

# janata

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## Fukushima: An Ongoing Global Radiological Catastrophe

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D-15, Ganesh Prasad,  
Naushir Bharucha Marg,  
Mumbai - 400 007.

Email : [janataweekly@gmail.com](mailto:janataweekly@gmail.com)  
Website: [www.janataweekly.org](http://www.janataweekly.org)

*April 26 marks the 33rd anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. And on March 11, the eighth anniversary passed of the triple meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear facility. Both anniversaries passed mostly without comment in mainstream media circles. In spite of ongoing radiological contamination that will continue to spread and threaten human health for lifetimes to come, other stories dominate the international news cycle. We give below a transcript of an interview of Dr Helen Caldicott conducted by Global Research in March this year on the health dangers posed by these nuclear disasters.*

**Global Research:** Now the Japanese government is preparing to welcome visitors to Japan for the 2020 Olympic Games, and coverage of the 8th anniversary of the Fukushima disaster is hardly, it seems to me, registered given the significant radiological and other dangers that you cited and your authors cited in your 2014 book, *Crisis Without End*. Now it's been more than four years since that book came out. I was hoping you could update our listenership on what is currently being recognised as the main health threats in 2019 in

relation to the Fukushima meltdown.

**Helen Caldicott:** Well, it's difficult because the Japanese government has authorised only examination of thyroid cancer. Now thyroid cancer is caused by radioactive iodine and there were many, many cases of that after Chernobyl. And already, they've looked at children under the age of 18 in the Fukushima prefecture at the time of the accident, and by June 2018 last year, 201 had developed thyroid cancer. Some cancers had metastasized (*means spreading of cancer to a different body part from where it started – ed.*). The incidence of thyroid cancer in that population normally is 1 per million. So obviously it's an epidemic of thyroid cancer and it's just starting now.

What people need to understand is the latent period of carcinogenesis, that is, the time after exposure to radiation when cancers develop, is any time from 3 years to 80 years. And so it's a very, very long period. Thyroid cancers appear early. Leukemia appears about 5 to 10 years later. They're not looking for leukemia. Solid cancers of any organ as such appear about 15 years later. The Hibakusha from Hiroshima and

Nagasaki who are still alive are still developing cancers in higher than normal numbers.

The Japanese government has told doctors that they are not to talk to their patients about radiation and illnesses derived thereof, and in fact if the doctors do do that, they might lose their funding from the government. The IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) interestingly set up a hospital—a cancer hospital—in Fukushima along with the Fukushima University for people with cancer, which tells you everything.

So there's a huge, huge cover up. I have been to Japan twice and particularly to Fukushima and spoken to people there and the parents are desperate to hear the truth even if it's not good truth. And they thanked me for telling them the truth. So it's an absolute medical catastrophe I would say, and a total cover up to protect the nuclear industry and all its ramifications.

**GR:** Now, are we talking about some of the contamination that happened 8 years ago or are we talking about ongoing emissions from, for example . . .

**HC:** Well there are ongoing emissions into the air consistently, number one. Number two, a huge amount of water is being stored—over a million gallons—in tanks at the site. That water is being siphoned off from the the damaged melted reactor cores. Water is pumped consistently every day, every hour, to keep the cores cool in case they have another melt. And that water, of course, is extremely contaminated.

Now, they say they've filtered out the contaminants except for the tritium which is part of the water molecule, but they haven't. There's strontium, cesium and many other elements in that water—it's highly radioactive—and because there isn't

enough room to build more tanks, they're talking about emptying all that water into the Pacific Ocean. But this will be a disaster. The fishermen are very, very upset. The fish being caught off Fukushima, some are obviously already contaminated.

Water comes down from the mountains behind the reactors, flows underneath the reactors into the sea and always has. When the reactors were in good shape, the water was fine, didn't get contaminated. But now the three molten cores are in contact with that water flowing under the reactors and so the water flowing into the Pacific is very radioactive. Note that that's a separate thing from the million gallons or more in those tanks.

