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Writers, Scientists, Filmmakers, Theatre Artists Appeal to Vote Out Hate Politics

Hundreds of writers, theatre artists, scientists and filmmakers have issued appeals stressing that the coming elections are crucial for the future of our country, the spectre of fascism looms over the country, and appealing to the people of the country to vote against inequality, intimidation, discrimination, and unreason, vote out the BJP. Reproduced below are extracts from their appeals:

Statement by over 100 Filmmakers:

Our country is going through the most testing times ever. Though culturally vivid and geographically diverse, we have always stayed united. As a nation. It has indeed been a great feeling to be a citizen of this wonderful country.

But all that is at stake now.

Fascism threatens to strike us hard with all its might if we don't choose wisely in the coming Lok Sabha election. Period.

As we all know, ever since the BJP came to power in 2014, things have changed. And only for the worse. A country polarised along religious lines isn't the India we have known. Besides, the BJP and its allies have failed miserably in keeping their election promises.

They are now using mob lynching and cow vigilantism to split the country communally. Marginalising Dalits and Muslims is the name of the game. They are spreading their hate campaigns with the help of the internet and social media. Patriotism is their trump card. Any individual or institution that raises the slightest dissent is labelled 'anti-national'. 'Patriotism' is how they grow their vote bank. Let us not forget that some of our eminent writers and media persons lost their lives because they dared to dissent.

Romanticising and exploiting the armed forces is one of their strategies. Even at the risk of engaging the nation in an unnecessary war. There is unrelenting onslaught on the cultural and scientific institutions in the country. They mock the collective intelligence of the people by appointing persons with no relevance or experience as heads of these institutions, propagating unscientific and irrational beliefs even at international science seminars, making us the laughing stock of the entire world. Banning and censoring 'works of art', especially the most powerful of the lot—cinema and books—is their way of keeping the population away

from the truth.

Farmers have been completely forgotten. In fact, the BJP has made the country the boardroom property of a handful of businessmen. Flawed economic policies that ended up as extreme disasters are covered up and made to look like successes. All with the help of false propaganda and marketing blitz. This has helped them to create a false optimism in the country.

Manipulation of statistics and history is another one of their fond projects. Giving them one more term in power will be a grave blunder. It could well be the last nail in the coffin for the biggest democracy in the world.

We urge all of you to do everything in your capacity to keep this harmful regime from coming back to power. Let your mandate be to choose a government that respects the Constitution of India, protects our freedom of speech and expression, and refrains from all kinds of censorship.

Yes, This is our last chance!

Appeal by more than 600 Theatre Artists:

Since colonial times, Indian theatre makers have celebrated India's diversity through their work. We have done plays as part of the freedom struggle, we have taken on social ills through our art, we have stood for social equity and inclusion, we have struck a blow at patriarchy, brahmanism and caste oppression. Theatre makers in India have a long and proud tradition of standing against forces of religious sectarianism, chauvinism, narrowness and irrationality. We have spoken from the margins, we have spoken of the margins. With song and dance, with humour and

pathos, with compelling human stories, we have, for over a hundred and fifty years, imagined a secular, democratic, inclusive and just India.

Today, that very idea of India is under threat. Today, song, dance, laughter is under threat. Today, our beloved Constitution is under threat. The institutions that have to nurture argument, debate and dissent have been suffocated. To question, to call out lies, to speak the truth, is branded 'anti-national'. The seeds of hatred have entered our food, prayers and festivals.

The ways in which this hatred has seeped into our daily fabric are alarming and it has to STOP. . . .

We, theatre practitioners of India, appeal to the people of India to help safeguard the Constitution and our syncretic, secular ethos. We appeal to our fellow citizens to vote for love and compassion, for equality and social justice, and to defeat the forces of darkness and barbarism.

Our appeal—vote bigotry, hatred, and apathy out of power. Vote against the BJP and its allies. . . .

Appeal by more than 150 Scientists:

The upcoming election is a crucial one. It asks for a re-affirmation of the most fundamental guarantees our Constitution gives us . . .

An atmosphere in which scientists, activists and rationalists are hounded, harassed, intimidated, censored, jailed, or worse, murdered, is not the future our country deserves. It is not the future we want to give our youth. We want them to awaken to a country that sees science as a means of democratic empowerment through sceptical, open-minded questioning, rather than just a

commercial enterprise. We must put an end to the denigration of rational, evidence-based public discourse; only then can we create better resources and opportunities for jobs, education and research.

We appeal to all citizens to vote . . . against inequality, intimidation, discrimination, and unreason. These are inimical to the values of our Constitution, whose promise is best reflected in Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore's famous words:

*Where the mind is without fear and
the head is held high
Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not been broken
up into fragments
by narrow domestic walls
Where words come out from the
depth of truth
Where tireless striving stretches its
arms towards perfection
Where the clear stream of reason has
not lost its way
Into the dreary desert sand of dead
habit
Where the mind is led forward by
thee
Into ever-widening thought and
action
Into that heaven of freedom, my
Father, let my country awake.*

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Shadow of Fascism

Prabhat Patnaik

In its attack on civil liberties, its restructuring of the State to effect an acute centralisation of power, and its pervasive purveyance of fear, the Modi years resemble Indira Gandhi's Emergency. But the resemblance stops there. In fact the two differ fundamentally in several ways.

First, there were no lynch mobs, and street thugs, terrorising people and giving them lessons in "nationalism" during the Emergency. It was only the State that repressed people then; but now we also have gangs of Hindutva hoodlums, who force critics of the government to apologise for their "misdemeanor", with the additional threat of arrests still hanging over these intimidated critics. One cannot easily forget the sickening sight of a professor being made to ask for forgiveness on bended knees for a facebook post critical of the government.

A new nationalism

Secondly, unlike the Emergency, the current repression invokes an ideology, that of "nationalism", interpreted as being synonymous with Hindutva, but cashing in opportunistically on the prestige of India's anti-colonial nationalism, despite having nothing in common with it. As a result, while Indira Gandhi's repression had the effect (no doubt unwanted by her) of making her critics appear honourable, the current repression deliberately portrays them as dishonourable, as "enemies of the people". This vilification is further magnified when State agencies are used to accuse

these opponents of "corruption" and "wrongdoings" of various kinds; the idea is to destroy their moral standing before the people.

The third difference is the government's capturing of the media. During the Emergency, the print media was subject to pre-censorship; papers would appear with vast spaces inked out, because of which they actually gained people's respect. Now, the media, barring a few honourable exceptions which too may not remain so for long, are totally in the Hindutva camp; and the task of destroying the moral stature of the opponents is facilitated because of the media's complicity it.

The media's changed role in turn is linked to the fourth difference between then and now: the Modi government is entirely in cahoots with corporate interests, while the Indira Gandhi regime maintained its difference with the corporates and even presented a "progressive" anti-corporate image. Indeed no government in post-independence India has been as close to the corporates as the Modi government, a point exemplified by his travelling to Delhi in Adani's aircraft for being sworn in as Prime Minister. (It is worth recalling by way of contrast that when Jawaharlal Nehru, the Hindutva *bête noire*, had not had enough funds to visit his wife Kamla when she was dying of tuberculosis in a Swiss sanatorium, and G.D. Birla had offered him financial assistance, he had refused; he had himself somehow managed to raise the money eventually).

Anti-minorities

The fifth difference is its thrust against the minorities, especially the hapless Muslim minority. Indira Gandhi's repression did not have any specific ethnic or communal or caste target. It was repression pure and simple directed at her opponents and those of her son Sanjay who was notorious for his shenanigans; correspondingly it did not have any grandiose projects of rewriting history, of presenting a narrative vilifying a particular religious community, and of using State power to thrust this narrative down the throats even of school children, inculcating in them a sense of hatred towards fellow countrymen belonging to a different religion.

The sixth difference, associated necessarily with this project, is a promotion of unreason, a prioritisation of faith over rational discourse, a cultivation of disdain for evidence, and even for internal consistency of argumentation. This phenomenon has for long characterised the RSS, but it has now invaded official public discourse, with even the Indian Science Congress not in a position to free itself of this discourse.

