

# janata

**Vol. 74 No. 11**

**April 7, 2019**

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## Current Threats to the Constitution

**Prashant Bhushan**

Sixty nine years ago, we framed a constitution and founded a republic. The foundations of this republic are a democratically governed society with various fundamental rights guaranteed to every citizen and the establishment of institutions which will preserve democracy and the rights of citizens.

Though we founded a representative democracy where people do not have a direct say in government decision making or law making, but it is implicit that for democracy to be meaningful, the people must have adequate information about what is happening in society, how the country is being governed, what kind of law and policies are being proposed, so that they can discuss all these issues and express their opinion about them.

It is also necessary in the functioning of democracy that power and in particular financial power is not so unevenly distributed, so that a few people will be able to in Noam Chomsky's words "manufacture consent" by using their power to advertise and influence public opinion.

Our constitution also guarantees various fundamental rights to all citizens and some to even non citizens. The most important of these is the right to life and liberty which is guaranteed to citizens and non citizens alike which has been held by the Supreme Court to include not just the right to a bare life and bare liberty but also a life of dignity and thus having all those amenities and facilities which allow for a life of dignity such as food, shelter, education, healthcare, a healthy environment, a corruption free society, etc.

The right to liberty also requires a freedom from oppressive and draconian laws which jeopardise the liberty of citizens. In the other civil rights guaranteed by the constitution is the freedom of speech and expression which has been held to include the right to a free media as well as the right to information and therefore the right to be informed about the functioning of all public authorities and institutions. We have also been guaranteed the right to equality and therefore the protection of minorities from an assault on their

*This is the text of the Krishna Bharadwaj Memorial Lecture, delivered by Prashant Bhushan at Jawaharlal Nehru University on March 14, 2019.*

rights by a communal majority.

Various institutions have been created by the constitution and the laws to guard the functioning of democracy and also to protect fundamental rights of citizens. These include an independent judiciary, which has been tasked to protect fundamental rights and to ensure that the executive and the legislature remain within the bounds of the powers laid out for them by the constitution.

An Election Commission has been created to ensure free and fair elections and all that is necessary for that. A Comptroller and Auditor General has been set up to do financial and performance audits of every part of the government which uses public funds. Special laws have been made to set up an independent Central Vigilance Commission which is supposed to not only accord vigilance clearance to public servants, but also to supervise the functioning of the CBI and act as the nodal agency to receive complaints from whistle blowers.

The Lokpal Act was brought in to set up the apex anti corruption ombudsman and the CBI Act to create an anti corruption investigating agency. There are also various laws and institutions to protect the freedom of the press. A Salutory Whistle Blower Law was also passed.

If we do an audit of the functioning of our democracy, the health of fundamental rights of citizens and the health of institutions created to protect all of this, it might be useful to divide all that into what happened in the first 64 years and what has happened in the last five years since Independence—since as we will see the last five years have been a watershed in many ways.

In the first 64 years of our republic, our representative democracy made some progress and some regress as well. The breath and depth of education did improve overall during the first 64 years, thereby making way for a more educated citizenry.

The advent of the Right to Information Act in 2005, also led to a substantial advance in the progress of democracy as people got greater access to information about the functioning of public authorities.

A robust right to information campaign ensured that the RTI Act was used substantially leading to greater transparency of public institutions and authorities. The Election Commission also became more independent and robust, which led to freer and fair elections.

However, economic inequality of our society grew particularly after economic liberalisation, with policies focussing on GDP growth at any cost. This increasing economic inequality led to more and more wealth in the hands of fewer people at the top who could then use it to influence elections and thus our polity came to be controlled increasingly by large corporates and policies were tailored for the economic interests of large corporates rather than the people. This also led to the phenomenon of manufacturing consent as Chomsky called it.

On the front of fundamental rights, the first 64 years also saw some expansion of rights particularly by the Supreme Court through an expansive and creative interpretation of the right to life (which was held to include a right to live with dignity) and the freedom of speech (which was held to include the right to information, a free press, the right

to privacy, etc).

There was also some improvement in the protection of Dalits and minorities with the creation of a Minorities Commission and an SC/ST Commission. Several rights based legislations have also been enacted especially in the first decade of the 21st century, such as the Food Security Act, the Forest Rights Act, the Rural Employment Guarantee Act, and the new Land Acquisition Act of 2013. These went a long way to expand and strengthen the rights of poor and marginalised sections of society.

The first 64 years also saw a strengthening of several institutions, including the judiciary, which become more independent and robust in general, despite other institutional failures of being inaccessible to the majority of the people, being lethargic and also unaccountable and corrupt. Despite all these problems, its independence improved as the selection of judges was withdrawn from the government and vested with the judiciary itself. Though that led to slightly more independent judges being appointed, it did not necessarily lead to more honest or more competent judges being appointed.

The first 64 years also saw, strengthening of the independence as well as institutional depth of the Election Commission as well as of the CAG. Despite both these bodies being appointed by the government, this happened because of the growth of these institutions themselves and the breath and depth that was added to them, as well as an institutional embedding of their functional independence, which gradually seeped into the consciousness of the individuals who came to man these institutions, especially in the

last 30 years.

The Supreme Court also chipped in to order changes in the method of selection of the Director, CBI, the Central Vigilance Commission and the Police Chiefs in order to make them more independent. The institutional changes directed by the court in the police organisations were such that if they had been properly implemented it would led to a sea change in the functioning of the police, at least with regard to its independence from the political executive.

Unfortunately, however, many of those salutary changes ordered which included the establishment of a Police Establishment Board for transfers and postings of police officers, the creation of Police Complaints Authorities for entertaining complaints against Police Officers and a minimum tenure for field level officers, have been frustrated by an obdurate executive in most states which want to have the police as their handmaiden, to be used for their political ends.

### **Assault on democracy**

The last five years have been a watershed in the functioning of our democracy, the protection of fundamental rights as well as the health of institutions. These years have witnessed an unprecedented assault on various elements of democracy, on rights and institutions.

The last few years have seen a steady erosion in the independence of the Election Commission, and after many years we are finding that important decisions of the Election Commission, especially the announcement of dates of elections and the enforcement of its model code of conduct, increasingly appear

to be partisan and decided by the government.

Officers from Gujarat who are said to have been close to the Prime Minister and Amit Shah have been appointed to the Election Commission, with the present Chief Election Commissioner not only being from Gujarat but also one who figures in the Radia tapes where he talks to her about an acquaintance who claimed that he had paid 9 crores to obtain a favourable judgement from the then Chief Justice of the Punjab and Haryana High Court. He was at that time perhaps heading Air India.

That such a senior officer did not bother to report this serious corruption of justice to any authority, but quietly mentioned it in gossip with a corporate lobbyist Nira Radia, speaks volumes about his character. It is because of the erosion of public confidence in the independence of the Election Commission that people have become very nervous about the integrity of the electronic voting machines and there is now therefore a persistent demand, especially by the opposition, to go back to paper ballots.

Elections in the last five years are now being increasingly influenced by money power. This is partly because the Election Commission has failed to enforce the limits on spending by political parties. But also because parties and candidates have begun to get unlimited amounts of money from their corporate cronies. It has been estimated that one lakh crore would be spent by parties and candidates in the 2019 elections, out of which eighty thousand crore would be spent by the BJP and its candidates alone.

Apart from not fixing limits for spending by political parties

and not making laws to ensure that parties and candidates receive and spend money only through banking channels (cashless transactions which the PM wanted to impose on the country through demonetisation), three retrograde changes in the law of election funding have increased the role of money power and corporate hijacking of elections.

The Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, brought primarily to prevent parties, candidates and public servants from getting and being influenced by foreign funds, has now been amended to allow receipt of foreign funds through subsidiaries of foreign companies. The limits on corporate donations to parties and candidates which was earlier 7.5% of their profits has been removed to allow unlimited corporate funding.