They put up a refrigerated wall of frozen dirt around the reactors to prevent that water from the mountains flowing underneath the reactors, which has cut down the amount of water flowing per day from 500 tons to about a 150. But it's a transient thing anyway so it's ridiculous. So over time the Pacific is going to become more and more radioactive.

They talk about decommissioning and removing those molten cores. When robots go in and try and have a look at them, their wiring just melts and disappears. The cores are extraordinarily radioactive. No human can go near them because they would die within 48 hours from the radiation exposure. They will never, and I repeat never, decommission those reactors. They will never be able to stop the water coming down from the mountains. And so, let the truth be known, it's an ongoing global radiological catastrophe which no one really is addressing in full.

**GR:** Do we have a better reading on the other cancers, like leukemia

incubation . . .

**HC:** No they're not looking for leukemia. They're not charting it. So the only cancer they're looking at is thyroid cancer and that's really high, 201 have already been diagnosed and some have metastasized. And a very tight lid is being kept on any other sort of radiation related illnesses and the like. It's not just a catastrophe it's a . . .

**GR:** . . . a cover up

**HC:** Yeah. I can't really explain how I feel medically about it. It's just hideous.

**GR:** Well I have a brother who's a physician, who was saying that the World Health Organisation is a fairly authoritative body of research for all of the indicators and epidemiological aspects of this, but you seem to suggest the World Health Organisation may not be that reliable in light of the fact that they are partnered with the IAEA. Is that my understanding...?

**HC:** Correct. They signed a document, I think in 1959, with the IAEA that they would not report any medical effects of radiological disasters and they've stuck to that. So they are in effect in this area part of the International Atomic Energy Agency whose mission is to promote nuclear power. So don't even think about the WHO. It's really obscene.

**GR:** What would the incentive be . . . simply that they got funding?

**HC:** I don't know. I really don't know but they sold themselves to the devil.

**GR:** That's pretty incredible. Then, there's also the issue of biomagnification in the oceans, where you have hundreds of tons of this radioactive water getting into the oceans and biomagnifying up through the food chain, so these radioactive particles can get inside our bodies. Could you speak about

what we could expect to see in the years ahead in terms of the illnesses that manifest themselves?

**HC:** Well number one, Fukushima is a very agricultural prefecture. Beautiful, beautiful peaches, beautiful food, and lots of rice. The radiation has spread far and wide through the Fukushima prefecture, and indeed they have been plowing up millions and millions of tons of radioactive dirt and storing it in plastic bags all over the prefecture. The mountains are highly radioactive and every time it rains, down comes radiation with the water. The radiation is from the elements. There are over 200 radioactive elements made in a nuclear reactor. Some have lives of seconds and some have lives of millions of years, that is to say, the radiation lasts for millions of years. So there are many many isotopes, long-lasting isotopes—cesium, strontium, tritium—on the soil in Fukushima.

And what happens is—you talked about biomagnification—when the plants take up the water from the soil, they take up the cesium also, which is a potassium analog, it resembles potassium. Strontium 90 resembles calcium, and so on. And these elements get magnified by orders of magnitude in the rice and in the plants. And so when you eat food that is grown in Fukushima, the chances are it's going to be relatively radioactive.

Now, these isotopes go into the ocean as well, and the algae bio-magnify them by ten to a hundred times or more. And then the crustaceans eat the algae, bio-magnify it more. The little fish eat the crustaceans, the big fish eat the little fish and the like. Tuna found off the coast of California some years ago contained isotopes from

Fukushima. So, it's an ongoing bio-magnification catastrophe.

And the thing is that you can't even taste, smell or see radioactive elements in your food. They're invisible. And it takes a long time for cancers to occur. And you can't identify a particular cancer caused by a particular substance or isotope. You can only identify that problem by doing epidemiological studies—comparing irradiated people with non-irradiated people—to see what the cancer levels are and that data comes from Hiroshima and Nagasaki and many, many, many other studies.