The seventh difference is the destruction of institutions that the Modi government has initiated, and this is especially true of public universities and other publicly-funded centres of learning. All these institutions are faced with a "heads I lose – tails you win" situation. If they cave in to the demands of the government to change their ambience and curricula, they

become intellectually dead anyway, since intellectual survival requires independent critical thinking. But if they persist with independent critical thinking, then they are starved of funds, and charged with harbouring “anti-national” seditious elements, as has happened to JNU. The fact that some of the finest institutions in the country, from the JNU, to the Hyderabad Central University, to the Pune Film Institute, to the Tata Institute of Social sciences, to the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, have been struggling for breath is symptomatic of our times. Nothing like this had happened before; no government in the past had ever shown such a disdain for thought.

Repression

These differences between the Emergency years and the Modi years can be summed up as follows. The Emergency was an authoritarian imposition, by the State, that had got extremely centralised by then, upon society, or upon the people at large; it was no doubt a fall-out of the contradiction between the logic of capitalist development and a democratic polity, but it did not represent direct corporate rule. The Modi years have witnessed not just an authoritarian imposition upon society by the State, that has also got extremely centralised; they have witnessed in addition a setting up of one segment of society against another, and the promotion of a cult of hatred, behind which the State acts directly in corporate interests. The difference in a word is between authoritarianism and fascism. The statistics of repression, such as the number of persons jailed, were worse during the Emergency. But the potential for repression being

built up now is much greater, more far-reaching.

Every single one of the characteristics mentioned above as being specific to the Modi years, is in fact a characteristic of fascism: the rampaging mobs, the “fusion of corporate and State power” (supposed to have been Mussolini’s definition of fascism), the targeting of a hapless minority, the promotion of unreason, the destruction of universities, and so on. To say this does not mean that we shall have a re-enactment of the 1930s. We have fascist elements in power but not yet a fascist State; and today’s context being different from the 1930s, we are unlikely even to have one.

To be sure, as in the 1930s, the current tendency towards fascism, which is not just an Indian phenomenon but a global one, arises from the crisis afflicting capitalism. Such a crisis brings with it a threat to the hegemony of the corporate–financial oligarchy, which therefore looks for an additional prop to retain its hegemony, one that can shift the popular discourse away from the flaws of the system to the danger supposedly posed by the “other”, some hapless minority that can be made the focus of anger. Corporate capital in such situations picks up some “supremacist” fringe group (such groups spewing hatred against a minority exist in most modern societies) and pushes it centre-stage through massive financial backing, thus bringing into being what Michal Kalecki, the renowned Polish economist, had called a “partnership of big business with fascist upstarts”.

This is what has happened in India too, with the promise of neo-liberal capitalism waning because of the prolonged stagnation that the

world economy has entered into after 2008; Modi has been instrumental in effecting this “partnership” between big business and the Hindutva crowd, whence his current political importance.

There is however a basic difference between the 1930s and now, which consists in the fact that the corporate–financial oligarchy in the capitalist countries then was nation-based, and engaged in acute rivalry with similar oligarchies of other nations; the apotheosis of militarism which is necessarily associated with fascism inevitably led to war in that situation.

This had two implications: one was that military spending in preparation for war, financed mainly by government borrowing, got the fascist countries quickly out of the Great Depression and its associated mass unemployment (Japan was the first to recover, in 1931, followed by Germany, in 1933); there was even a brief interregnum therefore between the recovery from Depression and the devastation unleashed by war, when the fascist governments had actually become quite popular for having overcome unemployment. The second implication was that fascism also burned itself in the process, through the war. The cost extracted for this extinction was no doubt terrible; but it did mean the extinction of fascism.

Today, by contrast, we do not rival corporate–financial oligarchies engaged in intense rivalry. All of them are integrated into a structure of globalised capital, which does not want the world broken up into separate “economic territories” through war; it would rather have a world that remains open for capital, especially financial, flows. This does not rule out wars; but wars today are

directed by leading powers against those States which are either not under the hegemony of globalised finance capital, or are challenging it.

Likewise, since finance capital dislikes fiscal deficits, and since the writ of globalised finance capital must run in any nation State (otherwise it would quit that country's shores en masse causing an acute financial crisis), increased government spending, even military spending, cannot be financed by a fiscal deficit. Nor can it be financed by taxes on capitalists which finance capital would obviously oppose. But these are the only means of financing government expenditure that can lead to an increase in employment (for government spending financed by taxes on workers who consume most of their incomes anyway does not add to aggregate demand). Contemporary fascism therefore is incapable of making any difference to the state of unemployment under neo-liberal capitalism. And being corporate-financed, it cannot challenge neo-liberal capitalism either.

This means both that it cannot acquire political legitimacy by improving the material conditions of life of the working people, and at the same time it is not going to extinguish itself through war as fascism in the earlier era had done. It cannot also do away altogether with the institution of parliamentary elections, because of the precious legitimacy which such elections provide to the hegemony of globalised finance. (It is significant that the coups we are witnessing these days against progressive regimes in Latin America that have dared to break away from neo-liberal policies are parliamentary coups, which are undertaken in the name of preserving democracy, unlike the

CIA-sponsored coups of an earlier era, such those which toppled Iran's Mossadegh or Guatemala's Arbenz or Chile's Allende).

It is in this context that the following denouement becomes a distinct possibility. Notwithstanding unwarranted interference with the electoral process, notwithstanding the discourse shift away from issues of material life to jingoistic nationalism which occasional terrorist actions make possible (there is a dialectic here between terrorism and the fascist elements in State power, each, objectively, serving to strengthen the other), the Modi government could lose the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections. But the government that follows, if it does not break away from the neo-liberal paradigm to provide succor to the peasantry and other segments of the working people, will also lose its popular support after sometime, which will once again enable the fascist elements to come back to power in a subsequent election.

Fascification of society

We may thus have oscillations with regard to government formation, with the fascist elements never getting extinguished, but on the contrary enforcing a gradual fascification of the society and the polity through such oscillations. The way for instance that the Congress government that has succeeded the BJP in Madhya Pradesh is emulating that Party in cashing in on the appeal of Hindutva is a pointer to this phenomenon, of a gradual fascification of society through oscillations with regard to government formation.

We could in short witness a fascification of society over time, under pressure from the fascist elements who continue to remain

strong, whether or not they are actually in power. This would be a case of fascification, without a fascist State actually being imposed on society in the classical fashion of the 1930s, a case of "permanent fascism" unless the conjuncture that gives rise to fascism is itself eliminated.

This conjuncture is one of neo-liberalism in crisis. To counter fascification effectively in India it is necessary to go beyond the current regime of neo-liberal capitalism that has reached a dead-end and has enveloped the world in a crisis, from which even Donald Trump sees no way out for the USA, except by imposing trade protection (which amounts to a certain negation of neo-liberalism). A step towards such a transcendence of the current neo-liberal capitalism would be the formulation of a programme of action that brings about an immediate improvement in the material conditions of life of the working people.

To say all this is not to underestimate the importance of ensuring the defeat of the Hindutva forces in the coming elections and of unity among all the secular forces to achieve this. But while that is a first step, rolling back the fascification of our society and polity would require a lot more than that; it would require above all a programme that provides relief to the people from the depredations of neo-liberal capitalism. Only if such relief is provided (and appropriate measures to sustain it are made to follow), can we succeed in overcoming the fascistic legacy of the Modi years.

(Prabhat Patnaik is Professor Emeritus at the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.)

Recovering the Spirit of the Rowlatt Satyagraha, 100 Years Later

Ramachandra Guha

The leaders of our major (and minor) political parties are currently crisscrossing the country in search of votes. Exactly a 100 years ago, in the spring of 1919, another leader was also touring different parts of India. It was four years since Mohandas K. Gandhi had returned to his homeland. He had organised protests by peasants in Champaran in 1917 and Kaira in 1918; and also led a satyagraha of mill workers in Ahmedabad. Now he was launching his first pan-Indian movement aimed at an oppressive piece of legislation known as the Rowlatt Act, that sought to criminalise dissent and to try alleged dissenters without juries and in camera, with the press and the public excluded.