Worst of all, a new anonymous instrument of political funding has been introduced through the instrument of electoral bonds which are bearer bonds and which allow anonymous funding of political parties even through banking channels. Thus the path has been cleared for payment of bribes by corporations to the ruling parties through the device of electoral bonds which guarantee the anonymity of their donors. It is not surprising therefore that the BJP has received about 95% of the approximately 2,000 crore of the funding through electoral bonds in the last 2 years since they have been introduced.

All the above amendments of electoral funding have been achieved by the dubious device of smuggling these amendments in through a Finance Bill, which avoids the amendments being taken to and voted in the Rajya Sabha where the ruling party doesn't have a majority.

The device of the Money Bill to bring about amendments to various laws which have nothing to do with the consolidated fund of India has been increasingly resorted to by the present government, making a mockery of the Constitutional requirement of bills being passed by both houses of parliament.

Parliament itself has seen a steady erosion in the number of days it meets, the time spent in discussions and particularly the time spent to discuss laws which are passed. In the last five years, not even 10% of the slotted parliamentary time has been spent in any meaningful discussion and perhaps not even 1% to discuss the slew of laws that have been passed amidst shouting and confusion.

Thus, far from making democracy more participatory, even in terms of allowing prior disclosure of Bills proposed to be passed or allowing any public participation in the laws to be made, even the present nominal representative democracy has been steadily emasculated.

During the last five years, the Right to Information Act has also been eroded by throttling the Information Commissions and not appointing people to man the vacancies. Even when the vacancies are directed to be filled by court orders, pliable bureaucrats have been appointed without any transparency in the selection. Simultaneously, crony capitalism has grown with policies being increasingly controlled by large crony capitalists who ensure that policies and government decisions are tailored for their economic benefit and to the detriment of the common people.

Our banks and financial institutions have been plundered by crony corporates who now owe

tens of lakhs of crores of unpaid debt to our banks. Many of them have been allowed or made to flee the country and have comfortably ensconced themselves in London or tax havens like Antigua or Bermuda, while our government makes a show of searching for them or seeking to extradite them.

Consequently economic inequalities have grown enormously and the GINI index that measures economic inequality is perhaps the highest in the world for India. It was recently reported that the wealth of the nine richest Indians is equivalent to the wealth of the bottom half of our population. All this, coupled with the control of few corporations over large sections of the mainstream media, has accentuated the manufacture of consent in India.

### **Erosion of rights**

The last five years have also seen an unprecedented assault on the freedom of speech and the right to dissent. Persons critical of the government have been assaulted on the streets by saffron lynch mobs which are patronised by the government and a complicit police; in many cases they have been charged with sedition, despite the fact that the Supreme Court had injuncted the use of this law for a situation where there is no incitement to violence or public disorder.

Those who escape the lynch mobs or sedition have had to face the wrath of an organised lynch mob on the social media, which as Swati Chaturvedi pointed out in her book *I Am a Troll* are organised and controlled by none other than the Prime Minister himself. These trolls descend like a pack of wolves

on any influential person who criticises the government or the PM by bombarding them with abuse and threats, on their phones, on social media platforms, etc. This is also sometimes picked up and amplified by those sections of the mainstream media which have become lapdogs of the government.

Dalits and minorities have especially borne the brunt of lynch mobs as they have been sought to be bludgeoned into submission by assertive saffron mobs who are secure in the confidence that the government and police will not act against them. Documentation of cases of lynchings have shown three stark facts:

1. Almost all of the hundreds of cases of mob lynching have been directed against Muslims and Dalits;
2. In almost all cases, the perpetrators are associated with assorted saffron groups who are connected with the BJP/RSS or at least enjoy their protection;
3. The police rarely act against the perpetrators unless compelled to by courts and often act against the victims themselves.

False information or fake news which is designed to generate hate against Muslims in particular is being generated and spread on a mammoth scale by the social media organisations affiliated with the BJP and its assorted lapdog and media portals. This has created a feeling of hopelessness and helplessness among large sections of minorities in particular as well as Dalits, especially when they see the administration, including the judicial administration, being reduced to bystanders.

The use of draconian laws like UAPA and NSA, particularly on hapless sections of minorities including Dalits, have accentuated

the injustice and the climate of fear among them.

The condition of the poor and the marginalised has become even more helpless with massive unemployment and job loss in the last five years and increasing agrarian distress wherein agriculture has become a losing proposition and thousands of farmers are being forced to commit suicide every year. India continues to steadily plummet on the Human Development Index as well as other indices designed to measure the well being of the majority of society. All of this has led to a degradation of human rights as well as a degradation of democracy in the country.

The most serious and long lasting assault on our republic has however been on account of the assault on our institutions. These include constitutional bodies like the judiciary, the Election Commission, the CAG as well as statutory bodies like the CVC, the CBI, Lokpal and also universities and other educational institutions and bodies.

There has been a concerted attempt by this government to erode the independence of the judiciary, in which it has succeeded to some extent. Even after the attempt to bring back the executive into the role of selecting judges through the Judicial Appointments Commission was scuttled by the Supreme Court, we have seen this government brazenly scuttling appointments of judges recommended by the collegium by just sitting on those names that it finds inconvenient; in particular, recommendation of judges from among minority communities have borne the brunt of this assault by the government.

Apart from sitting for years on several recommendations,

the government has refused to appoint inconvenient judges whose appointments have been reiterated repeatedly by the SC collegium in gross violation of the law.

For the first time in more than three decades, fingers are being pointed at the independence of the Election Commission and the CAG. In the audit of the Rafale contract, the government predicted in advance in a note given to the Supreme Court, three months before the CAG report was finalised, that the report would redact the details of pricing. This indeed happened three months later when the CAG report on the Rafale purchase was finalised and given to the PAC.

The redaction of pricing details from a CAG report is not merely unprecedented, it is contrary to the CAG Act which requires the entire report of the CAG to be tabled in parliament. The fact that the government knew three months in advance that the CAG would bow to this illegal demand of the government to redact pricing details from its report, demonstrates the extent to which the independence of the CAG has been compromised by the government.

Despite the Lokpal Act being passed more than five years ago, the appointment of a lokpal has been steadily stonewalled and even the inclusion of the leader of opposition from the selection panel of the Lokpal has been obstructed for five years by this government, which amended the Lokpal Act with alacrity to exempt public servants from making their asset disclosures to the government.

Also, for more than five years, the Whistleblower Act has not been notified, while an amendment has been brought to the Act which

will completely stultify the law by saying that any whistleblower who provides any more information about corruption in the government than what an ordinary citizen can obtain under the Right to Information Act, would lose his protection as a whistleblower and would be liable to be prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act.

Instead of repealing the colonial Official Secrets Act, this government now threatens to use it against journalists who have published documents exposing the corruption, violation of rules and the interference of the PMO in the Rafale contract. Apart from using the Official Secrets Acts, this government and its officers have also sought to use Contempt of Court as a weapon to intimidate activists and silence criticism of the government.

The CBI has been degraded further from being a caged parrot to blood hound of the government. When a CBI Director, whose tenure was protected, threatened to investigate the Rafale contract he was ousted in a midnight coup by the government and one Nageshwar Rao was appointed as Acting Director, who affected 40 transfers in the CBI within a day at the behest of the government.

The Central Vigilance Commission is headed by an officer who played a key role in suppressing incriminating documents recovered in the raids on the Sahara and the Birla Group of Companies which showed the PM and BJP Chief Ministers as recipients of large sums of unaccounted cash.

Another gentleman appointed as Vigilance Commissioner had been indicted by the CVC itself for having fabricated the confidential report of his subordinate senior officer of

a bank of which he was Chairman for destroying the career of that officer.

