit and non-merit subsidies is problematic.

Consider, for instance, one oft-mentioned non-merit subsidy, namely, the fertiliser subsidy. If the curtailment of fertiliser subsidy increases the cost of production for the peasantry and if this necessitates an increase in the procurement price, and hence the issue price under PDS, then this curtailment, though deemed to have affected only a non-merit subsidy, would hurt the poor. On the other side, if the issue price is not raised and the food subsidy is increased instead, then a cut in one subsidy would have led to an increase in another. Hence, distinguishing between merit and non-merit subsidies and assuming that the latter can be curtailed with impunity is not as valid as appears at first sight.

If an income support is to be given, without cutting existing welfare schemes and subsidies that benefit the poor, then additional taxes have to be raised (unless the government is willing to enforce cuts in some of its non-welfare expenditures, like defence). And if these taxes are not simply to take away from the poor what is given to them as income support, then they would have to take the form of direct taxes (such as income, capital gains, and wealth taxes) rather than of indirect taxes which typically impinge on the poor. Any increase in these direct taxes, however, would be opposed by the big capitalists and by globalised finance capital. Hence, no government that doesn't have the will to defy these powerful entities,

can provide genuine income support to the poor.

It is noteworthy in this context that some of the most enthusiastic supporters of the "Basic Income Scheme" are to be found among the neo-liberal stalwarts of the financial press who hold the interests of the big bourgeoisie dear to their hearts, and among current and former World Bank executives. This suggests that income support is expected to be provided not in addition to the existing welfare schemes but through a replacement of such schemes. Such replacement would not only subvert the goal of poverty alleviation but would also amount to a further disengagement of the State from the task of providing essential goods and services to the population. (At the most it would mean helping the poor not at the expense of the rich but at the expense of the slightly less poor).

Income support, contrary to appearances, therefore, amounts to a further drift in the direction of neo-liberalism, of the State washing its hands of the poor after handing them a certain sum of money whose real value too would dwindle over time.

The theoretical argument for income support usually invokes the proposition that the provision of employment for all has become well-nigh impossible in the current scenario. This, no doubt, is true of neoliberal capitalism, though it is made out to be a proposition of universal validity, irrespective of the mode of production. But let us for the moment accept this proposition as true. In such a case, the State should provide an income payment to the workforce in lieu of the wage income which they would have earned if employed; in addition, however, since the right to employment is

not the only economic right, but has to be supplemented by a whole set of other economic rights, the State has to provide these other rights as well. Income support, in other words, has to go together with the provision of free, quality, universal, public education; free, quality, universal, public healthcare through a National Health Service; subsidised food through a universal PDS; adequate old-age pension and disability benefits; and so on.

Putting it differently, if citizenship is to encompass a set of universal economic rights, which it must if poverty alleviation is not to become a matter of largesse by the State, then income support can only be a means of realising one of the rights that is otherwise supposedly unattainable, namely the right to employment. But this does not negate the need for guaranteeing the other rights, such as the right to free education and free healthcare etc. Income support cannot be a substitute for these other rights. It has to be combined with these other rights.

(Prabhat Patnaik taught at the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning in Jawaharlal Nehru University from 1974 until his retirement in 2010.)

Some 'Reservations' on the Modi Government's Reservation for EWS

Surajit Mazumdar

I

Since independence and even earlier, India has been characterised by an enduring duality in which the reality of an inegalitarian and oppression-ridden society has co-existed with a widespread and even growing urge for equality and justice. The inequalities prevailing in Indian society are multi-dimensional in which new ones emerging with time are intertwined in complex but mutually reinforcing ways with those handed down from the past. Caste and gender discrimination are knitted into the fabric of a society whose economic domain is also marked by sharp inequalities in control over resources and exploitative relationships. Most Indians are subject to at least one among several inequalities and oppressions, an overwhelming majority of them to more than one acting in tandem and a considerable part to all of them. In the absence of changes that would address the structural roots of these, affirmative action in the form of reservations in education and public employment—for members of social groups who are disadvantaged by the social realities from accessing the limited opportunities for these—has been the only substantive response of the Indian state to the demands for equality and justice. The creation and development of this reservation policy and its implementation has also been impaired by the resistance from the more privileged sections of Indian society and their power.

Opposition to caste-based reservations has expressed itself from time to time without succeeding in abolishing it or preventing some expansion in its scope. Indeed, how far at least the political discourse in India had moved was reflected in the fact that anti-reservation movements had to also couch their opposition as a fight against 'casteism'. Another example of this was the emergence of a political 'consensus' such that no major political formation operating within the framework of India's electoral democracy opposes the reservation policy, even if in government they only serve the interests of the privileged. More recently, we have also seen traditionally higher status caste groups demand recognition of their 'backwardness' and the extension of the benefit of reservations to them. From the old anti-reservation movements that were rooted in pure caste prejudice to these new demands for reservations that could have some basis also in the agrarian crisis produced by the impact of neo-liberalism in India—the significant existence of poverty and low economic status within the minority of the population excluded from the ambit of caste-based reservation has always been evoked. Are they not disadvantaged too and aren't many of them poorer than most of the actual beneficiaries of reservation? This is the question that has been thus always posed.

It is, however, a gross manipulation of the idea of equality

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if the disadvantages of economic backwardness of some within them are highlighted only to create an upper caste consolidation in favour of preserving a structure of caste and class privilege—which is also at the root of the economic backwardness being referred to. This would be no different from the contradiction that has always been visible in India but become even more marked in the last three decades—the invoking of the poverty of most Indians to rationalise economic policies which have exacerbated poverty, unemployment and inequality. A fundamentally different politics is to rupture any such upper caste unity and create instead a wider unity of the underprivileged in the struggle for transforming the socio-economic structure of caste and class privilege itself—which is certainly not the politics which the BJP represents. A case for incorporating within the reservation system some component based on an economic criterion had emerged in the past as part of an effort to create a larger social consensus in favour of the policy of reservation in education and public employment for SCs, STs and subsequently OBCs. However, the Modi government's desperate move to introduce reservation for 'economically weaker sections', sidestepping through a recourse to Constitutional amendments the constraints on such reservation imposed by Supreme Court judgments, clearly doesn't fall in that category. It is instead a naked attempt to fortify its electoral prospects by creating an upper caste consolidation.

II

There are so many aspects of the introduction of reservation for

'economically weaker sections' that are obvious indicators of its true political intent. The first is of course its timing—the fact that it was introduced four and a half-years after the Government assumed office and as the country is heading towards the national elections, and soon after the BJP suffered electoral reverses in three states it had been ruling, made it clear what prompted it. The haste with which the Constitutional amendments were pushed through in a matter of such magnitude, bypassing normal Parliamentary procedure and without the conduct of any proper study which could provide a sound basis for any policy, only adds to the evidence of the cynical calculations behind the Modi government's move. Even the data generated by the Socio-Economic Caste Census but not yet made public was not used for this purpose.