On February 8, 1919, Gandhi wrote to an Indian colleague that the Rowlatt Bills were not “a stray example of lapse of righteousness” but “evidence of a determined policy of repression”; therefore, “civil disobedience seems to be a duty imposed upon every lover of personal and public liberty”. The same day he wrote to a South African friend: “The Rowlatt Bills have agitated me very much. It seems I shall have to fight the greatest battle of my life.”

In the last week of February 1919, Gandhi hosted a meeting of patriots at his ashram in Ahmedabad. Here a “Satyagraha Pledge” was drafted. Its signatories resolved to court arrest unless the Rowlatt Bills were withdrawn. Meanwhile, Gandhi also wrote to the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, asking him to withdraw the bills, since even the

“most autocratic [Government] finally owes its power to the will of the governed”.

The Viceroy refused to withdraw the Bills. Gandhi now travelled with his Satyagraha Pledge across the country, seeking support and signatures. He visited Lucknow, Allahabad, Bombay, and Madras, as well as many smaller towns. He was preparing his growing band of followers for a major, countrywide, show of defiance, scheduled for Sunday, April 6, 1919.

At the time, Bombay was the epicentre of Indian nationalism. So Gandhi chose to lead the protests in that city himself. He arrived at the Chowpatty beach by 6.30 am. His admirers bathed in the sea and then came and sat around him. By 8 o’clock, there was a “huge mass of people” assembled on the sea face. One reporter estimated that 150,000 were present—“Mahomedans, Hindus, Parsis, etc., and one Englishman”. In his speech, Gandhi condemned the recent police firing on satyagrahis in Delhi, and then asked the crowd to endorse the resolutions asking the Viceroy to withdraw the Rowlatt Act, these sent “weighted with the blood of the innocents of Delhi and the promise that we shall continue to suffer by civil disobedience till the hearts of the rulers are softened”.

The Rowlatt Satyagraha was the first genuinely all-India upsurge against British colonialism (the Rebellion of 1857 had left large parts of the country untouched). Notably, while the scale, intensity and character of the protests varied

enormously, one feature was constant: the display of Hindu–Muslim harmony. Thus, while terming the satyagraha a “splendid success”, an Urdu weekly published in Bombay noted that the government’s passing of the bills had “united the Hindus and the Musalmans like sugar and water, although these two communities once stood apart from one another owing to the long-standing differences between them”.

Meanwhile, a newspaper in Karachi observed that the port town had “closed its shops and centres of business: when did such a stupendous thing happen before in the history of the city?” The paper further commented: “One was impressed at yesterday’s function with one soul-stirring fact—the disappearance of communal, parochial and sectarian impulses. They were “Hindus”, “Muhammadans”, “Parsis”, “Khojas”, “Jains”, yesterday; but they all felt they belonged to one community—the Indian; they all felt there was the One Religion in various religions, the Religion of Self-respect, the Religion of guarding India’s rights for the service of Humanity”.

The Rowlatt Satyagraha is the subject of great interest to historians of Indian nationalism and to biographers of Mahatma Gandhi. However, the Rowlatt Satyagraha is also of some contemporary relevance, for the fraternity that it manifested is worth recalling—and rehabilitating—in our own divided times.

I have quoted newspaper reports that testified to how, during the

course of the Rowlatt Satyagraha, Indians set aside their differences of creed and community. Let me now quote the leader of the movement itself. During the course of the movement, Gandhi asked Indian nationalists to take this vow:

With God as witness we Hindus and Mahomedans declare that we shall behave towards one another as children of the same parents, that we shall have no differences, that the sorrows of each will be the sorrows of the other and that each shall help the other in removing them. We shall respect each other's religion and religious feelings and shall not stand in the way of our respective religious practices. We shall always refrain from violence to each other in the name of religion.

The spirit of inter-community solidarity that so strikingly suffused the Rowlatt Satyagraha was less visible in later movements led by Gandhi. This was a fact he recognised, and mourned, and his own last years were devoted to recovering that spirit. Now, a 100 years after Rowlatt, we must press our leaders to do likewise. India would surely be a much safer and happier place if the politicians now on the campaign trail were to abide by the spirit of Gandhi's noble vow of April 1919.

(Ramachandra Guha is the author of Gandhi: The Years That Changed The World.)

India under Narendra Modi: A Throwback to the Germany of the 1930s?

Anjan Basu

As a boy, the German novelist Max von der Grun heard the news of Hitler becoming the Reich Chancellor over the radio on 30 January, 1933. Two days later, he and his family listened to Hitler speaking to the nation, again over the radio, on his first day in office. He wrote about it later:

Hitler proclaimed his new government officially in power. He did not do so before the Reichstag, the elected parliament, but over the radio. The meaning was clear enough . . .

Were the people clearly aware of his contempt for the parliament? I doubt it. In any case, my family considered it quite proper that Hitler had ceased to address . . . the deputies of the Reichstag, and had turned directly to the people.

It is hard to miss the similarities between Adolf Hitler and our very own Narendra Modi here. Like the Fuehrer, the Indian Prime Minister has never shrunk from showing the country his complete disdain for the Indian parliament—never mind the tearful tribute he paid to this same parliament ('The temple of democracy...' et cetera) when he was about to enter it upon being elected to office. Within two months of coming to power, Hitler got the Reichstag to pass what is known as the Enabling Act, a piece of legislation that spelled the death of the very same Reichstag by vesting in the Chancellor the power to frame and sign off on any law he deemed necessary 'in national interest'. For the next 12 years of the Third Reich,

the Reichstag met periodically only to ratify extensions of the same Act. (In the fitness of things, the great German parliament was housed in those years in an Opera house for the most part.) Mr Modi has skipped more sessions of the parliament than he has attended during his tenure as PM. He chose to stay away even when the parliament was discussing issues that would have far-reaching consequences. Often enough, he scoffed at parliamentary protocol by repeatedly promulgating executive ordinances in lieu of proper legislation. He also announced major policy initiatives at public engagements outside of the legislature, and did so quite frequently. Most tellingly, he often side-stepped the parliament's 'upper' house—the Rajya Sabha, where his party did not have a majority—on the specious argument that certain legislations did not need the Rajya Sabha's ratification. (His histrionics have often given the parliament a near-opera house look, too.) Of course he hasn't yet sought to dissolve parliament altogether, but there are enough straws in the wind to suggest that rewriting the Indian constitution is one of his party's top priorities. In the event of a strong mandate for a second term in office, he can surely devise ways and means of marginalising the parliament more completely by amending the constitution and dramatically changing the balance of power in favour of the executive, i.e., of himself. The Enabling Act is but a short step from that position.

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In Mr Modi's case as in Hitler's, the undermining of the parliamentary process took on another interesting aspect: both chose to communicate directly with the citizenry without any structured intermediation by either the legislature or the media. Hitler used the radio, while Modi's modern-day arsenal also includes TV, the internet and its numerous off-shoots. This mode of communication has unparalleled advantages for an unscrupulous practitioner of *realpolitik*. One, it can be an uninterrupted, and suitably grandiose, monologue which needs fear no challenge from a rational, unbiased audience which would like to sift the grain from the chaff by asking questions. Equally importantly, by giving to the common listeners/viewers a sense (however illusory) of direct access to the country's most powerful politician—thereby creating in the common citizen a false sense of empowerment—it enhances the speaker's image very significantly in the public's eye. This is a spectacular game of 'republican' showmanship that helps subvert democratic institutions far more effectively than any open assault on these same institutions could hope to achieve.

It takes a gifted demagogue to succeed in this game, and Mr Modi's skills in this area are quite as formidable as Hitler's. Ethical or moral scruples have hardly bothered either of them, and so their ability to manipulate public opinion has been almost limitless. When, after scoring stunning initial successes in their Russian campaign of 1941–42, the German Sixth Army led by General Paulus was routed in the battle of Stalingrad (now Volgograd), Hitler insisted to his countrymen that what looked like a setback was actually

a strategic triumph. Most Germans believed their Fuehrer. In the great demonetisation misadventure of November, 2016, Mr Modi managed to persuade a large majority of Indians—including many who lost everything they had in that cynical image-burnishing gambit of a megalomaniac—that their sacrifices would eventually improve the quality of their own lives significantly. The BJP's rousing victory in the UP Assembly elections of March, 2017 was a testimony to the fact that the PM's words had carried conviction.