Universities and educational institutions and regulatory bodies have particularly been in the cross hairs of this government. Virtually every appointment of Vice Chancellor in universities has been made of people who are associated with the RSS or have been close confidants of the present rulers. Thus, many appointments of Vice Chancellors as well as other educational regulatory bodies have been of people who have no academic qualifications for their jobs but have been placed there only due to their saffron links.

Such persons have systematically not only crushed dissent but also dismantled the spirit of inquiry and critical thinking in these educational institutions. Suggestions have been made by these persons to put up tanks in the premises of their universities to instil “nationalism” among students. Some of our finest universities like JNU, BHU and Hyderabad University have especially borne the brunt of this assault.

### **Reclaiming the Republic**

The republic founded by our constitution makers is therefore under siege today. Reclaiming it would require a slew of several fundamental and wide ranging reforms in our laws, policies and institutions. Many of these have been suggested in a document titled “Reclaiming the republic” prepared by a group of concerned and eminent citizens of this country from among academics, activists, lawyers, judges, etc.

In this document, we have tried to put together a list of the most essential and urgent reforms in laws,

policies and institutions which are necessary to reclaim the republic and democracy and for fundamental rights and regulatory institutions to survive in this country.

Pushing through these reforms would be a massive undertaking and would require a major campaign on

the part of a very large and broad section of our civil society activists, movements and other concerned citizens. The stakes are high for all of us and I hope we can all rise to the occasion.

*(The author is a noted Supreme Court advocate.)*

## **Modinomics = Falsonomics: Part II**

**Neeraj Jain**

It is not just GDP data that the government is fudging. It is fudging or is blocking the publication of every kind of data related to the functioning of the economy that shows that the economy is not doing well and which therefore puts the BJP in a bad light.

### **Employment–Unemployment Surveys Scrapped**

Thus, for instance, the government has discontinued the quinquennial NSSO Employment–Unemployment Surveys (EUS) conducted by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) under the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation as well as the Annual Employment–Unemployment surveys conducted by the Ministry of Labour and Employment.

The NSSO–EUS, like all the other NSSO surveys embodied the idea with which the organisation was instituted in 1950 by Professor Mahalanobis, widely regarded as the father of Indian statistics. His vision for the organisation was to obtain and quantify comprehensive information on an annual basis on the socio-economic, demographic, sectoral and other profiles of the country, both at the national and state levels. After trying different approaches and

concepts, the NSSO standardised the concepts and definitions of labour force, employment and unemployment, which were then adopted in quinquennial surveys (large sample sizes of over 100,000 households) on employment and unemployment which have been conducted regularly since 1972–73 in rural and urban areas.

The quinquennial surveys served as an extensive source of information pertaining to not only the levels of labourforce participation rates, work participation rates and unemployment rates, but have provided rich information on the levels of under-employment, different categories of workers, their living conditions and contractual status (self-employed or wage employed and their types), level of wages and earnings, occupational structures, status of informal labour and several other indicators of the quality of the workers and the non-workers.

In all, there have been a total of ten rounds of these surveys which provide validated and internationally comparable long term statistics pertaining to the Indian labour markets. After the 68th round that occurred in 2011–12, the next round was due in 2016–17, but the Modi Government has discontinued

it. No public announcement was made about the reasons, the survey was scrapped silently. Probably its scrapping had something to do with the uncomfortable data from the fifth round of the Annual Employment–Unemployment Survey of the Labour Bureau (discussed below), after which this survey too was discontinued by the Modi Government.<sup>1</sup>

The Annual Employment–Unemployment Survey (EUS) was begun in 2010, to make available some data annually, and was conducted by the Labour Bureau. The report of the fifth round was released in September 2016. As per this report, the unemployment rate in India shot up to a five-year high of 5 per cent in 2015–16. The survey reported that about 77 per cent of the households were reported to be having no regular wage or salaried person.<sup>2</sup>

Following the release of this report, the Modi Government decided to discontinue not just the Annual Employment–Unemployment Survey but also the NSSO's quinquennial survey. The latter survey is a more in-depth survey, and would have revealed in greater detail the serious employment crisis gripping the economy, especially after demonetisation. The ostensible reason given for scrapping these surveys is that they make available data after a lag, and so do not help in policy making.<sup>3</sup> But the real reason lies elsewhere is obvious from the fact that following the scrapping of these surveys in 2016, the government has made no data available about the unemployment situation in the country for the past three years! The only plausible conclusion that can be drawn is that the government does not want the

truth about the disastrous impact of demonetisation and GST on the employment situation in the country to come out. Several private surveys have revealed that these policies have caused enormous job losses—for instance, the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) reported that 1.5 million jobs were lost during the first four months after demonetisation (January–April 2017).<sup>4</sup>

### Statisticians Rebel

The government came under immense criticism for its failure to come up with a new survey to estimate the employment situation in the country. So, it instituted another employment survey, the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), to be done by the NSSO. This survey was conducted between July 2017 and June 2018. It was important as it was the first official survey of the country's employment situation after Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the demonetisation of high-value currency notes in November 2016. Despite the National Statistical Commission (NSC) approving the release of the data—and the NSC is the apex body that coordinates India's statistical activities and is autonomous<sup>5</sup>—the Modi Government decided to withhold its release. Unfortunately for the government, its attempt to give this report a quiet burial failed, because India's statisticians finally revolted. They had had enough.

On January 28, 2019, the only two non-government members of the National Statistical Commission, P.C. Mohanan (who was also the acting chairperson of the Commission) and Delhi School of Economics professor J.V. Meenakshi resigned from the Commission to protest the

delay in the release of the report, though the NSC itself had officially cleared it. A newsreport quoted one of them as saying, “The commission is being sidelined, neglected. We felt that the NSC was not doing its job and we were not being involved in key decisions. The NSC's job is to restore trust in official statistics and we were not serving that purpose.”<sup>6</sup>

The resignations of India's top statisticians created a furore in the media. Soon after, on January 31, 2019, the *Business Standard* newspaper obtained and published important details from the report. The leaked data indicated that the survey had found India's unemployment rate to be at a 45-year-high of 6.1 per cent in 2017–18.<sup>7</sup> This report tallies with another CMIE report that suggest a terrifying situation, with job losses amounting to 11 million for 2018.<sup>8</sup>

True to form, Union Minister Jaitley, who is more of a blogger than a minister, immediately issued a rebuttal from his hospital bed in the United States, claiming it was an “unverified draft”, while back in India, NITI-Aayog Vice Chairman Rajiv Kumar held a ‘damage control’ press conference on the very same day to assert that the NSSO report was not final as the government had not approved it yet. When asked by reporters as to who in the government was supposed to approve the report, he fumbled, “I suppose the Cabinet will approve. I don't know.” Both these statements were rubbished by experts. P.C. Mohanan, who had resigned from the Chairmanship of the NSC just a few days ago, lambasted Jaitley's and Kumar's claim that it was a “draft” report and asserted that it was the “final report” and needed no further approval. Former Chief Statistician Sen, when

asked if it was a practice to get the Union Cabinet's approval for NSSO reports, emphatically stated, "It has never happened. No. Never."<sup>9</sup>

And Bibek Debroy, chief of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council, declared recently that a new national sample survey will be conducted by the government to show there is substantial job creation—a chilling and open admission that the government would window-dress national employment data.<sup>10</sup> What brazenness! But it is reflective of the mentality of the entire Modi Government—that they are accountable to no one, and can subvert any institution in the country to further their agenda.