**GR:** Chernobyl as well, isn't it?

**HC:** Oh, Chernobyl! Well, a wonderful book was produced by the Russians, and published by the New York Academy of Sciences, on Chernobyl with over 5,000 on the ground studies of children and diseases in Belarus and the Ukraine, and all over Europe. By now, over a million people have already died from the Chernobyl disaster. And many diseases have been caused by that, including premature aging in children, microcephaly in babies, very small heads, diabetes, leukemia, I could go on and on.

And those diseases which have been very well described in that wonderful book, which everyone should read, are not being addressed or identified or looked for in the Fukushima or Japanese population.

May I say that parts of Tokyo are extremely radioactive. People have been measuring the dirt from roofs of apartments, from the roadway, from vacuum cleaner dust. And some of these samples are so radioactive that they would classify to be buried in radioactive waste facilities in America. That's number one.

Number two, to have the Olympics in Fukushima just defies imagination. Some of the areas

where the athletes are going to be running, the dust and dirt there has been measured, and it's highly radioactive. Abe, the Prime Minister of Japan, has set this up as a sort of way to obscure what Fukushima really means. And those young athletes . . . young people are much more sensitive to radiation . . . it's just a catastrophe waiting to happen.

It is being called the radioactive Olympics!

**GR:** Is there anything that people can do, whether they live in Japan or, say, the west coast of North America, to mitigate the effects that this disaster has had, and may still be having eight years later?

**HC:** Yes. Do not eat any Japanese food because you don't know where it's sourced. Do not eat fish from Japan, miso, rice, you name it. Do not eat Japanese food. Period. Fish caught off the west coast of Canada and America, well, they're not testing the fish so I don't know what to say. Well, most of it's probably not radioactive, but you don't know because you can't taste it.

They've closed down the air-borne radioactive measuring instruments off the west coast of America. That's pretty bad, because there still could be another huge accident at those reactors.

For instance, if there's another large earthquake, number one, all those tanks would be destroyed and the water would pour into the Pacific. Number two, there could be another meltdown, a release — huge release of radiation, from the damaged reactors. So, things are very tenuous, but they're not just tenuous now. They're going to be tenuous forever.

*(Dr. Helen Caldicott is author, physician and one of the world's leading anti-nuclear campaigners.)*

# Gandhi-Ambedkar Interface . . . When Shall the Twain Meet?

**Suhas Palshikar**

Gandhi and Ambedkar would have agreed on as many issues as they would have disagreed upon. They could not find much ground for co-operation and collaboration. In popular perception—and in the perception of many of their followers too—they remained opponents. Both indulged in verbal duels in order to expose the weaknesses of each other's thought and actions. This legacy could never be abandoned by the Ambedkaiite political movement even after the 1950s. The disappearance of both personalities from the social scene, and a change in the political context have not altered the standardised positioning of the two as each other's enemies. Against this background it is proposed to enquire into the differences in the discourses of Gandhi and Ambedkar.

Two general points may be noted before we proceed to a discussion of the relationship between the Gandhian discourse and the Ambedkarian discourse. Movements for social transformation are based on emancipatory ideologies. At the present juncture in the Indian society we find that movements for social transformation are weak and localised. Further, the dominant discourse today does not believe in the project of emancipation. In this context it becomes necessary to tap the possibilities of realignment of emancipatory ideologies. It would be inadvisable to be persuaded by the exclusivist claims of any ideology to the project of emancipation.

Secondly, personality clashes need not be the decisive factor in

the assessment of thought. Also, we need to accept that immediate political interests of Gandhi and Ambedkar clashed. Ambedkar began his political career as leader of the untouchables and continued to claim to be the authentic representative of the untouchable community. Gandhi, on the other hand, appeared to be denying the existence of separate interests of untouchables in the context of the freedom struggle. Ambedkar was always suspicious of the social content of freedom struggle and believed that Gandhi was not adequately sensitive to this. Since Gandhi was at the helm of the freedom struggle, Ambedkar thought it necessary to position himself against Gandhi. Given these historical circumstances, is it necessary that we sit in judgment to decide the case in favour of either Gandhi or Ambedkar?