Over and above their cynical disregard of parliamentary conventions and their undoubted talent for histrionics, let us note another character trait that Hitler and Mr Modi appear to share in common: the conviction that they were ordained to play a messianic role in the lives and affairs of their respective nations. Hitler's capacity for deluding himself on this score has been demonstrated too often to bear repetition. For Mr Modi, there are enough tell-tale signs that he is also convinced he is a messiah: referring to himself in the third person without a trace of embarrassment; an obsessive craving for photo-ops to show his carefully-groomed physiognomy to the world every minute of the day; laying claim to credit for anything good happening in his time, even when it has had not the slightest link to him personally; equally, a fervent belief that all social or economic ills predate his tenure or are the results of the opposition's conspiracy; and the compulsive change of 'costume' several times in course of a day. He is clearly past that stage when he needed others to tell him he was great. He now feels it in his very blood. Only a trained

psychologist can decipher for us the genesis of self-serving narcissism, but as lay citizens, we can visualise its impact on human communities easily enough. Hitler was alive and well within living memory, wasn't he?

Like Hitler in the early-to-mid 1930s (before he was ready to formally launch his campaign for a pan-European empire and the Holocaust), Mr Modi has been playing upon the basest instincts that still survive in most human collectives (usually lying dormant, but liable to be awakened into a frenzied existence if prodded cleverly enough) despite centuries of civilising influences: a deep-rooted sense of insecurity; suspicion of others in the community perceived to be competing for the same finite resources; a visceral antipathy towards the unfamiliar and 'the other'; a mindless obsequiousness towards someone seen as more powerful than 'us'; and a non-rational susceptibility to pomp and grand ritual. Hitler invoked fantastic images of a triumphant Germany bringing all the 'inferior' nations to their heels; Mr Modi's ideology exults in the project to revive the supposedly unsurpassed glory of an ancient Bharat. For both, militant nationalism is the way to go. For both, conflict and strife are not only unavoidable in achieving their grand objectives, they are enmeshed with these objectives so completely as to be indistinguishable from them. For Hitler, the 'other' comprised Jews, Slavs, Communists and radical Socialists, and such 'non-mainstream' elements as homosexuals and gypsies. Mr Modi has not yet had the opportunity (a second term in office is sure to give him one) of fully propounding his

‘world view’ in public, but has already done and said and insinuated enough to point to his unmistakable enemies: non-Hindu religious minorities (Muslims most of all: as the Chief Minister of the western-Indian state of Gujarat, he virtually presided over a pogrom of Muslims in February/March 2002 which left over 2000 dead; and he never so much as acknowledge that it was a massacre); communists and socialists and social liberals; civil rights activists; and, of course, Pakistan (both the state and the nation). Though he has not yet been able (for fear of losing elections) to articulate it clearly, his resentment at Dalits and other ‘low’ caste denominations is unmistakable, and the RSS, inside whose hallowed precincts his ideological moorings rest, has never made any secret of its distaste for every societal segment other than the ‘high-bred’ Hindu male. Denial of justice in nearly every walk of life to Dalits has been quite as pronounced and frequent in Mr Modi’s India as their denial to Muslims. Both these communities have been repeated victims of orgies of violence and abuse staged by Mr Modi’s cohort, and he has clearly given his blessings to these abominations by doing nothing and even saying little against them. In fact, the most brazen perpetrators of such crimes have often received overt endorsement from his own establishment. This establishment has also repeatedly equivocated on issues such as gay rights and gender equality. Many of its influential voices have expressed horror at decriminalising gay sex. They have also been quite open about how they think that women ‘belong’ in family homes rather than at the workplace. It is well-known that Hitler loathed homosexuality, and

gay men happened to be among the first detainees at Nazi concentration camps. As for women, Nazi Germany insisted on taking them out from the country’s work-force, encouraging them to be homemakers and mothers instead.

The points at which Mr Modi’s personality—as well as his personal style of functioning—converge with Hitler’s are too striking to be wished away as accidental. That in less than five years’ time India is so far advanced on the path to what can only be described as a variant of fascism points to the fact that the congruence goes beyond similar character traits alone. The historical contexts are very important here. Weimar Germany was an ill-fated republic that can be said to have been doomed at its birth to early decay and death. On the other hand, when Mr Modi came to power, India had an on-the-whole stable economy, and despite wide-ranging social and economic inequalities (and resultant tensions), was a functioning democracy. That he has been able to so seriously undermine that democratic structure in such short time demonstrates the odious forces he has brought into play. Writing in 1939, the German journalist Sebastian Haffner recalled a conversation he had had with his father soon after Adolf Hitler rose to power in January, 1933:

I discussed the prospects of the new government with my father. We agreed that it had a good chance of doing a lot of damage, but not much chance of surviving very long. How could things turn out so completely different?

What had given the young Haffner and his father hope was that, in the 14 years since the creation of the Weimar Republic in November, 1918, Germany had had as many as

14 Chancellors. Since Hitler’s hold on power was unlikely to last long, they told one another, there was only so much harm he could possibly do. But when things did turn out to be so very different, Haffner (who had to flee Germany in 1938) agonised over the question ‘how’. And, soon enough, he had the answer:

Perhaps it was just because we were all so certain that they could not do so—and relied on that with far too much confidence. So we neglected to consider that it might, if worse came to worst, be necessary to prevent the disaster from happening.

Looking around India today, one cannot help a creeping feeling that, like Haffner and his father in Germany in 1933, we may soon rue what we are doing now. More accurately, what we are not doing now but would have, if only we were a tad less smug in our liberal complacency. For we are looking on as the Indian state descends steadily into bedlam.

(Anjan Basu freelances as literary critic, commentator and translator.)

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Book Release: “The RSS: A Menace to India”

Qurban Ali

Scholar, lawyer and author Abdul Ghafoor Noorani’s latest book *The RSS: A Menace to India*, published by Leftword Books, was released in New Delhi on April 2, 2019. It’s a well written, comprehensive, research-intensive deep-dive book about one of India’s biggest and most secretive organisations.

Speaking on the occasion, journalist and commentator Siddharth Varadarajan said, “RSS is ruling India. Let’s make no bones about it. It is an organisation which calls itself a cultural entity but no one has any idea about its membership, structure and finances. They have exploited every loophole to keep its finances opaque.”

Varadarajan reminded everyone that the RSS’ might have removed the controversial parts from its second Sarsanghchalak M.S. Golwalkar’s book *Bunch of Thoughts*, but their central theme was there for everyone to hear when Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke at Wardha. He questioned why PM Modi gets away by saying Hindus are first class citizens ?

“Are Muslims and minorities not legitimate citizens? It was a blatant violation of Section 126 of the Representation of People’s Act. Opposition is not raising it. This allows Modi to get away by saying that Hindus are first class citizens,” Varadarajan emphasised. He added that in addition to being communal, RSS has penetrated and infiltrated every arm of the system—politics, defence forces, judiciary.

Here is the text of the speech given by Shri M. Hamid Ansari,

former Vice-President of India, on the occasion:

Mr. Noorani is nothing if not prolific. Here we have another tome of over 500 pages with its contents diligently distilled. It is also timely.

The topicality of the RSS as a subject of study is evident. This is the second volume on it in English to be published in eight months. The first was an updated version of an earlier work by Walter Anderson and Shridhar Damle. It sought to test a set of prepositions by using a case-study approach of the organisation and its network of affiliates emanating from what it called a homogenising of society.

The present work by Mr. A.G. Noorani goes beyond the superstructure into the origins of the organisation and its progress through certain critical landmarks in the history of modern India, pre-and-post Independence. It brings on record the views of Dr. Ambedkar and Jawaharlal Nehru about the RSS and its objectives. It is a comprehensive in its coverage. Particularly useful are the appendices and the documents therein.

The Constitution of the RSS is given in Appendix 2. The Preamble spells out its objectives, the first of these being ‘to eradicate the fissiparous tendencies arising from the diversities of sect, faith, caste and creed and from the political, economic and provincial differences among Hindus’ and ‘to bring about a regeneration of the Hindu Samaj.’