### **Even Mudra Job Survey Goes Underground**

More recently, it was reported in the media that the government has suppressed the publication of yet another employment survey: by the Labour Bureau on the number of jobs created under the Micro Units Development & Refinance Agency (MUDRA). This survey by the Labour Bureau covered an estimated 97,000 Mudra beneficiaries who took loans between April 8, 2015 and January 1, 2019. A report published in the *Indian Express* quoted sources as saying that the report will not be made public for another two months, that is, till after the Lok Sabha elections. The official reason cited are "errors" and "anomalies" in the methodology used for the jobs survey.<sup>11</sup>

The MUDRA programme was launched in April 2015, and provides loans at low rates for people to set up small business and in order to generate jobs through self-employment. Last August, the Department of Financial Services

had stated that around 90% of the loans fell in the lowest category of under Rs 50,000. Clearly, this amount too measly for any serious, even if small, entrepreneurial venture, and so obviously, job creation under the MUDRA scheme about which PM Modi himself has been making such tall claims must be negligible.<sup>12</sup>

Given the audacity with which the Modi Government has been manipulating / suppressing all uncomfortable data, it is obvious that the MUDRA survey results would have also told a similar story of job losses and joblessness, and so the Modi Government has suppressed this report too.

After suppressing all these official surveys that would have revealed the distressing state of unemployment in the country—to give just one anecdotal evidence, around 1.9 crore candidates, including some with PhDs, applied when the Railways advertised 63,000 low-level and mid-level jobs last year<sup>13</sup>—the Prime Minister and his cabinet ministers are now giving speeches all over the country making wild claims about millions of jobs having been created during the past five years. If indeed this is true, what was the need to suppressing the survey reports—by statistical bodies that are considered to be among the best in the world (that is, before the Modi Government set about destroying them).

### **Does the Govt Care About Data Integrity Anymore?**

Another important statistic that the government has manipulated / suppressed is farm suicide data. First, soon after coming to power, in 2014 itself, the Modi Government got the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) to make major changes in

its methodology because of which a majority of farmer suicides got shifted to new or revised categories in NCRB data tables. Because of these new parameters, the number of farmer suicides in 2014 fell to 5,650, which was less than half their 2013 figure of 11,772. On the other hand, there was a spectacular increase in suicides recorded under the category "Others", from 24,809 in 2013 to 41,216 in 2014. But even with these new diluted parameters, in 2015, the number of farmer suicides crossed the 8,000 mark, recording a whopping increase of 40% over the 2014 figure of 5,650 suicides. After that, further release of data on farmers' suicides stopped! On December 18, 2018, Union Agriculture Minister Radhamohan Singh unashamedly told parliament that the NCRB, which collects such data, has not published figures of farmer suicides since 2016.<sup>14</sup>

Likewise, the Modi Government got the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to suppress data about the quantum of demonetised currency that had returned to the banks. The RBI normally releases data on cash with the public in its fortnightly bulletins. Indeed, it did so until mid-December 2016, after which it has suddenly found itself incapable of completing the task of counting the cash returned in demonetisation; it kept claiming that it was still counting the notes that had returned. Finally, after more than 20 months, it finally declared on August 30, 2018 that the counting had been completed and that 99.3% of the junked Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 notes have returned to the banking system.<sup>15</sup>

This manipulation of statistical data by the Modi Government has gone to such extremes that on March 14, 2019, a group of 108



eminent economists and social scientists from across the globe issued an open statement expressing concern about it. They emphasise the fact that economic statistics are a public good. Policy formulation will become difficult and faulty in the absence of data or when the data is wrong or insufficient. Not only that, credible economics statistics are a vital necessity for informed public discourse in democracies where citizens seek accountability from its government. They go on to say: “For decades, India’s statistical machinery has enjoyed a high level of reputation for the integrity of the data it produced on a range of economic and social parameters. It has often been criticised for the quality of its estimates, but never were allegations made of political interference influencing decisions and the estimates themselves.” However, lately, Indian statistics and the institutions associated with it have “come under a cloud for being influenced and indeed even controlled by political considerations. . . . Any statistics that cast an iota of doubt on the achievement of the government seem to get revised or suppressed on the basis of some questionable methodology.” Because of this, the “national and global reputation of India’s statistical bodies is at stake.”

<sup>16</sup>

More recently, Raghuram Rajan, who has served as Governor of RBI during the first three years of the present Modi regime, and was also formerly the Chief Economist of the IMF, and therefore definitely cannot be called a “compulsive contrarian”—words used by Arun Jaitley to dismiss the statement of the 108 economists and social scientists mentioned above—in an interview with CNBC–TV18 stated that he is

“in the camp that has no idea what the statistics are at this point.” He stated that “a revamp” was needed “to really figure out what India’s true growth rate is”, and called for an impartial body to look at the numbers.<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, we have a government at the Centre that is not concerned with integrity of data anymore, so it is not bothered about the true growth rate, or the true unemployment rate, or the true poverty rate . . .

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## Islamophobia, Theirs and Ours

Apoorvanand

The massacre at Christchurch in New Zealand has forced European countries into deep introspection. New Zealanders are bewildered as to how and why such a horror could visit their country. In Australia, the birthplace of the accused, people are being asked to look at the reality of increasing malice and hatred against Muslims in particular and immigrants in general. It has been pointed out that the massacre is only the end point of the Islamophobia that is spreading across public life, institutions and the media.

Amidst this recognition of Islamophobia, it was heartening to read about mosques across the globe being flooded with flowers from people from other faiths. In Singapore, New Zealanders went to mosques to express their solidarity with the Muslims. They felt it was important not only to underline that the perpetrator, who sought to speak in their name through his 74-page manifesto, was rejected by them, but also to express their active empathy.

You could see the sincerity of pain on the face of the prime minister of New Zealand and could sense the urgency in the worry expressed by the Australian prime minister. He has also supported the call for action against an Australian senator who put the blame on the victims.

In India, home to the second largest population of Muslims in the world, we saw no such initiative. Indian Muslims were killed in the massacre but no compatriot sympathised with them. It is futile to expect the governments and political classes to join their kin in

their mourning. We happily accept the foreign currency they bring but would not share their loss.

My mind went to the attacks on mosques in India—Malegaon, Mecca Masjid, Ajmer Sharif. How did the nation react then and what was the response of the governments?

Mosques, in these election times, are in the news for a different reason. The BJP in Delhi has asked the Election Commission to “appoint special observers for the mosques especially in the Muslim-dominated areas so that political and religious leaders cannot spread hate among people to influence elections on the lines of religion”. It did not evoke outrage. Barring the AAP, no political party thought it necessary to call out the BJP for making mosques objects of suspicion.

In the West, there are people who work constantly to identify Islamophobia in all forms and demand action against those who promote it. In India, we have normalised it so much that if Muslims complain, they are called unnecessarily touchy. Experiences of Muslim children being mocked and bullied in their schools travel through generations. A man past his 70s tells me about how he was harassed by his schoolmates 68 years back for being a Muslim. A man in his 50s said that sitting through the classes of medieval history was painful for him. He could feel the accusing eyes of his classmates as the stories of Muslims plundering India rolled out as objective history. A Muslim girl, all of 6, studying in a “progressive” school in Delhi,

thanked her Hindu mother for being so wise as to not let the surname of her Muslim father be in her name. The principal of my daughter’s school refused to believe her when she complained about a teacher indulging in blatantly ‘othering’ Muslims. And we are not even talking about the chain of schools under the Saraswati Shishu Mandir organisation which turn out Hindus as perfect Others of Muslims.

Policy makers and implementers unabashedly express their Islamophobia under cover of national security. Recently a friend shared his horror after returning from a mid career training of police officers and civil servants who openly denounced Muslims and underscored the need to “put them in their place”. Madrasas are being asked to submit proof of nationalism by different governments. It has not shocked us that in the name of culture and economy the eating habits of a large number of people have been criminalised. The Supreme Court, by making Sri Sri Ravishankar one of the mediators in the Ayodhya dispute, legitimised Muslimophobia. You can speak against Muslims and yet remain respectable.