That the measure is largely for propaganda purposes and has little real benefits to offer to anyone is also clear from the Modi Government's record on the employment front, particularly in public sector employment. Union Budget documents show that about 75,000 jobs were lost in Central Government Establishments (Ministries, Railways, Postal Department, Police, etc.) between 2014 and 2017, and evidence indicates further reduction in 2018. According to the Public Enterprises Survey, in Central Public-Sector Enterprises (PSEs) total employment has shrunk from 16.91 lakhs in 2014 to 14.66 lakhs in 2018—2 lakh 25 thousand jobs have vanished. RBI data shows that in Public Sector Banks, some trend of increase between 2009 and 2015 was reversed and in the next two years some 35,000 jobs were lost. Thus, if the jobs to which reservation could

apply are themselves disappearing, how many can get the benefit of any new additional reservation flowing from the Constitutional amendment whose passage by the Lok Sabha was described by Modi as "a landmark moment in our nation's history"? As regards admissions to higher education institutions, the MHRD and the UGC which have been quick to instruct Central institutions to implement the new reservation policy, have not too long ago also been the chief actors in slashing the number of admissions to the research programmes in these institutions through the imposition of the UGC 2016 Regulations.

That the Modi Government is appealing to upper caste identity rather than economic backwardness is also evident from the criteria by which the economically weaker sections are being defined. Fixing of the level of the annual family income below which one would be deemed to be economically weak and eligible for reservation at Rupees 8 lakh (or almost 67,000 rupees a month) is bizarre given India's economic realities where more than 95 per cent of the population has a lower income level. The number of individuals declaring an annual income above Rs 8 lakh wouldn't even number 1 crore in a population of over 130 crores. A significant section of even regularly employed government and public sector employees would be having an annual income below the 8 lakh level. Would the Government be willing to use the same criteria of economic backwardness to identify who should be beneficiaries of 'targeted' schemes or use it as a justification for raising MNREGA wages and raising the minimum salary levels of its own employees? Other than in the context of reservation,

would the Modi government be even willing to concede that such a large proportion of Indians are economically backward and poor?

However, while all the above have allowed people to see through the hollowness of this “welfare” measure of the Modi government and to understand its true intent, there are also deeper issues which go beyond these. The policy of reserving 10 per cent of seats/jobs for the economically weaker sections, as is being implemented by the BJP government, in effect is insidiously redefining and perverting the meaning of ‘equality’. This may be the real long-term consequence of the cynical short-term and ill thought out gimmickry of the Modi Government. If it passes judicial scrutiny in its current form, it might mean a more fundamental change to the Constitution.

III

In the reservation policy that has been in force, general category candidates were eligible to be considered for all unreserved posts. This category therefore doesn’t refer to any distinct social group for whom 50.5% of seats or positions were reserved—it in fact includes all sections of society but without any reference to their social and economic position. Any one making the cut in the general merit list (even someone eligible for SC/ST or OBC reservation) was assigned an unreserved seat/post. The 10 per cent reserved for economically weaker sections under the new policy, however, is not similarly open to anyone irrespective of social background as long as they meet the additional criteria of economic backwardness—it is only available to “persons who are not

covered under the existing scheme of reservations for the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and Socially and Educationally Backward Classes”. In this exclusion of SCs/STs and OBCs from its purview lies a problem.

‘Economically weaker section’ is defined solely based on some economic status. As such, it cannot privilege those who have this exclusive disadvantage vis-à-vis those who have an additional disadvantage derived from caste status. No constitutional amendment should be able to bring such a privileging within the ambit of ‘equality’. It is precisely such a privileging, however, that is inevitable if the economically weaker among SCs, STs and OBCs are excluded from the purview of the 10 per cent reserved for the economically weak. Even a poor SC/ST or OBC candidate with a higher merit position may have to be passed over to allot a seat or a post to someone in this set of reserved positions. Indeed, since the income threshold for determining who is economically backward is identical to that for separating the creamy layer among OBCs, the new policy of reservation means excluding all SCs, STs and OBCs from 10 per cent of seats/posts—which amounts to discrimination and reversal of one of the underlying principles of affirmative action.

When the same economic level is employed to determine who is purely backward economically as employed to exclude the creamy-layer among OBCs, it amounts to saying that OBCs and anyone who does not suffer any disadvantage from caste status are also the same if they have the same level of economic disadvantage. Both are entitled to

reservation on an equivalent basis—one to 27 per cent of seats/posts and the other to 10 per cent of the total—which is the same as saying there is 37 per cent reservation for the economically disadvantaged divided up among two groups of those so disadvantaged. In the process what is forgotten is the fact that the creamy layer in OBCs is not supposed to be made up of those who are free from economic backwardness but those whose economic privileges are of such an order as to enable them to overcome the social disadvantages of their caste status. A distinction is made in this regard between OBCs and SCs only because the latter are subject to the most extreme social oppression which no economic status can neutralise.

The equation of the non-creamy layer among OBCs and the economically weak among others who don’t suffer a caste related social disadvantage also of course increases the proportion of the latter even in the total population of the country. Even then, it has not even been ascertained what is that share or what would be the share if a more reasonable criteria of defining economically weak were to be adopted. Are they high enough to justify a 10 per cent reservation for that group when the OBC reservation is capped at 27 per cent, a proportion that is way-way below their share in the Indian population? Indeed, if the proportion of reserved seats/posts can now exceed 50 per cent, one might ask—what is the rationale for keeping the OBC reservation capped at 27% when their proportion in the population is much higher? That the SC/ST reservation percentages are closer to their shares in the population while that in the case of OBCs was much

less can be justified in different ways including the fact of differences in the degree of discrimination and oppression these social groups have traditionally been subject to. However, no such rationale can justify the economically backward within those social groups not covered by any other reservation having any disproportionately larger benefit of reservation as compared to non-creamy layer OBCs. Within the 37 per cent, the division into 10 per cent reservation for the former and 27 per cent for the latter would without doubt amount to privileging the former unless they were far more than 20 per cent or so of the total Indian population. In other words, it has to be assumed that social groups who enjoy a disproportionately large share in the control over economic resources and representation in higher income groups are also almost entirely economic weak!