Similarly, the RSS Prayer and Oath which is administered to every entrant enjoins him to work for ‘the

all-round greatness of Bharatvarsh by fostering the growth of my ‘Hindu religion, Hindu society and Hindu culture.’

The focus thus is on those who profess to be Hindus who constitute 80 percent of our population. In other words, every fifth Indian—20 percent of the population—is beyond the stated ambit of the RSS and therefore supposedly beyond its prescriptive ideology.

Three questions logically arise here: (a) Do 80 percent Hindus become synonymous with 100 percent Indians? (b) Do the 20 percent non-Hindus get conflated with the 80 percent Hindu population? And (c) What happens to the Constitution of India, its democratic structure, its principle of equality and charter of rights, including the right to profess, practice and propagate their religion, and the duty of every citizen to value and preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture?

The answer to the first two questions is an emphatic NO, unless a hitherto unstated process of conversion in contravention of the Constitution is sought to be initiated. The answer to the third is evident: the Constitution remains the basic law of the land, is binding on all citizens and supersedes other affiliations.

The RSS has developed over the years public policy orientations and influence through the large number of its affiliates and by grafting and promoting Hindutva as a concept of cultural revitalisation and political mobilisation which ‘seeks to subjugate and homogenise

the ethnic pluralities by establishing the hegemony of an imagined cultural mainstream.’ This has also generated social violence by some of its adherents.

These principles, depicting Indian nationalism in terms of the faith of the religious majority, have serious negative social and political implications for sections of the citizen-body and are in violation of the Constitution. In this sense, it is detrimental to India as we know it, a denial of all that the freedom struggle stood for, a negation of the existential reality of a plural society, a camouflage for assimilation and homogenisation, a device for erasing the richness and diversity of our land, of converting civic nationalism into cultural nationalism and our liberal democracy into an ethnic one.

Jai Hind.

(Qurban Ali is a senior broadcast journalist.)

Climate Catastrophe and Extinction Rebellion

Paul Street

The British-based group Extinction Rebellion has called for nonviolent acts of civil disobedience on April 15 (2019) in capitals around the world to reverse our “one-way track to extinction.” This talk was given by Paul Street in Chicago, USA, some days ago in the background of this global call for action.

In the last years of his life, Dr. Martin Luther King spoke against what he called “the triple evils that are interrelated”—economic inequality, racism, and militarism. If King were alive today, he’d be talking about the five evils that are interrelated, adding patriarchy and Ecocide, the destruction of livable ecology. He’d also be noting the dangerous rise of a new national and global fascism linked to the presidency of a malignant racist who glories in accelerating humanity’s environmental self-destruction while the media obsesses over matters of far slighter relevance.

I was given three questions to answer today. The first question runs as follows: “How have you as a historian mapped the trajectory of Climate Change over time? What do we have to worry about right now?”

Let me say as politely as I can that I don’t like the phrase “Climate Change.” It’s too mild. Try Climate Catastrophe. If a giant oak tree is about to collapse on to your little house, you don’t say that you are at risk of housing change. You say “holy shit, we’re about to die and we better do something fast.”

I haven’t really tracked climate change as an historian. I am an urban and labour historian, not an environmental one. The climate issue really started being noticeable to me

with the often-forgotten Chicago heat wave of July 1995, when hundreds of people, very disproportionately Black, died.

I rely on climate scientists to crunch the time-series numbers on planetary warming and what they are telling us is not good, to say the least. We are at an oak tree tipping point for the house of humanity. It’s the biggest issue of our or any time. As Noam Chomsky told Occupy Boston 8 years ago, if the environmental catastrophe led by global warming isn’t averted in the next few decades, then nothing else we progressives, egalitarians, and peaceniks care about is going to matter.

In 2008, NASA’s James Hansen and seven other leading climate scientists predicted “irreversible ice sheet and species loss” if the planet’s average temperature rose above 1°Celsius as they said it would if carbon dioxide’s atmospheric presence reached 450 parts per million. CO2 was then at 385 ppm. The only way to be assured of a livable climate, Hansen said, would be to cut CO2 back to 350 ppm.

Here we are eleven years later, well past Hansen’s 1°C red line. We’ve gotten there at 410 ppm, not 450. It’s the highest level of CO2 saturation in 800,000 years, 600,000 years before the first fossil evidence of homo sapiens. I recently attended an Extinction Rebellion meeting in which it was reported that 22% of all human industrial-era carbon emissions have taken place since 2009, one year after Hansen issued his warning.

The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s latest report reflects the

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consensus opinion of the world's leading climate scientists. It tells us that we are headed to 1.5°C in a dozen years. Failure to dramatically slash carbon emissions between now and 2030 is certain to set off catastrophic developments for hundreds of millions of people, the IPCC warns.

The IPCC finds that we are headed at our current pace to 4°C by the end of century. That will mean a planet that is mostly unlivable. Tipping points of unlivable existence are already being reached by millions in Sub-Saharan Africa, Sub Continental and Southeast Asia, parts of Central America and other regions where climate-driven migration is underway, with significant political consequences.

Numerous Earth scientists find the IPCC report insufficiently alarmist. It omits research demonstrating the likelihood that irreversible climatological "tipping points" like the thawing of the northern methane-rich permafrost could occur within just "a few decades."

We really don't know how quickly the existential threat may unfold. This is an experiment that's never been run. What do we have to worry about? Extinction. Current female life expectancy in the United States is 81 years. A baby girl born this year would in theory turn 81 in 2100, when, at the current Greenhouse Gassing pace, Antarctica will have melted and the Amazonian rain forest will have long ceased to function as the lungs of the planet.

I was also asked by this conference's organisers to discuss "connections between Climate Change, class inequity, and imperialism" and to offer ideas on why "this intersectionality is often overlooked." Let me to be as brief as I can because that's a

doctoral dissertation or two. Eco-socialists like John Bellamy Foster are right about capitalism. It is a system not just of class disparity but of plutocratic and corporate class rule, the rule of the owners and managers of capital. And there are a number of environmental problems with capitalist class rule. The first problem is that the owners and managers of capital don't really care about anything other than the accumulation of capital and profit. They are systemically compelled to commodify anything and everything they can get their hands on. They have always been perfectly content to profit from anything and everything. They cash in on slavery, fascism, mass-incarceration, endless war, and even on turning the planet into a giant Greenhouse Gas Chamber—a crime that quite frankly makes the Nazis look like small-time criminals by comparison.

The second problem is that the owners and managers of capital are constantly throwing masses of human beings out of livable wage employment and off of social safety nets and out of common lands and public schools and public housing and the only so-called solution to the mass poverty that results from this constant Enclosure process they've ever been able to offer is the promise of new jobs through ever more expansion and growth, an environmental disaster at numerous levels.

The third problem is that Wall Street and Bond Street and LaSalle Street and the rest of the big financial streets and exchanges have huge fixed and sunken investments in a vast Carbon Industrial Complex. They do not want to see that giant portfolio devalued by home sapiens choosing to survive by keeping fossil fuels in the ground where they belong.

The fourth problem is that

capital is inherently and systemically opposed to and threatened by social, public, and environmental planning on the scale required for the task of moving humanity off fossil fuels and on to renewable energy and broadly sustainable environmental practices.

Fifth, class rule regimes insulate their top decision-makers from the worst environmental consequences of their growth-addicted systems. By the time people living in ruling-class bubbles begin to sense existential threat to themselves, it is generally too late for them to do anything about it except stuff like trying to get the Tesla guy to fly them to Mars or to download their consciousness into an Artificial Intelligence satellite to roam the galaxy for eternity.

With imperialism, the connections are less abstract. Eating up more than half the nation's federal discretionary spending and sustaining more than 1000 military installations across more than 100 nations, the Pentagon system itself has the single largest carbon footprint of any institutional complex on Earth. The so-called defense budget steals trillions of dollars that need to be spent on green infrastructure and green jobs if we are going to reduce carbon emissions to a livable scale. At the same time, America being a global super-power has long depended on US control over global oil and gas reserves: the remarkable economic and geopolitical power that flows to control over the flow, pricing, and currency denomination of those reserves and the super profits that result from their extraction and sale. Oil control has long been a great source of American critical leverage in the world system. (The fact that the United States under Obama achieved so-called energy independence through accelerated fracking and drilling in the homeland doesn't

change the strategic calculation. Its never been primarily about getting access to the oil for our cars and trucks and facilities. Its been about the critical imperial leverage oil control grants Washington.) A planet that depends on renewable energy rather than petroleum to run its economies will be less susceptible to that sort of imperial domination.