The ultimate form of Islamophobia experienced by Muslims is when they are told that they are so modern that they do not look like Muslims. Muslims are asked to shed their Muslimness in all forms to be accepted as equal members of a civilised society.

Elections are around the corner. We will see the open demonisation of Muslims as a means to mobilise

Hindu votes. Recently, in the campaign for the assembly elections, the prime minister and his party talked about a conspiracy to make a Muslim the chief minister of a state. A minister in Assam is openly talking about the fear of some constituencies turning Muslim majority and also about the “disastrous” prospects of Badruddin Ajmal becoming the chief minister. We have made Muslim demonisers our leaders and ask Muslims to accept them to prove their tolerance and inclusiveness. We see them as our role models. It is seen as a good bargain to secure economic growth.

Writers like Premchand and Ramdhari Singh Dinkar repeatedly asked Hindus to accept Muslims as equals. They are long dead. Islamophobia continues to run like blood in our veins. We share our lives with those who hate Muslims and yet claim to remain civilised. Unless we first recognise this duplicity, we would not be able to move towards getting rid of this disease.

*(The writer teaches Hindi at Delhi University.)*

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## And Now, It's Lohia's Turn!

**Prem Singh**

23rd March is Dr. Rammanohar Lohia's birthday. But it is said that he did not want people to celebrate the day because it was on this day that the revolutionaries—Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev were executed by the British government. So most of his admirers and Indian socialists celebrate Lohia Jayanti by observing it as Martyrdom Day.

This time, on the occasion of Lohia Jayanti, Prime Minister Narendra Modi remembered Lohia on his blog. As soon as this news became public, one of my friends called me to take notice of this fact. He said with urgency in his voice that I should immediately write a reply to the Prime Minister's tweet. I told the friend that in today's politics, blogs and tweeters have become a huge industry, in which mercenaries or paid people work in large numbers. If one were to write answers to the blogs and tweets of the leaders, then there will be hardly any time to do one's own work. I asked the friend if anyone can respond to the stuff Modi has been stating/writing about personalities such as Gandhi, Ambedkar, Patel and Bhagat Singh for the last five years? Is it even desirable?

The phrase khanti Lohiavadi (staunch Lohiaite) is commonly used for diehard socialists. The friend who called me comes in the same category. He spoke anxiously saying ‘But the case of Doctor Saheb (Lohia) is altogether different. He was till now out of the picture. Modi should not be allowed to capture him.’ I replied that joining this controversy

would mean playing on Modi's pitch, and that serves no purpose. The friend was slightly angry at my reluctance. I tried to convince him that Modi and RSS can capture neither Gandhi, Ambedkar, Patel, Bhagat Singh nor Lohia. How can a person or organisation, which does not have any regard for the values of freedom struggle and the values of the Constitution, appropriate personalities who were moulded in the furnace of the struggle for the country's independence? There is a fundamental opposition between the two. Modi and RSS can use them only for their power game, and they are doing exactly the same. Regarding Lohia, saying anything about him in the context of Modi or RSS will be a bad joke.

The friend reluctantly agreed but remained adamant on the idea of refuting Modi. Finally I asked him if there is any justification in blaming Modi and the RSS for 'kidnapping' Lohia. The blame falls more heavily on those 'socialists' who, on the occasion of Lohia Jayanti or Lohia's death anniversary go to the extent of inviting Home Minister Rajnath Singh and President Ramnath Kovind along with other RSS/BJP leaders as guests and speakers on the day? They do this under the leadership of pro RSS/BJP leaders like Nitish Kumar and thus make a marketable business of Lohia! The friend was now really upset and he put the phone down saying that such people have definitely been successful. Look at the great future possible! This time if Modi wins, his government might

want to award Lohia with the Bharat Ratna. It does not matter of course, that it will actually be the worst kind of devaluation of Lohia till date.

The next morning, I read in the newspapers detailed reports on the comments Modi had made about Lohia in his blog. Modi, in the wake of the Lok Sabha elections, has finally made Lohia a weapon and attacked the opposition. The comment is full of inane observations and hollowness. It is a matter of regret that a person who had been a freedom fighter and who constantly fought for equality in the interests of the poor has been dragged on the scene for electoral gains on the occasion of his birth anniversary. Even more so when the person doing this is the Prime Minister of the country. As we know, there is no justification whatsoever in discussing Lohia's ideology, principles and policies in the context of Modi's blog. But I would only point out that Lohia's non-Congress-ism, which according to Modi, was his 'heart and soul' is a completely wrong statement. Modi has replaced non-Congressism with anti-congressism in his blog.

Lohia had fought for the independence of the country under the Congress banner. The Congress Socialist Party (CSP), of which Lohia was a part, was formed in 1934 within the Congress fold. After independence, the Socialist Party separated from the Congress in 1948. This decision was made because the Congress had refused to allow the existence of the CSP under its new party constitution. In a democracy, the criticism of the ruling Congress and its leadership was Lohia's democratic obligation. At least Lohia used to believe in this democratic ethos. At the fag end of

his political career, Lohia adopted the strategy of non-Congressism to defeat the Congress in 9 states. It was not his political theory but a strategy. In his last editorial of 'Jan' (October 1967), he reviewed that experiment and expressed his dissatisfaction with the results.

The Sonia Gandhi–Manmohan Singh Congress in the times of Modi has little to do with the Nehru Congress. The Sonia Gandhi–Manmohan Singh Congress is a supporter of corporate capitalism. The RSS/BJP and Modi too are supporters of the same ideology and system. When Manmohan Singh implemented the New Economic Policies in 1991, the senior BJP leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee had said that now the Congress has adopted the ideology of the BJP. In this respect there is no difference of policies between the two parties. Modi is simply advancing the policies of the Congress. However, there is one difference: Manmohan Singh, being an economist of high calibre, carried out neo-liberal policies in the classical way, while

Modi makes blind moves in a bizarre manner. Even as regards misuse of power, the Modi government has not been far behind the Congress.

Citizens are being oppressed and humiliated for criticising Modi or the government during his regime; the constitutional institutions, which have formed the basis of democracy, are being devalued and destroyed; the ministers of the government openly proclaim that they do not accept the Constitution, rather they are working to change it; they go to the extent of declaring that this election of the Lok Sabha will be the last; the BJP president says we will remain in power for 50 years . . .

The Modi government's anti-democratic manifestations are endless. In spite of all this, Modi uses the name of Lohia, a democrat from beginning to the end, just to attack his rivals in the opposition! What can one call it—irony or the culmination of hypocrisy?

*(The author teaches Hindi at Delhi University and is president of Socialist Party India.)*

## The People of Palestine Are on the March

Vijay Prashad

The bombs start again. Israel, as if on a timer, begins to pulverise Gaza. The bombs strike from one end of the country to another, a warning against the protests that have been ongoing for a year. There is a shudder from Gaza, phone calls to friends who say that they are fearful that this bombing run will escalate. Nothing is beyond Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, who will use these bombs as an advertisement for his campaign to be reelected as

Israel goes to the polls on April 9. The phone lines carry the sound of scared children and anxious adults, a building demolished, the warplanes shrieking overhead.

### Abu Artema's Birds

In January of last year, the Palestinian journalist Ahmed Abu Artema sat at his computer in his home in Rafah (Gaza, Palestine). He had just returned home from a walk in this 365-square-kilometer

(141-square-mile) enclave that sits on the Mediterranean Sea. There is a hint of paradise in Gaza—the sea on one side, the citrus groves on the other. But the entire piece of land—populated by 2.2 million Palestinians—is hemmed in by the Israeli occupation. The land is dotted with barbed wire fences and ditches, with armed guards on alert to shoot where and when they will, and the sea is patrolled by Israeli naval vessels, which routinely stop and arrest Palestinian fishermen. Paradise is encircled by barbed wire and gunboats. Abu Artema decided to write a plea.