Reservation for SCs, STs and OBCs and such traditionally excluded groups also has a representational element—and it can be so because those getting the benefit of it do not lose in the process their membership of the social groups which they represent. If the reservation is only on a purely economic criterion, the same doesn't apply, particularly in public employment. If the bar for defining 'economically weak' is kept close to the minimum income in public employment, then anyone entering public employment ceases to be 'economically weak'. If on the other hand the bar is kept much higher, as it has been, then the 'economically weak' automatically have 'representation' in public employment—a significant proportion of such employees is automatically "economically weak" and this is because the government

pays them too little! The only way, therefore, that reservation for economically weaker sections does come under the ambit of 'representation' is by its limitation to those who do not have the benefits of SC/ST/OBC reservation—but that makes it a representation of those who are socially privileged and already over represented rather than of those who are economically backward.

IV

The complex issues opened up by any move to introduce reservations for economically weaker sections may have been examined, scrutinised and even

addressed in the formulation of a reservation policy—provided the intentions behind it were genuine and the necessary study, deliberation and discussion had been undertaken. That is not something the Modi government has time for—in its haste to play on the upper caste sentiments that might exist on either side of an economic divide, it has initiated another jumla that achieves little in moving things forward and instead undoes some of the achievements of the past. That, unfortunately, has been a bit of a pattern with it.

(Surajit Mazumdar is a Professor of Economics in Jawaharlal Nehru University.)

Remembering George Fernandes As He Was, Before He Lost Himself

Nitya Ramakrishnan

George Fernandes first entered my life when I was six or seven years old, as a cause of envy. For, when he once came to Delhi, my father took my brother Niranjana to see him, leaving me behind. His signature scripted in Devanagari in my brother's autograph book was a daily reminder of the exclusion. But I did come to know George eventually, a privilege that I owe to my father K.G. Ramakrishnan, a lifelong socialist who had participated in the 1942 Quit India movement.

A friend and admirer of Ram Manohar Lohia, my father attributed the emerging relevance of George Fernandes in Indian politics to the genius of the great Doctor Sahib as much as to Fernandes's own array of talents. The secret of success

lies not only in knowing how to lead, but also in knowing how to be led, as Fernandes's equation—first with Placid D'Mello and then with Lohia—would bear out.

The socialist pantheon in the '60s and '70s was impressive, but even amongst its stalwarts, the cerebral Madhu Limaye and the dashing George Fernandes stood out. Lohia's uncanny instinct could spot and galvanise political energy to fight the degenerating ethos of the Congress party. Key to this was an organised workers' movement and George Fernandes was the man for this task.

George's march from a seminary in Bangalore to the trade unions of Bombay is legendary. The effortless mastery of Hindi, Marathi and

other languages, the ability to forge (and break) alliances and above all, the sheer magnetism that could command lasting loyalty, marked him with a heroism that would endure. It would endure because behind the dazzle and the sparkle lay a core of genuine moral courage. The many physical assaults and spells of incarceration that George suffered unflinchingly in free India gave hope that the spirit of Gandhi had survived the marginalisation of the Mahatma by the Congress.

The astonishing defeat of S.K. Patil in Bombay South brought George into the Lok Sabha in 1967, making it clear that his organisational talent was not limited to trade unionism. He had come to stay in national politics. The 1974 railway strike and its sabotage by a vicious state—through the betrayal of those who might have been his ideological comrades—is a story that must be told afresh for the coming generations. Here I will only refer to a remark Madhu Limaye made to me personally, in his usual dry tone, but barely masking a wealth of affection and admiration for his old comrade: “You all know of George’s ability in organising the strike—do you know what strategy and courage it took to call it off?”

As teenagers, our political baptism was the Emergency of 1975 and George Fernandes was its unmistakable hero. With his amazing contacts, he got wind of it in the evening of June 25, ahead of its declaration at midnight. In an instant, he disguised himself as a fisherman and went underground. My father met him in those days, which I did not then know. As I write, my brother tells me that on one occasion my father got into a waiting car where George was

sitting and drove around with him for an hour discussing resistance. They, the men in my family, kept all this exciting stuff from me. But just the thought that George was out and about in those dark days thrilled my young mind. Then, on June 10, 1976, he was caught. So important was his capture to the rulers and their opponents alike, that even the muzzled press could not but broadcast the fact. I myself learnt of it from the ‘Spot News’ stand on Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg and felt that all was now lost.

Shackled, not silenced

But, George Fernandes in chains proved more potent than a free George Fernandes. Every production in court was turned by him into a political campaign. Holding his manacled hands aloft, he would signify defiance with every gesture. That picture will be my lasting memory of George.

That spirit of defiance, the moral force of Jayaprakash Narayan’s leadership and some incidental factors led to the declaration of elections in 1977. Thinking first that it was a ruse for legitimising the Emergency, George and Madhu Limaye argued for a boycott but were wisely overruled.

George was in jail during the election campaign. I recall getting off a bus on my way home from college—at a stop just outside 5 Dupleix Road (now Kamraj Marg). That was then the home of Morarji Desai. The days were different and the leaders were not behind walls of security. I had only to walk in to meet Morarji bhai. I asked him why he had issued no statement in support of George Fernandes, who was contesting the election from prison. “I do not support violence.”

said the man clad in spotless white. Too disappointed and too young to understand the quality of his conviction, I made my way home with a heavy heart.

But the people of India were straining at the leash. And George Fernandes was George Fernandes. He “romped home” as per the election lingo of the times, from Muzzaffarpur, Bihar with nearly four lakh votes. The poster of the man in chains had done the trick once again.

The great communist leader A.K. Gopalan died just as the election results were coming in. At a condolence meeting on the lawns of Vithal Bhai Patel House, George Fernandes, who had been released that morning, spoke in Hindi. His last meeting with Gopalan had been while underground, and they had both noted how India’s vociferous trade unions had tamely buckled under the Emergency. Ruefully, they concluded that their trade unions had been grounded more in economism than in political ideology.

I pass over Fernandes’ initial reluctance to join the cabinet, his later enthusiastic stewardship of the Ministry of Industries and the ouster of Coca Cola—which was replaced by a soft drink christened 77 (Double Seven) by his fellow socialist H.V. Kamath. I also pass over his masterly defence of the Morarji government in Parliament (that I watched from the visitors’ gallery with my friend and George’s brother Michael)—only to join, on the next day, the suicidal bid for mid-term polls. That is oft repeated history. I refer instead to his public stand on political prisoners, and support to the cause of self-determination and human rights even while in power. I refer to this because it makes all the more poignant my grief over his alignment

with the BJP and his continued support to it during and after the Gujarat pogrom of 2002. As I told him, during a chance meeting in 2003 at a book release, it made me wish never to speak again with him. “But you are speaking to me now,” he said throwing an affectionate arm around my shoulders—but that was really the last time that I met or spoke with him.