Why are these intersectional connections overlooked? Because it's a capitalist media and its sponsors are not interested in talking about how capitalism and its evil twin imperialism are only interested in profit over people.

The final question I was given is "What effective solutions and political strategies do you have to offer?" I want to say six things regarding the path forward. First, there's a whole bunch of information out there to use to counter the standard "cost and benefit" arguments that we can't afford to undertake a national and global Green New Deal and that shifting to renewable energy is a job killer. Both of those arguments are false. The technologies are available and affordable. Green jobs do pay and will continue to pay better than fossil fuel jobs.

Second, we can't afford NOT to make the transition. It is darkly hilarious to hear corporate Democrat and Republican right-wing commentators advance critical so-called cost-benefit analyses of the big scary Green New Deal. Whatever you think of whether or not the Green New Deal is radical enough to get the job done, at least Green New Dealers are talking seriously about the benefit of a livable earth. It seems like society might want to absorb significant costs to achieve the continuation of the species. It's a green cliché but it's true: there are no jobs on a dead planet. There is no economy on a

dead planet.

Third, we need to be ready to talk about green jobs and what they do and might pay and about how we can create social safety nets for fossil fuels sector workers if we want to sell environmental reconversion to the populace. The carbon-capitalist Exxon-Mobil-Donald Trump-Joe Manchin right has propagated the notion that green transformation is a giant job-killer. We must counter that claim in ways that show we understand and care about the concerns of the working-class majority.

Fourth, we need to be existentialists, not catastrophists. It's not about the crystal ball. We can't care about the odds. The betting line on Green Transformation does not matter. Maybe it's just 1 in 10. Maybe it's better. It doesn't matter. The odds go to zero in ten if we don't take action. Let Vegas take the bets. We are on the field of action.

Fifth, Howard Zinn was right. It's not just about who's sitting in the White House or the Governor's mansion or the Mayor's office or the city council seat. It's also and above all about who's sitting in the streets, who's disrupting, who's monkey-wrenching, whose idling capital, who's occupying the pipeline construction sites, the highways, the workplaces, the town-halls, the financial districts, the corporate headquarters, and universities beneath and beyond the biennial and quadrennial candidate-centered big money big media major party electoral extravaganzas that are sold to us as "politics"—the only politics that matters. This is true about fighting racist police violence. It's true about labor rights and decent wages. It's true about all that and more and it's true about saving livable ecology.

Sixth, know your climate

enemies. If you think it's just the eco-fascist Republicans, you are sadly mistaken. Yes, unlike Donald Trump, Barack Obama did not deny the existence of anthropogenic, really capitalogenic global warming. But so what? As Kevin Zeese and Margaret Flowers noted last year, "Obama watered down global climate agreements and grew oil and gas output and infrastructure in the United States. . . . Obama presided over the highest gas production in history and crude oil production rose by 88%, the fastest rate in the 150-year history of the US oil industry." Obama bragged about this to a bunch of petroleum executives at the Baker Institute last year.

Vote if you think it'll make any difference but don't drink the full Kool Aid of American electoral fake-representative politics, the longtime graveyard of American social movements. Become a Gilet Jaune or a Gilet Verde. Get your yellow, green, red and black vests on. Learn how to build barricades. Study civil disobedience. Join the great Extinction Rebellion, which has a dynamic new Chicago chapter and will be making some splashes here and around the world this year. Remember the words of Mario Savio: "There's a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart that you can't take part! You can't even passively take part! And you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus—and you've got to make it stop!"

If you're waiting for some elite politician to fix this ecological mess you will be hung out to dry well past humanity's expiration date.

(Paul Street is an independent journalist, policy adviser and historian.)

Modinomics = Corporatonomics: Part I

Neeraj Jain

Ever since the Congress released its manifesto promising to implement a scheme, NYAY, under which it would guarantee a transfer of Rs 72,000 per year or Rs 6,000 per month to the poorest 20% of India's households, the BJP has gone to town claiming that the scheme is not practical, and the country has no resources to implement it. But actually, as we show below, the scheme is very much doable, the government, if it so wishes, can implement not only this but also several other much needed welfare measures for the people.

The total budgetary receipts of the government, which are equal to its budgetary outlay, include tax revenue, non-tax revenue and capital receipts. The total receipts, and hence the total budgetary outlay of the Central government in 2019–20, is Rs 27.8 lakh crore. If the government wants, it can significantly increase this by increasing its tax and non-tax revenue. Can it do so? Yes, it can.

India: Low tax revenue

Budget 2019–20 estimates the gross tax revenue of the Centre to be Rs 25.5 lakh crore, and net tax revenue to Centre to be Rs 17.1 lakh crore. Now, the fact of the matter is, the total tax revenue of the government is very low. This can be understood by comparing the total tax revenue of the Indian Government (Centre and States combined) as a proportion of GDP with other countries. India's tax-to-GDP ratio (taking into consideration all taxes of the Centre and states) was 17.82% in 2016–17 (BE), according to the Indian Public

Finance Statistics, Government of India, 2016–17. *The Economic Survey 2015–16* says that India's tax-to-GDP ratio is lowest among BRICS countries (Brazil 35.6%, South Africa 28.8%). It is lower than both the Emerging Market Economy (EME) and OECD averages, which are about 21% and 34% respectively.

It is thus obvious that there is a huge scope for the government to increase its tax revenue. If India's tax-GDP ratio is to be brought to 26–27% (that is, a 50% increase), and since the Central government collects the bulk of the tax and non-tax revenue in the country, this means that the Centre's tax revenues can be increased by at least 50%.

How to increase the government's tax revenue

According to the *Global Wealth Report 2016* compiled by Credit Suisse Research Institute, India is the second most unequal country in the world, with the top 1% of the country's rich owning nearly 60% of the country's wealth. The cumulative wealth of India's billionaires was \$440 billion in 2018¹, which translates into Rs 31 lakh crore, more than the budgetary outlay of the government in 2019–20. On the other hand, India also has the highest number of people living in abject poverty in the world—a staggering 276 million people lived on less than \$1.25 per day at purchasing power parity (PPP) terms according to the World Bank in 2011. Taking another, more stringent measure, as of 2014, 58% of the total population were living on less than \$3.10 per day. That is more than 600 million

people.² And as we have discussed elsewhere, even these terrible figures are underestimates by a wide margin, India's poverty levels are actually horrendous.

Therefore, a simple way to increase tax income, and simultaneously reduce the enormous inequality prevailing in India, would be to increase taxes on the rich. This is precisely what the developed countries do; inequality in those countries is much less as compared to India because of progressive tax and fiscal policies.³

Presently the tax collection system in India is grossly inequitable, and overwhelmingly favours the rich. On the one hand, as we discuss below, the government gives huge tax concessions to the rich, while on the other hand, the larger portion of the taxes it collects is from the ordinary people. To understand this, let us take a look at the tax structure of the government.

There are two types of taxes, direct taxes and indirect taxes. Direct taxes are levied on incomes, such as wages, profits, property, etc., and so fall directly on the rich; while indirect taxes are imposed on goods and impersonal services, and so fall on all, both rich and poor. An equitable system of taxation taxes individuals and corporations according to their ability to pay, which in practice means that in such a system, the government collects its tax revenue more from direct taxes than indirect taxes.