“No one stopped the birds,” he thought during his walk as he saw a flock of birds fly across the perimeter fence. The Israeli occupation, he felt, “clips my wings” and “disrupts my evening walks.” What if a Palestinian from Gaza decided to “see himself as a bird and decides to reach a tree beyond the fence,” he mused? “If the bird was Palestinian, he would be shot.”

So, this journalist—a father of four young children—wrote the following simple question: “What would happen if thousands of Gazans, most of them refugees, attempted to peacefully cross the fence that separated them from their ancestral lands?” The answer, plainly, was that they would be shot.

### Land Day

In 1976, the Israeli government announced the seizure of 20,000 dunams of land in the Galilee. The government declared a curfew so that it could proceed with the land theft without protest. It miscalculated. Pressure grew from below, so Tawfiq Ziad—the mayor of Nazareth (the largest Palestinian city inside Israel’s 1948 lines)—called for a general

strike. The strike on March 30, 1976, was almost total, with the Israeli State reacting to it with ferocity. The land was seized, but March 30 became a monumental day, Land Day, an annual commemoration of the struggle against the Israeli occupation.

Abu Artema’s plea made in January 2018 became real on March 30, 2018, when the Great March of Return began. The initial plan was to start the protests on Land Day and then continue until May 15, the day to commemorate the Nakba or the expulsion of the Palestinians from their homeland in 1948. But the energy opened up by the Great March of Return could not be contained. This protest, held each Friday, began with 30,000 Palestinians on Land Day in 2018 and continues with tens of thousands of Palestinians each week.

### Suffocation

When Abu Artema took to his Facebook page, he would not have been able to drink water—even if boiled—from his tap. That month, the Palestinian Water Authority warned that 97 percent of Gaza’s water was undrinkable because of high levels of sewage and salinity. It was lucky that Abu Artema was able to get on Facebook. Gaza only gets power for about four hours per day. The Israelis blame the Hamas government in Gaza for these problems. Such a story is only possible for someone with no memory.

In each of the punctual bombings of Gaza since Operation Hot Winter (2008), Israel has targeted Gaza’s power plant and its water sources (wells, water towers, sewage pipelines and sewage treatment plants). Millions of dollars

of damage are done to Gaza’s infrastructure, which then cannot be repaired because Israel prevents materials from entering the enclave. Because of the Israeli bombings and Israeli embargo, Gaza, the United Nations has found, will become “uninhabitable by 2020.”

It is no wonder the Great March of Return has seen such large crowds, so many people—including children—coming to the fence each week despite the Israeli snipers and the tear gas. Palestinians set up tents out of range of the snipers so that they could feed the protesters and heal them. The destruction of infrastructure put a heavy burden on Palestinian women, which deepened their political commitment and brought them to set up and work in these encampments.

Medical personnel and journalists would be on hand, thinking that their professions gave them immunity. It did not. The Israeli snipers fired at them: two journalists were killed, 184 journalists injured; three medics were killed, 181 medics injured. Hind Khoudary, a journalist, said that her work has been “more than [a] nightmare. I would have never imagined I would see people shattered into pieces.”

### War Crimes

According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, 196 people have been killed by the Israeli armed forces, while 11,427 people have been wounded (over 500 of them are in serious condition, with at least 300 having had at least one leg amputated). The United Nations office in Palestine (OCHA) says that the number of injured is double this—23,603 from March 30 to the end of December 2018.

Last year, as the violence by

Israel on the Gaza perimeter fence escalated, the United Nations' Human Rights Council set up a panel of inquiry (comprised of Argentina's Santiago Canton, Bangladesh's Sara Hossain and Kenya's Kaari Betty Murungi). On March 18, the panel submitted its report. Israel's government, which did not cooperate, rejected the report. The report found that there were "reasonable grounds to believe that Israeli snipers shot at journalists, health workers, children and persons with disabilities, knowing they were clearly recognisable as such." The Chair of the panel, Santiago Canton, went further, saying that the panel "has reasonable grounds to believe that during the Great March of Return, Israeli soldiers committed violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. Some of these violations may constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity and must be immediately investigated by Israel."

### Israel

So, there it stands. The international community's panel says that war crimes were committed, but the legal framework stops at the borders of Israel. Must be immediately investigated by Israel. But Israel will do no such thing. It has rejected the panel and its findings. There will be no investigation of the war crimes beyond what the panel has found. Instead, Israel has begun to bomb from the sky.

Israel will hold an election on April 9, a little more than a week after the first anniversary of the Great March of Return. On the anniversary itself, tens of thousands of Palestinians are expected to walk towards the perimeter. Last Friday,

on March 22, Israeli soldiers killed Nedal 'Abdel Karim Ahmed Shatat (age 29) and Jihad Munir Khaled Hararah (age 24). Israeli tear gas canisters flew into the medical field station at Bureij Refugee Camp. About 181 Palestinians were injured on that day. This shows that neither the Palestinian protesters nor the Israeli soldiers will back down.

Israel's government is undaunted by the UN findings. The Palestinians have no choice but to protest. The confrontation will escalate on the first anniversary of the March. The Israelis will be harsh, harsher to give Benjamin Netanyahu the kind of

muscular response that allows him to bully his way back to power.

Abu Artema's birds—perhaps they are terns or gulls—continue to fly back and forth. They emerge out of the poems of Mahmoud Darwish, the poem that asks, Where should we go after the last frontiers? Where should the birds fly after the last sky? Palestinians will remain in this vast congested open-air prison called Gaza, hemmed in and forgotten, bombed once more, mercilessly.

*(Vijay Prashad is the Director of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research.)*

## Tosepan: Resistance and Renewal in Mexico

Alex Jensen

Since the mid-1980s, Mexico has been a poster child for globalisation. Through free trade treaties and structural adjustment policies imposed by international financial institutions, the country has been "liberalised"—opened up to unfettered corporate investment and imports—to an extent matched by few other countries. Though the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is the most well-known trade treaty to affect Mexico, it is but the first and largest of numerous multilateral and bilateral agreements that make Mexico the world's free trade agreement (FTA) leader. All told, Mexico has signed 12 free trade agreements with 44 nations, 28 bilateral investment treaties, and 9 agreements of economic cooperation.

The grim consequences of globalisation in Mexico are by now familiar. NAFTA threw the doors open to heavily subsidised US

agribusiness products—especially corn—which subsequently flooded into the country. Imports increased three-fold, and the price of corn dropped 50 percent, devastating the rural economy and forcing some 4.9 million campesinos (peasants) out of farming altogether, precipitating their mass migration from the countryside to cities (and to the US) in order to survive.

NAFTA also exposed the Mexican economy to retail and fast-food multinationals based in the US, besieging the country with an avalanche of junk foods and soft drinks high in fat, salt, and sugar, and an attendant epidemic of deadly "diet-related diseases"—e.g. hypertension, diabetes, and obesity (these would be more accurately termed "corporate globalisation-related diseases").

The liberalisation regime has also fueled a veritable bonanza for extractive industries—from mining

and fossil fuels to big dams and mega-infrastructure developments. Transnational companies—with the blessing of state and national governments—have been scouring the country, extracting its natural wealth and concentrating the benefits in fewer and fewer corporate hands (the richest 1 percent in Mexico owns over half of the country's wealth). Consequently, Mexico hosts over 500 ongoing environmental conflicts—one of the highest counts in the world today. Defenders of the environment are targeted with violent reprisals by those pushing destructive development. Global Witness reports that 15 environmental defenders were killed in Mexico in 2017, up from 3 in 2016.

### **Unión de Cooperativas Tosepan**

It is hard to find much hope amidst this desperate situation, and yet, throughout Mexico, there is a florescence of inspiring resistance and alternatives, some long-established, some only now springing up. In the southern state of Puebla, the lush, cloud-forested Sierra Norte mountains bordering Veracruz are home to one of the oldest and most inspiring of these movements of “the other Mexico” or México profundo: the Unión de Cooperativas Tosepan (also known as Tosepan Titataniske, meaning “United We Will Overcome”).