“The wrath of the people will be upon you”, George Fernandes had warned members of parliament in a telegram, in the wake of the murder in 1966 of the charismatic tribal leader Pravir Chandra Bhanjdeo of Bastar—engineered, by a powerful politician of the time. My brother reminds me of this. Was it the same George in 2002?

Yet, before this, he was my first stop for many of our causes. I took to him every case for commutation of the death penalty. He was a minister I think when Kartar and Ujagar, the hired killers in the Vidya Jain murder case were to be hanged, while the chief minds behind the murder had been granted premature release. The class bias was shockingly evident. George pointed this out to the president and the cabinet, but to no avail. He campaigned against the unconscionable execution of Kehar Singh in the Indira Gandhi assassination case. And if there is any one reason that two condemned Dalit men are alive today in Andhra Pradesh, that reason is George Fernandes.

After a midnight reprieve of a week from the Supreme Court on Good Friday in 1996, just five hours before they were to be marched to the gallows, it was George Fernandes who (along with a team led by the great and good V.M. Tarkunde) persistently lobbied with the Deve

Gowda cabinet for their life. It was George who called to tell me that as one of Deve Gowda’s last prime ministerial acts the execution had been put off indefinitely (The final order of commutation came when K.R. Narayanan was president.)

Innumerable men detained without cause during the conflict years in Punjab were released with his intervention. His initiatives in Kashmir were stymied by a pusillanimous Centre and we are still facing the consequences of that crass insensitivity. Naga, Tibetan, Burmese and other politically targeted activists found a ready refuge in his home, even when it became a ministerial one. His own living quarters were in two rooms. The rest of his sprawling bungalow was home to trade unionists, party workers and human rights activists and their various causes. There was no security paraphernalia and he often drove a battered Fiat himself.

His election campaigns were a joy to behold. Indefatigable, eating by the roadside or going without food, his whole being was a political statement. With numerous electoral victories, he was perfectly at home in any part of the country. But the great thing is that, even in defeat, he secured dividends. The fateful Chikmagalur by-election of 1978 brought Indira Gandhi back into Parliament. She had been routed in 1977 chiefly by the North and so chose the safer South for a re-entry. Besides, Karnataka was under Congress rule at the time. George ran the campaign for Janata Party’s Virendra Patil against her. The simplicity of his attire and manners made people frankly incredulous that this man was a minister! He electrified the atmosphere. Though Mrs Gandhi won, George Fernandes

had managed to strengthen the Janata Party in Karnataka.

I wrote after the Tehelka sting of 2001 that as an expose it was overrated—and flimsy. It was a sham in the face of the daily atrocities that the underprivileged in this country reel under but go unnoticed by the media. None could believe that Fernandes was corrupt. Even Tehelka could allege nothing against him personally. In fact, the armed forces were enthused by his visit to each station in India’s inclement frontiers, and by the unprecedented ministerial attention to their needs of gear and sustenance. The tragedy of George Fernandes was not that he was corrupt but that he had lost himself. I retain the sense of betrayal that such a powerhouse of courage, brilliance and energy should have sided with and attempted to legitimise the BJP, which represents the greatest ever assault upon the idea of India.

Brilliance and energy are the two words that I will always associate with George Fernandes. My grief at his involuntary silence that is owed now to the collapse of his health is equal to my grief at his deliberate silence that came more than a decade earlier—a silence that was owed to the tragic collapse of his judgment. But while I find it hard to come to terms with the final phase of his political career, in the history of the socialist movement as a whole, George Fernandes will rank as one of the most dynamic associates of the incomparable Doctor Sahib.

[Nitya Ramakrishnan is a lawyer. Originally written for a souvenir brought out by the Hind Mazdoor Kisan Panchayat (HMKP) to mark George Fernandes’s 88th birthday, June 3, 2018.]

Agroecology and the Fight Against Deadly Capitalist Agriculture

Colin Todhunter

Food and agriculture across the world is in crisis. Food is becoming denitrified and unhealthy and diets less diverse. There is a loss of biodiversity, which threatens food security, soils are being degraded, water sources polluted and depleted and smallholder farmers, so vital to global food production, are being squeezed off their land and out of farming.

A minority of the global population has access to so much food that it can afford to waste much of it, while food insecurity has become a fact of life for hundreds of millions. This crisis stems from food and agriculture being wedded to power structures that serve the interests of the powerful global agribusiness corporations.

Over the last 60 years, agriculture has become increasingly industrialised, globalised and tied to an international system of trade based on export-oriented monocropping, commodity production for the international market, and indebtedness to international financial institutions (IMF/World Bank).

This has resulted in food surplus and food deficit areas, of which the latter have become dependent on (US) agricultural imports and strings-attached aid. Food deficits in the Global South mirror food surpluses in the North, based on a 'stuffed and starved' strategy.

Whether through IMF–World Bank structural adjustment programmes related to debt repayment as occurred in Africa (as a continent Africa has been

transformed from a net exporter to a net importer of food), bilateral trade agreements like NAFTA and its impact on Mexico or, more generally, deregulated global trade rules, the outcome has been similar: the devastation of traditional, indigenous agriculture.

Integral to all of this has been the imposition of the 'Green Revolution'. Farmers were encouraged to purchase hybrid seeds from corporations that were dependent on chemical fertilisers and pesticides to boost yields. They required loans to purchase these corporate inputs and governments borrowed to finance irrigation and dam building projects for what was a water-intensive model.

While the Green Revolution was sold to governments and farmers on the basis that it would increase productivity and earnings and would be more efficient, we now have nations and farmers incorporated into a system of international capitalism based on dependency, deregulated and manipulated commodity markets, unfair subsidies and inherent food insecurity.

As part of a wider 'development' plan for the Global South, millions of farmers have been forced out of agriculture to become cheap factory labour (for outsourced units from the West) or, as is increasingly the case, unemployed or underemployed slum dwellers.

In India, under the banner of a bogus notion of 'development', farmers are being whipped into subservience on behalf of global capital: they find themselves steadily

squeezed out of farming due to falling incomes, the impact of cheap imports and policies deliberately designed to run down smallholder agriculture for the benefit of global agribusiness corporations.

Aside from the geopolitical shift in favour of the Western nations resulting from the programmed destruction of traditional agriculture across the world, the Green Revolution has adversely impacted the nature of food, soil, human health and the environment.

Sold on the premise of increased yields, improved food security and better farm incomes, the benefits of the Green Revolution have been overstated. And the often stated 'humanitarian' intent and outcome ('millions of lives saved') has had more to do with PR and cold commercial interest.

However, even when the Green Revolution did increase yields (or similarly, if claims about GMO agriculture—the second coming of the Green Revolution—improving output are to be accepted at face value), Canadian environmentalist Jodi Koberinski says pertinent questions need to be asked: what has been the cost of any increased yield of commodities in terms of local food security and local caloric production, nutrition per acre, water tables, soil structure and new pests and disease pressures?