In most developed and developing countries, the direct tax revenue as a percentage of total revenue varies from 55% to 65%

and more. But in India, for every Rs 100 collected by the government as tax revenue, only around Rs 30 comes from direct taxes (and the rest, Rs 70, from indirect taxes). The government is aware of this. *The Economic Survey 2017–18* admits that direct taxes account on average for about 70% of total taxes in Europe. It also admits that India has much lower proportion of direct taxes in its total tax revenue as compared to other emerging market economies (except for China, which is a non-democratic country). An article in *thewire.in* points out that India's personal income tax collection both as a percentage of revenues and as a percentage of GDP is much lower than not just the USA and OECD but also the BRICS countries (as a percentage of GDP, personal income tax in USA was 10%, around 8% for the OECD countries, 5% for China, 3.6% for Russia, and 8.5% for South Africa, but was just around 1% for India.⁴

Most of the taxes collected by the States are in the form of indirect taxes. The direct taxes are mostly collected by the Centre. In the Centre's tax revenue, the share of direct taxes has been falling since the UPA-II regime. The share of direct taxes in Centre's gross tax revenue fell from 61% in 2009–10 to 56% in 2013–14, the last year of the UPA Government. Under the Modi Government, this has fallen further to 54.1% in 2019–20 BE. In other words, it has fallen by a full 7 percentage points in a decade.

Therefore, if the government reduces its tax concessions to the rich, as well as increases direct taxes on them, the Centre can easily increase its net tax revenue from Rs 17 lakh crore at present (in 2019–20 BE) to Rs 25 lakh crore at the

minimum. In fact, as the measures given below suggest, it can even go up to Rs 30 lakh crore!

Let us discuss some possible steps that the government can take to do so.

i) Curb illicit capital flows to increase tax revenue

One way the government can increase its tax revenue is by curbing illicit outflows and inflows of money. According to the latest report by the international watchdog *Global Financial Integrity* released in April 2017, between \$8–23 billion was illegally taken out of India and between \$39–101 billion illegally came into India in 2014, primarily through trade mis-invoicing. Even if we take the lower figures, the total illicit financial flows total \$47 billion. These illegal flows primarily take place to escape taxation; had the government taken strong steps to curb these flows and tax them, they could have yielded at least \$12 billion or Rs 78,000 in taxes—this amount is 6.3% of the total tax revenue for the financial year 2014–15.

Unfortunately, the present BJP Government, despite all its rhetoric against corruption and black money, is simply not interested in taking firm steps to curb these illegal flows. As we have explained in an earlier article published in *Janata Weekly* on demonetisation⁵, all the chest thumping by the new government about fighting corruption and curbing the black economy is a lot of hot air; the truth is that it is actually diluting anti-corruption legislations.

ii) Eliminate the huge tax concessions to rich

The most important reason for the low tax revenue of the

Government of India is the huge tax concessions given by it to the rich. The budget documents reveal that in its first two years in power, the Modi–Jaitley Government gave tax exemptions given to the country's uber rich totalling a mind-boggling Rs 11 lakh crore. These tax write-offs are in corporate income tax, customs and excise duties.

In the Union Budget 2017–18, the government changed the methodology for calculating these tax exemptions, and thus drastically lowered the estimated revenue foregone for the year 2016–17. We have calculated the revenue foregone for this year using the older methodology, to show that the revenue foregone was Rs 5.5 lakh crore for this year.⁶

In the budget document of 2018–19, the government has not made a full estimate of the tax concessions given to the rich under excise and customs duties for 2017–18 as it said that the revenue forgone due to exemptions under GST will be calculated next year; the document calculates only the revenue foregone due to corporate tax concessions—and these have increased over the previous year. And for this year, this statement is missing, probably because it is an interim budget.

Considering the past behaviour of the government, and its overall attitude towards giving tax concessions and other subsidies to the rich, we can safely assume that the revenue foregone for 2017–18 and 2018–19 would be at least at the same level as during the first three years, which therefore means that the government must have given at least Rs 27.5 lakh crore of tax concessions in corporate taxes, excise duties and customs duties to the rich during its five years in power. (See Table 1)

Table 1: Revenue Forgone Due to Tax Exemptions and Fiscal Deficit (Rs lakh crore)

	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17	2017–18	2018–19	Total
Revenue Forgone	5.49	5.51	5.50*	5.50*	5.50*	27.5

*Our Estimate

But for the tax concessions given to the rich, the gross tax revenue of the government would have gone up from Rs 22.48 lakh crore in 2018–19 RE to at least Rs 28 lakh crore, an increase of 25%.

iii) Re-Impose Wealth tax

Wealth tax in India was abolished by the BJP after coming to power in 2015. As the wealth tax stood then, an assessee was required to pay 1% of the value of his assets above a certain threshold. But there were so many exemptions to this, that the wealth tax collection was only about ₹950 crore in 2014–15, a miniscule fraction of the ₹2.7 lakh crore collected by way of taxes on income on non-corporates that year.⁷ Using this as an excuse, Jaitley abolished the wealth tax.

It has been estimated by the *Global Wealth Migration Review* 2018 that the total wealth of India's high net worth individuals, that is, the dollar millionaires, totals 48% of the total private wealth (total assets of private individuals less liabilities) in the country. India had a total private wealth of \$8,230 billion or Rs 576 lakh crore in 2017, and of this, 48% or Rs 276 lakh crore was held by millionaires.⁸ A two percent wealth tax on this wealth would yield Rs 5.5 lakh crore. And if those with private wealth above \$10 million are taxed at a higher rate, and the billionaires are taxed at a yet higher rate, this amount can be considerably increased to probably in the range of Rs 7–9 lakh crore. (Of course, this

tax would have to be complemented by taxes on gifts and transfers which would be a means of evasion.)

iv) Re-impose Inheritance tax (also called estate duty)

This tax is perfectly in synchronism with the philosophy of a market economy; it was abolished in India in 1985. It is imposed by several developed countries, with rates ranging from 10% to as much as 55%. The most capitalistic of capitalist nations, the USA and the Netherlands impose a stiff inheritance tax with some states in the US impounding as much as 50 percent of one's estate, leaving the inheritors only the remaining 50 percent. We propose a modest inheritance tax of one-third of the value of property inherited for only the country's millionaires, whose number according to the *Global Migration Review* is 3.3 lakh. Assuming that every year 5% of their total wealth gets transferred to their children, or other legatees, as inheritance, then such an inheritance tax would fetch $276 \times .05 \times .33 = \text{Rs } 4.6$ lakh crore per annum.

India: Low non-tax revenue

The non-tax revenue of the government is very low because of the huge transfers of public funds and resources to private corporations and the super-rich. But for these transfers, the government could have hugely increased its non-tax revenue, or it could have saved on its budgetary expenses. These transfers

to the rich include loan write-offs, handing over control of the country's mineral wealth and resources to private corporations in return for negligible royalty payments, transferring ownership of profitable public sector corporations to foreign and Indian private business houses at throwaway prices, direct subsidies to private corporations in the name of 'public-private-partnership' for infrastructural projects, and so on. These transfers of public wealth to private coffers total several lakh crore rupees. This implies that *had the government not given these transfers, it could have increased the budget outlay by several lakh crore rupees*. To give just two figures:

- During the first four years of the Modi Government, public sector banks have waived loans given to big corporate houses to the tune of Rs 3.1 lakh crore; additionally, they have also restructured loans of the 'high and mighty'—which is a roundabout way of writing off loans—probably to the tune of ten lakh crore rupees (the actual amount is not known). Despite this, the total non-performing assets (that is, bad loans) of the banks had gone up to Rs 9.5 lakh crore as of June 2017; the RBI has now initiated a process of accelerated restructuring of these loans too.
- In the five budgets presented by it, that is, upto 2018–19 RE, the Modi Government has allocated a total of Rs 2.7 lakh crore just

for construction of roads and highways. The government no longer constructs highways. They are now constructed by private corporations, who collect toll from the users to recover their investment. Then why is the government allocating so much money for construction of roads and highways? This is the subsidy being given by the government—not as loan but as grant—to private corporations as an ‘incentive’ so that they invest in construction of highways; it is another matter that apart from this subsidy, which is as much as 40% of the project cost, they get to keep the earnings from the toll as well.

It is because of this vampyean plunder of the country's wealth and resources by corporate houses that India now has the third largest number of billionaires in the world. This plunder has reached such rapacious proportions that even the RBI Governor Raghuram Rajan, himself an ardent votary of neoliberalism, has lambasted the collusion between “venal politicians” and “crony capitalists”. After observing that India has the second highest number of billionaires in the world per trillion dollars of GDP (after Russia), he pointed out that “three factors—land, natural resources, and government contracts or licenses—are the predominant sources of the wealth of our billionaires. And all of these factors come from the government.”