In Puebla, local communities defending their territories and lifeways are confronting corporate–state development projects, including mining, gas fracking, centralised electrical grid infrastructure, big dams, and big box stores. According to the EJ Atlas, concessions have been granted in Puebla for 11 mines and 14 hydroelectric projects,

along with petroleum development (including fracking).

But there has been a fierce backlash across the state, successfully blocking many of these projects. In the Sierra Norte, the resistance has been particularly spirited and effective, causing a number of hydropower projects to be suspended, and a planned Walmart (under its Mexican subsidiary name, Bodega Aurrerá) to be scuppered.

Some of the most effective resistance has emanated from a network of cooperatives called Tosepan that has been working in the region for 40 years, building up a parallel solidarity economy among largely Nahua and Tutunaku indigenous communities, encompassing some 35,000 members across 430 villages in 29 municipalities. Tosepan was instrumental in encouraging a citizen's plebiscite to reject the incursion of a Walmart/Bodega Aurrerá store in the town of Cuetzalan in 2010, by using arguments about the economic, cultural and environmental harms it would cause. An analysis was done showing that Walmart's promised 60 low-quality jobs would come at the cost of 500 local businesses, and put at risk the entire solidarity economy built up by Tosepan and others, based on ancestral indigenous practices. The significance of this victory cannot be overstated in a country where Walmart has steadily been taking over and dominating the economy (1 in 5 Walmart stores worldwide are in Mexico, destroying local livelihoods and spreading a culture of consumption, disposability, and waste).

All of these struggles of resistance help to uphold the main work of Tosepan: constructing a

holistic, sustainable, locally and democratically controlled economy rooted in the indigenous culture and knowledge of the Sierra Norte—a source of dignified livelihoods and ecological security, and a viable alternative to the distress-migration suffered by so many other communities.

As one of Tosepan's members, María Luisa Albores, explained in a 2016 article in *La Jornada del Campo*: “The history of Tosepan is completely tied to its mission and reason for being, adhered to up until today: ‘Improve the quality of life of the families of the members (of the cooperative), through work organised to advance towards the construction of a project of ‘vida buena’.”

Tosepan is comprised of three civil associations and eight cooperatives, which together cover basic needs. These include: organic agroecological farming of staples like corn, beans and vegetables, as well as crops like coffee, pepper, and sugarcane, both for sale (primarily to local markets) and for the community's subsistence; small-scale, community-based ecotourism; natural building using local resources like bamboo and adobe, incorporating features like water harvesting, solar dehydrators, ecological cookstoves, and renewable energy; local health-care, focusing on prevention and traditional herbal remedies; decentralised renewable energy with a goal of total energy sovereignty; and local finance to support the functioning of the entire ecosystem of cooperatives (Tosepan has its own cooperative bank, called “Tosepantomin”, meaning “money of all”/“everyone's money”).

Since 2001, Tosepan's members have been involved in organic

coffee production based on highly diversified, biologically rich agroecological “gardens of coffee” that are possibly the most diversified coffee farms in Mexico. A single hectare may contain over 200 species of plants, with multiple ecological and social functions and values (ritual, medicinal, fuel, food for family consumption, non-timber forest products for trade, etc.).

Since 2014 there has been a special emphasis on food sovereignty in Tosepan, with the goal of meeting local needs first. Some of the activities towards this end have included:

- increasing production of organic corn
- establishing vegetable gardens and chicken coops in the majority of member homes
- designing a local credit scheme called “Backyard Garden Credit”
- producing a documentary film, *Corazones de Maíz* (Hearts of Corn)
- organising events to barter backyard garden produce as well as seeds of corn, beans, amaranth, chilis and squashes
- maintaining a nursery with approximately 1 million plants—valuable forest species like coffee, macadamia, red cedar, cinnamon and many others—distributed each year to members for reforestation and agroforestry
- growing edible mushrooms on coffee pulp

Beginning in 2003, one of Tosepan’s signature efforts has been to bring back the native bee *Scaptotrigona Mexicana*. This bee was domesticated in pre-colonial times, and the unique system of two-tiered clay pot hives has been maintained since then. The bees’

honey, propolis, and wax have many medicinal properties, while the pollen is rich in proteins. The cooperative also makes products like shampoos, soaps and creams from the honey and wax.

Albores explains the ethos guiding Tosepan’s work: “Our cooperative model is based in values of a cosmovision or form of life that closely coincides with the social and solidarity economy which values life, people, the land, plants, and animals. From this vision we have constructed the mode of life of Tosepan. . . . The sense of belonging and permanence in our territory gives us identity . . . in the face of the onslaught and displacements of the capitalist system. Here we are and will continue with dignity, on foot walking in our land, which is sacred.”

The capitalist system’s relentless need to expand and grow continues to pose a threat, and Tosepan has not been spared the violence that the global economy inflicts on local people standing in its way. Some of its leaders have been murdered and others have narrowly escaped attempts on their lives by mercenaries in the pay of industry. Violence and physical intimidation, it seems, continue to be favoured tools of plunderers who have otherwise been blocked by well-organised communities deeply committed to defense of their homes.

This is one of the signal lessons of the inspiring work of Tosepan: that a culture of solidarity—fortified by cooperatives providing for material and cultural needs—deepens democracy, and that this in turn makes it very hard for predatory capital to enter. However inspiring and admirable, though, the corporate free-trade regime bearing down

on Mexico continues to hover menacingly in the background, posing a constant threat to any initiatives in local self-reliance, ecological security, dignity, and renewal. Thus the need to confront and dismantle this regime is still paramount, to enable many more Tosepans to emerge and succeed.

*(Alex Jensen is active in environmental health / anti-toxics work / agro-biodiversity projects in India and several other countries.)*

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*Letters to Editor***Might is Right****Jawaharlal Jasthi**

When Mike Pompeo, the Secretary of State of the United States of America expresses hope that India will not buy oil from Venezuela, in diplomatic terms the 'hope' has to be understood as 'warning'. The situation in Venezuela, created by the US and nurtured by the so-called civilized western world, is now reaching its climax and the US is preparing for direct onslaught. They are calling back all their diplomatic staff from Venezuela. It is a grace that they waited for two months for it. They were expecting surrender of the country to the machinations of capitalist regimes. They thought that the people will drive out President Maduro leaving the Chair to the puppet Juan Guaido installed by them. But the people in Venezuela saw through the game and stood by the elected President. They know that the scarcity of essential goods in the country is the creation of the sadistic west in a naked attempt to appropriate the rich natural resources of the country.

It is true that there is scarcity of essential goods in Venezuela. People are starving, patients are dying for want of medicines. But the country cannot use its own assets and income to ameliorate the situation. It is a situation created by the sanctions promulgated by the US. They seized the assets of the country and froze the same. Nay, they told the banks to transfer all the balances in the name of Venezuela to the account of Juan Guaido, who is installed

and recognised as the legitimate President of Venezuela. Nobody, none of the civilized countries objected and everybody complied. That is the power of sanctions of America. Nobody is allowed to have any sort of commercial dealings with Venezuela. How can the Venezuelans survive? That is not their concern. But they blame the Venezuelan government for the inhuman situation and for the troubles of the people. Having created the situation, they shed crocodile tears. They had the temerity to send help to feed the people. But when the trick did not work, they tried to instigate the neighbouring countries to cross the border. This also failed as the people are against such an invasion. Then they resorted to sabotage of the electrical system.