We may also ask what the effects on rural communities and economies have been; on birds, insects and biodiversity in general; on the climate as a result of new technologies, inputs or changes to

farming practices; and what have been the effects of shifting towards globalised production chains, not least in terms of transportation and fossil fuel consumption.

Moreover, if the Green Revolution found farmers in the Global South increasingly at the mercy of a US-centric system of trade and agriculture, at home they were also having to fit in with development policies that pushed for urbanisation and had to cater to the needs of a distant and expanding urban population whose food requirements were different from local rural-based communities. In addition to a focus on export-oriented farming, crops were also being grown for the urban market, regardless of farmers' needs or the dietary requirements of local rural markets.

Destroying indigenous systems

In an open letter written in 2006 to policy makers in India, farmer and campaigner Bhaskar Save offered answers to some of these questions. He argued that the actual reason for pushing the Green Revolution was the much narrower goal of increasing marketable surplus of a few relatively less perishable cereals to fuel the urban-industrial expansion favoured by the government and a few industries at the expense of a more diverse and nutrient-sufficient agriculture, which rural folk—who make up the bulk of India's population—had long benefited from.

Before, Indian farmers had been largely self-sufficient and even produced surpluses, though generally smaller quantities of many more items. These, particularly perishables, were tougher to supply to urban markets. And so,

the nation's farmers were steered to grow chemically cultivated monocultures of a few cash-crops like wheat, rice or sugar, rather than their traditional polycultures that needed no purchased inputs.

Tall, indigenous varieties of grain provided more biomass, shaded the soil from the sun and protected against its erosion under heavy monsoon rains, but these very replaced with dwarf varieties, which led to more vigorous growth of weeds as they were able to compete successfully with the new stunted crops for sunlight.

As a result, the farmer had to spend more labour and money in weeding, or spraying herbicides. Furthermore, straw growth with the dwarf grain crops fell and much less organic matter was locally available to recycle the fertility of the soil, leading to an artificial need for externally procured inputs. Inevitably, the farmers resorted to use of more chemicals, because of which soil degradation and erosion set in.

The exotic varieties, grown with chemical fertilisers, were more susceptible to 'pests and diseases', leading to yet more chemicals being poured. But the attacked insect species developed resistance and reproduced prolifically. Their predators—spiders, frogs, etc.—that fed on these insects and controlled their populations were exterminated. So were many beneficial species like the earthworms and bees.

Save noted that India, next to South America, receives the highest rainfall in the world. Where thick vegetation covers the ground, the soil is alive and porous and at least half of the rain is soaked and stored in the soil and sub-soil strata.

A good amount then percolates

deeper to recharge aquifers or groundwater tables. The living soil and its underlying aquifers thus serve as gigantic, ready-made reservoirs. Half a century ago, most parts of India had enough fresh water all year round, long after the rains had stopped and gone. But clear the forests, and the capacity of the earth to soak the rain drops drastically. Streams and wells run dry.

While the recharge of groundwater has greatly reduced, its extraction has been mounting. India is presently mining over 20 times more groundwater each day than it did in 1950. But most of India's people—living on hand-drawn or hand-pumped water in villages and practising only rain-fed farming—continue to use the same amount of ground water per person, as they did generations ago.

More than 80% of India's water consumption is for irrigation, with the largest share hogged by chemically cultivated cash crops. For example, one acre of chemically grown sugarcane requires as much water as would suffice 25 acres of jowar, bajra or maize. The sugar factories too consume huge quantities of water.

From cultivation to processing, each kilo of refined sugar needs two to three tonnes of water. Save argued that this could be used to grow, by the traditional, organic way, about 150 to 200 kg of nutritious jowar or bajra.

If Bhaskar Save helped open people's eyes to what has happened on the farm, to farmers and to ecology in India, a 2015 report by GRAIN provides an overview of how US agribusiness has hijacked an entire nation's food and agriculture under the banner of 'free trade' to the detriment of the environment, health

and farmers.

In 2012, Mexico's National Institute for Public Health released the results of a national survey of food security and nutrition. Between 1988 and 2012, the proportion of overweight women between the ages of 20 and 49 increased from 25% to 35% and the number of obese women in this age group increased from 9% to 37%.

Some 29% of Mexican children between the ages of 5 and 11 were found to be overweight, as were 35% of youngsters between 11 and 19, while one in 10 school age children suffered from anaemia. The Mexican Diabetes Federation says that more than 7% of the Mexican population has diabetes. Diabetes is now the third most common cause of death in Mexico, directly or indirectly.

The various free trade agreements that Mexico has signed over the past two decades have had a profound impact on the country's food system and people's health. After his mission to Mexico in 2012, the then Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, concluded that the trade policies in place favour greater reliance on heavily processed and refined foods with a long shelf life rather than on the consumption of fresh and more perishable foods, particularly fruit and vegetables.

He added that the overweight and obesity emergency that Mexico is facing could have been avoided, or largely mitigated, if the health concerns linked to shifting diets had been integrated into the design of those policies.

The North America Free Trade Agreement led to huge foreign investment in food processing and a change in the retail structure

(notably the advent of supermarkets and convenience stores) as well as the emergence of global agribusiness and transnational food companies in Mexico.

The country has witnessed an explosive growth of chain supermarkets, discounters and convenience stores. Local small-scale vendors have been replaced by corporate retailers that offer the processed food companies greater opportunities for sales and profits. Oxxo (owned by Coca-cola subsidiary Femsas) tripled its stores to 3,500 between 1999 and 2004. It was scheduled to open its 14,000th store sometime during 2015.

In Mexico, the loss of food sovereignty has induced catastrophic changes in the nation's diet and has had dire consequences for agricultural workers who lost their jobs and for the nation in general. Those who have benefited include US food and agribusiness interests, drug cartels and US banks and arms manufacturers.

More of the same: a bogus 'solution'

Transnational agribusiness has lobbied for, directed and profited from the very policies that have caused much of the above. And what we now see is these corporations (and their supporters) espousing cynical and fake concern for the plight of the poor and hungry.

GMO patented seeds represent the final stranglehold of transnational agribusiness over the control of agriculture and food. The misrepresentation of the plight of the indigenous edible oils sector in India indicates encapsulates the duplicity at work surrounding the GM project.

After trade rules and cheap imports conspired to destroy farmers

and the jobs of people involved in local food processing activities for the benefit of global agribusiness, including commodity trading and food processor companies ADM and Cargill, there is now a campaign to force GM into India on the basis that Indian agriculture is unproductive and thus the country has to rely on imports. This conveniently ignores the fact that prior to neoliberal trade rules in the mid-1990s, India was almost self-sufficient in edible oils.