India: Low general revenue

These huge concessions / subsidies / transfers being given to the rich, both in the form of tax concessions and non-tax concessions, are responsible for the

government's low revenues and low budgetary outlay. Readers will be surprised to know that India's total government revenue as percentage of GDP is amongst the lowest in the world. It is more than 40% for most countries of the European Union, going up to above 50% for countries like Belgium, France, Denmark and Finland. It is 29.7% for South Africa, 36.6% for Argentina and 31.6% for Brazil. The world average is 30.2%. But India ranks far below—the Indian Government's total revenue is only 20.8% of GDP (this is total government revenues, Centre + States combined).

From the data given above about government's tax revenue as compared to other countries, or from the data on government's total revenue as compared to other countries, it is obvious that there is huge scope for increasing total government revenues in India.

As discussed above, the government's tax revenues (net tax revenue to Centre) can easily go up to Rs 25 lakh crore, or even Rs 30 lakh crore, from the Rs 17 lakh crore at present. The government's non-tax revenue is Rs 2.7 lakh crore, it can also easily go up to Rs 5 lakh crore if some of the huge subsidies being given to the rich are eliminated. Therefore, this means that total non-debt revenue of the Centre can go up from Rs 20 lakh crore at present to at least Rs 30–35 lakh crore (see Table 2), and probably even more if the government develops the political will to increase taxes on the rich and reduce subsidies to corporate houses.

Increase borrowings

Apart from this, another way in which the government can raise money for increasing welfare expenditures is by indulging in

deficit financing! The theory, that high levels of fiscal deficit relative to GDP will adversely impact growth, is humbug. John Maynard Keynes, one of the greatest economists of the 20th century, had debunked it long ago. He had argued that in an economy where there is poverty and unemployment, the government can, and in fact should, expand public works and generate employment by borrowing, that is, enlarging the fiscal deficit; such government expenditure would also stimulate private expenditure through the ‘multiplier’ effect. All developed countries, when faced with recessionary conditions, have implemented Keynesian economic principles and resorted to high levels of public spending and high fiscal deficits.

Then why have all our Finance Ministers—from Arun Jaitley to his predecessors—been harping on the need to curb the fiscal deficit? It is a part of the neoliberal economic model being implemented in the country. In the lexicon of this humbug economics, the concessions given to the poor, which are aimed at making available essential welfare services like education, health, food, transport and electricity to the poor at affordable rates, are given the derisive name of ‘subsidies’ and are being drastically reduced in the name of reducing the fiscal deficit. That this theory is a fraud is obvious from another simple fact: as mentioned above, the BJP has also been giving enormous subsidies to the rich, and these are much more than the few subsidies being given to the poor. If Jaitley was indeed so concerned about the fiscal deficit, he could have reduced these subsidies to the rich. But in the jargon of neoliberal economics,

Table 2: Government Receipts, 2019–20, Actual and Proposed (Rs lakh crore)

	2019–20 BE	2019–20 (proposed)
Net Tax Revenue to Centre	17 lakh cr	25 – 30 lakh cr
Non-Tax Revenue	2.7 lakh cr	5 lakh cr
Total Revenue Receipts (to Centre)	19.8 lakh cr	30 – 35 lakh cr
Capital Receipts	8.1 lakh cr	13.9
<i>Of which:</i>		
<i>Debt receipts (Borrowings + other liabilities)</i>	7 lakh cr	12.8
Total Receipts	27.8 lakh cr	43.9 – 48.9 lakh cr
Total Receipts as % of 2019 GDP	13.23%	20.9 – 23.28%

these subsidies to the rich are called ‘incentives’ and are considered to be essential for growth.

The total government borrowings as a percentage of non-debt receipts has fallen from 62% in the decade of the 1980s to only 39% during the five years of the BJP rule (2014–19). Assuming that the government borrows in the same proportion as the 1980s, the government borrowings can go up from Rs 7 lakh crore proposed in the 2019–20 budget to Rs 12.8 lakh crore.

Enough resources to finance NYAY and more

This would mean that the budgetary outlay of the Centre can easily go up to Rs 44 lakh crore or even Rs 49 lakh crore from the Rs 27.8 lakh crore budgeted in 2019–20 (see Table 2). That is an increase of Rs 16–21 lakh crore, which works out to between 7.6–10% of the GDP. That’s huge.

In its election manifesto for 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the Congress has promised to implement a scheme for guaranteed income support, NYAY, if voted to power. This scheme promises a transfer of Rs 72,000 per year or Rs 6,000

per month to the poorest 20% of India’s households. The BJP has criticised this scheme, saying that the country does not have resources to implement it. Now, the estimated number of households in India in 2018 is 25 crore; 20% of this number is five crore families. Five crore families multiplied by Rs 72,000 per family per year works out to an annual bill of Rs 3.6 lakh crore. Considering the huge amount of resources that can be raised, to the tune of Rs 15–20 lakh crore, if the government reduces the huge concessions being given to foreign and Indian corporate houses, and marginally increases the taxes on them rich, this guaranteed income transfer scheme is clearly doable.

In fact, the government if it so wishes can implement so many schemes to guarantee the poor a life of dignity, including good quality and free education and health care, decent old age pensions to all, and guaranteed jobs at minimum wages to all at decent wages, and also enormously increase its investment in agriculture to bring it out of the deep crisis that it is facing. The resources for all these investments can easily be raised—what is needed

is the political will to increase the taxes on the rich.

Then, why is the BJP not doing it?

The reason is simple: the BJP is the most pro-big corporate government that has come to power at the Centre since independence. It must not be forgotten that in 2014 elections, India’s leading corporate houses had openly supported the BJP. That is because Modi had a very successful record of favouring corporates during his Chief Ministership of Gujarat. At an investor meet in Ahmedabad, Ratan Tata drenched Modi in praise saying that a state would normally take 90 to 180 days to clear a new plant but, “in the Nano case, we had our land and approval in just two days.” Modi’s ability to run the economy such that corporate houses can rake in big profits is best exemplified by the rapid rise of Gautam Adani from a small-time Gujarati businessman to one of India’s richest corporate honchos in a little over a decade—during the very years Modi was Chief Minister of Gujarat.⁹

And so, as the 2014 Lok Sabha elections approached, India’s top corporate houses gradually came

to the opinion that Modi should be backed for Prime Ministership. Anil Ambani stated: “Narendrabhai has done good for Gujarat and [imagine] what will happen if he leads the nation.” While his brother Mukesh Ambani gushed, “Gujarat is shining like a lamp of gold and the credit goes to the visionary, effective and passionate leadership provided by Narendra Modi.”¹⁰ They liberally poured money into Modi's election campaign, making Modi's campaign expenditure the highest ever in India's election history. It was an unprecedented election campaign, what with 3D holographic rallies, extensive use of the social media as never before, and a mesmerising media campaign.

After coming to power, the BJP has been running the economy solely to benefit India's biggest corporate houses and the uber rich, because of which the wealth of the richest 1% in the country has zoomed to mindboggling levels. The number of dollar billionaires in the country has doubled during the first four years of Modi rule: in 2014, the Forbes list of billionaires had the names of 56 Indians; by 2018, this number had more than doubled to 119. The richest 1% have cornered most of the wealth being created in the country: Oxfam reported that in 2017, the richest 1% population cornered 73% of the country's wealth generated in that year, because of which it estimated that the cumulative wealth of India's billionaires rose 35% from \$325 billion in 2017 to \$440 billion in 2018!¹¹

There is little room for doubt: the BJP is the most pro-corporate government to have come to power since independence. No wonder that it is raising the bogey of lack of resources to criticise Rahul Gandhi

and Congress' NYAY scheme. The fact of the matter is, the country has enough resources not just for this guaranteed income transfer scheme, but to implement other welfare measures too that would provide all its citizens all the basic necessities required for people to live like human beings—healthy food, best possible health care, invigorating education, decent shelter, security in old age and clean pollution-free environment.

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