The West is claiming that the elections in Venezuela are not legitimate. In this connection it is desirable to look to the legitimacy of those elections. Jimmy Carter, the former President of the US, established a Center to monitor elections over the world. His statement is worth noting. "Of the 92 elections that we have monitored I would say the election process in Venezuela is the best in the world. . . . By way of contrast the US election system, with its emphasis on campaign money is one of the worst." Now the person elected by the worst system is calling the person elected by the best system as illegitimate. Worse than kettle calling the pot black.

How does America get the right to declare sanctions on Venezuela and force all other sovereign countries to follow suit? The secret lies in its might—both economic and

military. It is the lone super power. Leave alone other countries, even the Secretary General of the United Nations, President of the Security Council or of the General Assembly fail to open their mouths.

The US can do whatever it wants with impunity. Who is there to question? That is what happened with Iraq. It will be repeated with Venezuela.

**Obituary:  
Viqar Ahmad****Qurban Ali**

Viqar Ahmad, the most outstanding broadcaster and an authoritative voice of the BBC Urdu Service for many decades, passed away on 13 March, 2019, after a prolonged illness in a London hospital. He was 90. Viqar Ahmad was born in Sitapur in Awadh in 1929 in undivided India to Nisar Ahmad, a prominent lawyer of his time in Uttar Pradesh (then known as United Provinces). Viqar was educated at Lucknow and Aligarh universities in the years before Independence and developed an early interest in politics and history. After the Partition, the family moved to Pakistan in 1950, where they settled in Karachi. Soon afterwards, Viqar left for London to study B.A. in European History at Birkbeck College. At the same time, he began broadcasting for what was then the BBC's Pakistan Service, first as a contributor and later as a member of staff.

In 1961, Viqar Ahmad returned to Pakistan to take up a job as a

lecturer in European History at Karachi University. He also became a regular contributor to discussion programmes on Radio and TV.

In 1971, Viqar returned to London again to join the BBC Urdu Service, by now with an increase in his audience because of following his commentary of the recent political and military upheavals. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, through some of the most turbulent years in the

politics of South Asia, Viqar was the regular presenter of the BBC Urdu service's flagship daily current affairs programme, Sairbeen.

Outside the studio, Viqar was a man of many friendships across the Urdu, Hindi and Bengali Services of the BBC. He and his wife Rehana are also fondly remembered as wonderful hosts in their family home in Harrow, where Faiz, Ahmad Faraz and Zehra Nigah would sometimes

be found reciting their poems late in the evening. According to his former colleague at BBC Urdu service Prof. Obaid Siddiqui "Viqar bhai was a caring husband, the much-loved father, an enlightened, liberal, humane man, a much-loved friend and colleague, a wonderful host and a remarkable broadcaster, whose influence on BBC broadcasts to South Asia is still felt today".

## **Aurat March Still Faces Never-Ending Backlash and Threats of Violence in Pakistan**

Aurat March 2019 was held on March 8 as part of International Women's Day celebrations in different cities including Lahore, Faisalabad, Islamabad, Peshawar, Karachi, Hyderabad and Larkana. People from diverse backgrounds came out on the roads in large numbers to express solidarity with women. What happened next was a never-ending backlash and social media abuse for all the women involved or speaking for the march.

Aurat March started last year in Karachi and spread to the whole country this year. It has emerged as a new wave of feminism in Pakistan—and with that, the march organisers have been receiving rape and death threats online.

Nighat Dad, founder of the Digital Rights Foundation is one of the organisers in Lahore. She received rape threats on Twitter in reply to one of her posts on the Aurat March. Five other women reached out to her nonprofit organisation, which works for digital rights in Pakistan and runs a cyber-harassment helpline, to complain of receiving rape and death threats.

A number of women connected with the march are facing violent hate speech, rape threats, acid crimes and worse. Women are being targeted for staging a demonstration for their own rights and publicly aligning with the cause of women's rights and offering vocal support to Aurat March.

Digital Rights Monitor has reported various social media posts and users involved in incitement of violence against the demonstrators.

"The hate against Aurat March is demonstrative of the fact that the turnout and the zeal behind the march has touched a sore spot among the supporters of patriarchy. This is the main reason why, even days after the march, we are continuing to see hateful commentary, endless judgement and increasing threats of violence", says Sadaf Khan, co-founder Media Matters for Democracy, "The march has touched such a raw nerve, that people are actually investing in spreading misinformation to discredit the movement."

Doctored images from the march, often containing sexual

innuendos and falsified slogans are being circulated online. While some users are trying to raise awareness about these morphed images, the negative public sentiment is still keeping these falsified images in circulation.

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly on Wednesday unanimously passed a resolution condemning the Aurat March, which was held across Pakistani cities on March 8.

The resolution, presented by Rehana Ismail of the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA), claimed that women had taken part in the march holding placards and raising slogans that were "obscene".

"Some hidden forces have sped up their efforts to destroy our family system and social customs, the practical demonstration of which took place on March 8, 2019, in various big cities on Women's Day," the resolution stated.

It said the demands made at the event for women empowerment were "shameful and un-Islamic".

Some of the slogans raised in the march were: "Khana garam

## **Raghuram Rajan Says Capitalism is 'Under Serious Threat'**

kardoongi, bistar khud garam lo.” (I’ll warm up the food, you warm up the bed yourself.) “Tu kare to stud, mein karoon to slut” (If you do it, you are a stud, if I do it, I am a slut) and “Mera Jism, Meri Marzi,” (My body, my rules.)

Pakistan has experienced a surge in social media usage with more than 40 million Facebook users. The rapid growth has sparked an online debate about misogyny, with some women highlighting daily hate and pornographic messaging.

Many of these politico-religious parties, in past years, have rejected Pakistan’s Domestic Violence Bill calling it “anti-Islam”. In a contradiction of sorts, many of these parties, such as the Jamaat-e-Islami, also have vibrant women’s wings that are actively involved in their politics and activism.

A report by the Human Rights Watch last year estimated that 1,000 “honour killings”—the practice of relatives murdering girls or women because they think the victim has brought shame or dishonour on the family—take place in Pakistan each year.

*Courtesy: Sabrang India*

Former RBI governor Raghuram Rajan on Tuesday warned that capitalism is under “serious threat” of a “revolt” as the economic and political system has stopped providing for the people, especially after the 2008 global financial meltdown.

Mr. Rajan, now a professor at the University of Chicago, told BBC Radio 4’s Today Programme that governments across the world cannot afford to ignore social inequality when considering the economy.

“I think capitalism is under serious threat because it’s stopped providing for the many, and when that happens, the many revolt against capitalism,” the former Chief Economist at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said.

Mr. Rajan said he believes that capitalism is breaking down because it is not providing equal opportunities.

“It’s not providing equal opportunity and in fact the people who are falling off are in a much worse situation,” he said. He said authoritarian regimes arise “when you socialise all the means of production. A balance is needed, you can’t pick and choose—what you need to do is improve opportunity,” he said.

Mr. Rajan, tipped by some as a possible successor to take over from Mark Carney as governor of the Bank of England, said it was possible in the past to obtain a middle class job with “modest education”. But the landscape has changed in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis

and the resulting austerity.

“Now, if you really want to succeed, you need a really good education. Unfortunately, the very communities that are hit by the forces of global trade and global information tend to be communities which have deteriorating schools, rising crime, rising social illnesses and are unable to prepare their members for the global economy,” he said.

A recent report from S&P Global Ratings suggests another global credit downturn is possible, with a 50% surge in worldwide debt since the global financial crisis. It said since 2008, government debt has risen 77% while corporate debt is up 51%.

However, the analysts said the next downturn is unlikely to be as severe as the 2008 financial crisis. In discussing the state of the global economy, Mr. Rajan also pointed to the challenges of putting limits on the trade of goods.

“If you put up those barriers, then down the line they’ll put up barriers to our goods. How are you going to keep the goods flowing across those borders when we need to send them?” he asked.

*Courtesy: The Hindu*

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