In collusion with the Gates Foundation, corporate interests are also seeking to secure full spectrum dominance throughout much of Africa as well. Western seed, fertiliser and pesticide manufacturers and dealers and food processing companies are in the process of securing changes to legislation and are building up logistics and infrastructure to allow them to recast food and farming in their own images.

Today, governments continue to collude with big agribusiness corporations. These companies are being allowed to shape government policy by being granted a strategic role in trade negotiations and are increasingly framing the policy/knowledge agenda by funding and determining the nature of research carried out in public universities and institutes.

As Bhaskar Save wrote about India: "This country has more than 150 agricultural universities. But every year, each churns out several hundred 'educated' unemployables, trained only in misguiding farmers and spreading ecological degradation. In all the six years a student spends for an M.Sc. in agriculture, the only goal is short-term—and narrowly perceived—'productivity'. For this, the farmer

is urged to do and buy a hundred things. But not a thought is spared to what a farmer must never do so that the land remains unharmed for future generations and other creatures. It is time our people and government wake up to the realisation that this industry-driven way of farming—promoted by our institutions—is inherently criminal and suicidal!”

Save is referring to the 300,000-plus farmer suicides that have taken place in India over the past two decades due to economic distress resulting from debt, a shift to (GM) cash crops and economic ‘liberalisation’.

The current global system of chemical-industrial agriculture, World Trade Organisation rules and bilateral trade agreements that agritech companies helped draw up are a major cause of food insecurity and environmental destruction. The system is not set up to ‘feed the world’ despite the proclamations of its supporters.

However, this model has become central to the dominant notion of ‘development’ in the Global South: unnecessary urbanisation, the commercialisation and emptying out of the countryside at the behest of the World Bank, the displacement of existing systems of food and agricultural production with one dominated by Monsanto-Bayer, Cargill and the like and a one-dimensional pursuit of GDP growth as a measure of ‘progress’ with little concern for the costs and implications—mirroring the narrow, reductionist ‘output–yield’ paradigm of industrial agriculture itself.

Agroecology offers a genuine solution

Across the world, we are seeing farmers and communities pushing

back and resisting the corporate takeover of seeds, soils, land, water and food. And we are also witnessing inspiring stories about the successes of agroecology.

Reflecting what Bhaskar Save achieved on his farm in Gujarat, agroecology combines sound ecological management, including minimising the use of toxic inputs, by using on-farm renewable resources and privileging natural solutions to manage pests and disease, with an approach that upholds and secures farmers’ livelihoods.

Agroecology is based on scientific research grounded in the natural sciences but marries this with farmer-generated knowledge and grassroots participation that challenges top-down approaches to research and policy making. However, it can also involve moving beyond the dynamics of the farm itself to becoming part of a wider agenda, which addresses the broader political and economic issues that impact farmers and agriculture.

Agroecology is thus a refreshing point of departure from the reductionist approach to farming which emphasises securing maximum yield and corporate profit to the detriment of all else.

Agroecology can lead to fundamental changes

A few years ago, the Oakland Institute released a report on 33 case studies which highlighted the success of agroecological agriculture across Africa in the face of climate change, hunger and poverty. The studies provide facts and figures on how agricultural transformation can yield immense economic, social, and food security benefits while ensuring climate justice and restoring soils and the environment.

The research highlights the multiple benefits of agroecology, including affordable and sustainable ways to boost agricultural yields while increasing farmers’ incomes, food security and crop resilience.

The report described how agroecology uses a wide variety of techniques and practices, including plant diversification, intercropping, the application of mulch, manure or compost for soil fertility, the natural management of pests and diseases, agroforestry and the construction of water management structures.

There are many other examples of successful agroecology and of farmers abandoning Green Revolution thought and practices to embrace it.

In a recent interview appearing on the *Farming Matters* website, Million Belay sheds light on how agroecological agriculture is the best model of agriculture for Africa. Belay explains that one of the greatest agroecological initiatives started in 1995 in Tigray, Northern Ethiopia, and continues today. It began with four villages and after good results, it was scaled up to 83 villages and finally to the whole Tigray Region. It was recommended to the Ministry of Agriculture to be scaled up at the national level. The project has now expanded to six regions of Ethiopia.

The fact that it was supported with research by the Ethiopian University at Mekele has proved to be critical in convincing decision makers that these practices work and are better for both the farmers and the land.

Belay describes another agroecological practice that spread widely across East Africa—‘push-pull’. This method manages pests through selective intercropping

with important fodder species and wild grass relatives, in which pests are simultaneously repelled—or pushed—from the system by one or more plants and are attracted to—or pulled—towards ‘decoy’ plants, thereby protecting the crop from infestation. Push-pull has proved to be very effective in biologically controlling pest populations in fields, reducing significantly the need for pesticides, increasing production, especially for maize, increasing income of farmers, increasing fodder for animals and, due to that, increasing milk production, and improving soil fertility.

By 2015, the number of farmers using this practice increased to 95,000. One of the bedrocks of success is the incorporation of cutting edge science through the collaboration of the International Center of Insect Physiology and Ecology (ICIPE) and the Rothamsted Research Station (UK) who have worked in East Africa for the last 15 years on an effective ecologically-based pest management solution for stem borers and striga.

But agroecology should not just be regarded as something for the Global South. Food First Executive Director Eric Holtz-Gimenez argues that it offers concrete, practical solutions to many of the world’s problems that move beyond (but which are linked to) agriculture. In doing so, it challenges—and offers alternatives to—prevailing moribund doctrinaire economics and the outright plunder of neoliberalism.

The scaling up of agroecology can tackle hunger, malnutrition, environmental degradation and climate change. By creating securely paid labour-intensive agricultural work, it can also address the interrelated links between labour

offshoring by rich countries and the removal of rural populations elsewhere who end up in sweat shops to carry out the outsourced jobs.

Thick legitimacy

Various official reports have argued that to feed the hungry and secure food security in low income regions, we need to support small farms and diverse, sustainable agroecological methods of farming and strengthen local food economies.

Olivier De Schutter says: “To feed 9 billion people in 2050, we urgently need to adopt the most efficient farming techniques available. Today’s scientific evidence demonstrates that agroecological methods outperform the use of chemical fertilisers in boosting food production where the hungry live, especially in unfavorable environments.”

De Schutter indicates that small-scale farmers can double food production within 10 years in critical regions by using ecological methods. Based on an extensive review of scientific literature, the study he was involved in calls for a fundamental shift towards agroecology as a way to boost food production and improve the situation of the poorest. The report calls on states to implement a fundamental shift towards agroecology.

The success stories of agroecology indicate what can be achieved when development is placed firmly in the hands of farmers themselves. The expansion of agroecological practices can generate a rapid, fair and inclusive development that can be sustained for future generations. This model entails policies and activities that come from the bottom-up and which the state can then invest in and

facilitate.

A decentralised system of food production with access to local markets supported by proper roads, storage and other infrastructure must take priority ahead of exploitative international markets dominated and designed to serve the needs of global capital.

It has long been established that small farms are per area more productive than large-scale industrial farms and create a more resilient and diverse food system. If policy makers were to prioritise this sector and promote agroecology to the extent Green Revolution practices and technology have been pushed, many of the problems surrounding poverty, unemployment and urban migration could be solved.

However, the biggest challenge for upscaling agroecology lies in the push by big business for commercial agriculture and attempts to marginalise agroecology. Unfortunately, global agribusiness concerns have secured the status of ‘thick legitimacy’ based on an intricate web of processes successfully spun in the scientific, policy and political arenas. This perceived legitimacy derives from the lobbying, financial clout and political power of agribusiness conglomerates which have been successful in capturing or shaping government departments, public institutions, the agricultural research paradigm, international trade and the cultural narrative concerning food and agriculture.

This allows its model to persist and appear normal and necessary. While critics of this system are viciously attacked for being anti-science, for forwarding unrealistic alternatives, for endangering the lives of billions who would starve

to death and for being driven by ideology and emotion.

This has led to a situation wherein so many governments are working hand-in-glove with agribusiness industry to promote its technology over the heads of the public. A network of scientific bodies and regulatory agencies that supposedly serve the public interest have been subverted by the presence of key figures with industry links, while the powerful industry lobby holds sway over bureaucrats and politicians.

Agribusiness corporations have in fact come to acquire so much power over global agriculture that they are involved in writing international agreements. Monsanto played a key part in drafting the WTO Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights to create seed monopolies and the global food processing industry had a leading role in shaping the WTO Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures. From the Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture aimed at restructuring Indian agriculture to the currently on-hold US–EU trade deal (TTIP), the powerful agribusiness lobby has secured privileged access to policy makers to ensure its model of agriculture prevails.

Therefore, challenging the dominant model of agriculture being promoted by multinational agribusiness corporations, and promoting agroecology as an alternative model, will require challenging the ‘thick legitimacy’ that has presently been acquired by it. An important step will be the building of small agroecology alternatives. The more agroecology is seen to work, the more policy

makers may see the failings of the current system and the more they may become open to holistic approaches to agriculture. As practitioners and supporters of agroecology create their own thick legitimacy, the more officials might be willing to give space to a model that has great potential to help deal with some of the world’s most pressing problems. It has happened to a certain extent in Ethiopia, for example. That is hopeful.

Of course, simply building small islands of agroecology will not be enough to challenge the

dominant discourse about chemical intensive corporate agriculture. Simultaneously, mass movements will need to be built that challenge the stranglehold of corporations over national and international policies, including agricultural policies. These mass movements will need to link up across continents. Till then, agroecology will remain on the periphery.

(Colin Todhunter is originally from the UK. A former social policy researcher, he is a widely acclaimed journalist who writes extensively on development issues.)

Everyday Life in Besieged Venezuela

Cira Pascual Marquina interviews Jessica Dos Santos

Cira P. Marquina: *Much has been written in a very general sense about Venezuela’s current situation. For example, we hear a great deal about the economic war, sanctions, imperialist meddling, and even communal organisation and building popular power. But very little is said about daily life: for example, about the difficulties we face every day in a city like Caracas. Would you say that being a chronicler of everyday life is a political act? What happens to politics when it doesn’t connect with concrete reality and when daily life is not taken into account?*

Jessica Santos: Well, I am one of those people who believe that absolutely everything in life is a political act, from the way we feed ourselves to our way of speaking. And that is perhaps the key to understanding why politics goes beyond and must go beyond party politics. Therefore, I agree with you.

I think that being a chronicler of

everyday life is a political act that seeks to record the day-to-day and lays out, in some way or other, the main episodes of the story we are living. It is an attempt to leave traces that will later allow us to reconstruct a scene. It helps us know what was happening moment by moment leading up to this or that event.

For that reason, when politics does not connect with concrete reality or does not take daily life into account, it ends up becoming an endless number of speeches that do not connect with anything. It can be empty and so contradictory as to be shameless. This inevitably generates discontent in the population as the people do not find their real life reflected in the political discourse.

For example, many parts of President Nicolás Maduro’s speech during his Annual Address have nothing to do with what the Venezuelan people experience on a daily basis. In the same way, Guaidó

doesn't win people over saying that among his first political projects is the return of the RCTV channel. These are things that don't make any sense in a country with problems as serious as ours.

Alejo Carpentier said that the work of Latin American writers was different from that of writers elsewhere. Writers from our continent have to describe things (such as the bizarre and huge ceiba tree or the noisy macaw) with a lot of attention to detail, because they have not previously figured in narratives. Is your work as a chronicler something like that? Can you give us an example of a "ceiba," a unique and previously undescribed reality, in Venezuelan daily life?

Yes, my work is more or less like that. But I also have the enormous advantage of having been born in the Caribbean. Gabriel García Márquez says in *The Fragrance of Guava* that the Caribbean teaches us to see reality in a different way and accept "supernatural elements" as something that is part of our daily life. The Caribbean is a world apart. The human synthesis and the contrasts here are not present anywhere else in the world.

A "ceiba" of Venezuelan daily life? One example would be precisely our way of dealing with the complex situations that we are facing today. Once a Chilean friend, who was obviously annoyed, told me that she did not understand why we take everything as a joke here. Perhaps what she and others do not understand is that this is our way of processing and overcoming what happens. But that way of dealing with things doesn't make us crazy or unaware.

For example, on the day commemorating January 23, I

happened to see both marches. Then I went home and spent the whole afternoon following the events. It was really tense, but in the middle of all of it, there was a lot being said on the networks and messages from friends that made me laugh without stopping. If we weren't this way, perhaps we would have lost our minds. Furthermore, our idiosyncratic way of being in the world in some way or other brings us all together.

Another "ceiba" or "macaw" [a la Carpentier] would be to tell the story of how Venezuelans try to lead "normal" lives in the middle of all the abnormality that we experience. It is not normal to see the same product change prices three times a day, or the amazing speed of information in our country. Nevertheless, we're trying to change all that and come out ahead.

Street protests are on the rise again. Previously they were in rural areas and the demands included access to food and services but just recently this kind of protest has hit Caracas. Unlike the guarimbas of 2014 and 2017, these protests have an organic relation to the poor and their needs: a material situation that is very extreme. What should our attitude towards these protests be? Should we question them? Should we work to bring the protestors back to the Chavista fold?

We should differentiate among different kinds of protests, separating one kind from another. In Venezuela, there have been protests for many months, and they have been triggered by the breakdown of public services and utilities: electricity, water, cooking gas, public transport. Protests against this kind of situation are absolutely valid and, from my point of view, should not be called

into question. Rather, they must be heard, and the demands should be urgently addressed and taken seriously. Furthermore, dealing with these problems is the only way to recover the people's trust. These, then, are popular protests.

By contrast, protests that end up in acts of vandalism, protests where houses are burned, cars are turned over, neighbors are attacked, etc.—they do not contribute to anything, nor do they reflect the intentions of the majority. In fact, they end up tarnishing the just claims of the people. People want services and utilities that work, a stable economy, and they want children who have left the country to return. You don't get there by destroying what we have left.

As a Chavista, you support the government, but you do so critically. This support is unbending in the face of the imperialist threat, but it is coupled with a willingness to criticise a government that (from my perspective) shows signs of distancing itself from the people. Can you help us to understand what it means to fight on two battlefronts, one against imperialism and against the opposition, and another a fight on a more fluid battlefront that demands that the government provide solutions to the people's needs?

When I was a teenager I read all the Che Guevara journals, and I read them several times. In one, he wrote that those who occupy a middle position during a battle get shot at from both sides. Thus, one should always clearly choose a side.

For a long time, I tried to internalise that as an irrefutable truth. And I continue to do so. But later I came to understand that the side we choose, our side, should be

that of the people. We must choose to be with the majorities, with those who suffer as we do. If the extreme positions are out of touch with the people and one ends up in the middle, then you have to accept your middle position and make noise about it so that things will change.

All of that refers to the internal struggle. However, when it comes to fighting against foreign intervention, then there isn't much to think about: our home country is and must be first. And this is not just because of our love for it, but also because we have historical awareness. There isn't one single nation that has come out better after a US or NATO intervention. In addition to that, intervention presupposes that we don't have the capacity to solve our own problems, and I firmly believe that we can.

(Jessica Dos Santos, who grew up with the Bolivarian Revolution, is a university professor and journalist, but for many she has found her true calling as a chronicler of everyday life in Venezuela. This interview with her was first published on venezuelanalysis.com on January 31, 2019.)

Billionaires are the Leading Cause of Climate Change

Luke Darby

Recently, the United Nations released a damning report. The short version: We have about 12 years to *actually* do something to *prevent* the worst aspects of climate change. That is, not to prevent climate change—we're well past that point—but to prevent the worst, most catastrophic elements of it from wreaking havoc on the world's population. To do that, the governments of Earth need to look seriously at the forces driving it. And an honest assessment of how we got here lays the blame squarely at the feet of the 1 percent.

Contrary to a lot of guilt-tripping pleas for us all to take the bus more often to save the world, your individual choices are probably doing very little to the world's climate. The real impact comes on the industrial level, as more than 70 percent of global emissions come from just 100 companies. So you, a random consumer, exert very little pressure here. The people who are actively cranking up the global thermostat and threatening to drown 20 percent of the global population are the billionaires in the boardrooms of these companies.

There are probably no individuals who have had a more toxic impact on public and political attitudes about climate change than the Koch brothers, and it would take an absurd amount of space to document all the money and organisations they've scraped together for that purpose. (Investigative reporter Jane Mayer's groundbreaking *Dark Money* does basically that.) And they have every

reason to: In her book, Mayer notes that "Koch Industries alone routinely released some 24 million tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere a year."

But the scope goes far beyond merely sowing dissent and skepticism. While billionaires and the companies they run have spent years insisting that climate change either doesn't exist or is overblown, they've known the reality of the situation for a long time. PayPal cofounder Peter Thiel, for example, used to donate to the Seasteading Institute, which aimed to build floating cities in order to counteract rising sea levels. And Exxon Mobil allegedly knew about climate change in 1977, back when it was still just Exxon and about 11 years before climate change became widely talked about.

Instead of acting on it, they started a decades-long misinformation campaign. According to Scientific American, Exxon helped create the Global Climate Coalition, which questioned the scientific basis for concern over climate change from the late '80s until 2002, and successfully worked to keep the US from signing the Kyoto Protocol, a move that helped cause India and China, two other massive sources of greenhouse gas, to avoid signing.

Even when Republican lawmakers show flashes of willingness to get something done, they're swiftly swatted down. There are myriad examples, but one example comes via *Dark Money*, where Mayer describes an incident

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in April 2010 when Lindsey Graham briefly tried to support a cap-and-trade bill: A political group called American Solutions promptly launched a negative PR campaign against him, and Graham folded after just a few days. American Solutions, it turns out, was backed by billionaires in fossil fuel and other industries, including Trump-loving casino magnate Sheldon Adelson.

In recent years, fossil-fuel companies have tried to cast themselves as being on the same side of the general public. Just this month, Exxon pledged \$1 million to fight for a carbon tax, a stopgap measure that charges a fee of \$40 per ton of carbon produced and increases as production goes up. At a glance, that may seem magnanimous, but the truth is that Exxon can *afford the tax*. Not only is the oil and gas industry experiencing a serious boom right now, companies know that the only real solutions to climate change will hurt them even more than a measly tax.

That's largely because there is no "free market" incentive to prevent disaster. An economic environment where a company is only considered viable if it's constantly expanding and increasing its production can't be expected to pump its own brakes over something as trivial as pending global catastrophe. Instead, market logic dictates that rather than take the financial hit that comes with cutting profits, it's more reasonable to find a way to make money off the boiling ocean.

Nothing illustrates this phenomenon better than the burgeoning climate-change investment industry. According to *Bloomberg*, investors are looking to make money off of everything from revamped food production to

hotels for people fleeing increasingly hurricane-ravaged areas. A top JP Morgan Asset investment strategist advised clients that sea-level rise was so inevitable that there was likely a lot of opportunity for investing in sea-wall construction.

Even today, after literally decades of radical libertarian billionaires fostering disbelief in climate change and skepticism about the government, three out of five Americans believe climate change affects their local community. That number climbs to two-thirds on the coasts. Even the Trump administration now admits that climate change is real, but their response to it is dead-eyed acceptance. If popular support actually influenced public policy, there would have been more decisive action from the US government years ago. But the fossil-fuel industry's interests are too well-insulated by the mountains of cash that have been converted into lobbyists, industry-shilling Republicans and Democrats, and misinformation. To them, the rest of the world is just kindling.

(*Luke Darby is a freelance writer living in Pittsburgh, USA.*)

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