The present note proceeds with the assumption that Gandhi–Ambedkar clashes resulted from their personalities, as well as their respective positioning in the contemporary political contexts. However, beyond these clashes and differences of assessment of contemporary politics, there exists some ground where the agenda of Gandhi and Ambedkar might actually be complementary. To realise this, it is necessary to throw away the burden of proving whose political position was correct or incorrect.

The question of separate electorates for untouchables is a case in point. Was Gandhi wrong in opposing separate electorates

for untouchables? Was he wrong in forcing Ambedkar into acquiescence through the fast? I would tend to argue that such questions are largely irrelevant given the fact that 'separate electorates' do not form the core of Ambedkar's thought. In other words, the Gandhi–Ambedkar relationship needs to be probed in the context not of personalities or political strategies, but in terms of their respective emancipatory projects.

## **Caste Question**

The centrality of the caste question in Ambedkar's thought cannot be overemphasised. He believed that untouchability was an expression of the caste system. Therefore, Ambedkar chose to study the caste system and critically analyse the justification it received from Hindu scriptures. His thought does not deal merely with removal of untouchability which was but one part of the anti-caste movement. He was also concerned with the overall annihilation of caste. Gandhi, of course, was in favour of abolition of caste-based discriminations. In personal conduct too, he did not practise caste. But the caste question does not occupy a place of urgency in his thought. He tended to emphasise untouchability more than the caste question. For Gandhi, untouchability formed the core of the caste system. Once untouchability was removed, there will be no caste system. Gandhi was right in identifying untouchability as the most abhorring expression of caste-based inequality and attendant inhumanity. But the

crucial question is, would caste disappear if untouchability is not practised? If so, why should there be internal differentiation and hierarchical separation among the touchable castes? Gandhi would argue that untouchability stands for everything ugly in the caste system, and therefore, it must go instantly. Extending this logic, he could further claim that untouchability could be fully and finally removed only when caste-consciousness is removed. Removal of untouchability would thus symbolically bury the caste system. In the light of development of Gandhi's views on the caste issue, there is no doubt about Gandhi's ultimate preparedness to abolish caste. And yet, the caste question does not become the core of Gandhi's discourse.

Consequently, Gandhi did not extend the scope of satyagraha to caste and caste-based inequality. Gandhi extended support to temple entry movements but did not allow such movements to occupy the centre-stage in his movement. Similarly, Gandhi undertook fast to convince Hindus of the sinfulness of practising untouchability and exhorted people to abolish the practice. But the philosophy of satyagraha does not adequately answer the question of tackling injustices perpetrated by one's own society and sanctioned by religion. Satyagraha as a political weapon is adequately demonstrated by Gandhi's thought and practice. But if satyagraha is to become a moral purifier, what kind of struggle is necessary against untouchability and caste? In the case of untouchability, Gandhi could argue that the responsibility of removing untouchability lies with the caste Hindus. Hence the reference to sin

and penance. However, as Ambedkar put it squarely, untouchability exists as a stigma on the body of the untouchables. As the ones suffering from injustice, how should the untouchables fight against their plight in the Gandhian framework? Even if they were to offer satyagraha, how could this act prick the conscience of caste Hindus who were under the ideological spell of religious sanction to caste and who were getting material advantages from the caste-based order? Apart from practising untouchability, the caste society presents a number of other possible sites of injustice where different caste groups may be located in antagonistic situations. Gandhi's discourse does not direct intellectual attention and political energies to the question of waging struggle against the caste system and more importantly against caste groups deriving advantages from the caste system; instead, Gandhi tends to search for possible areas of co-operation and integration of castes. Therefore, he refuses to recognise caste divisions even at the analytical level.

Gandhi's constant appeals to caste Hindus not to practise untouchability clearly indicate his awareness that one section of the society was being treated unjustly by another; it was not a 'personal' relationship but a group relationship. In spite of this division of society at the empirical level, Gandhi refused to concede a separate political identity to untouchables through separate electorates. He would allow 'reservation for castes' but the representational character of those elected through reserved seats would not be 'communal', i.e., not as representatives of untouchables but as representatives of the general

electorate. Gandhi's relative neglect of developing satyagraha against caste probably derived from this position of not recognising the political nature of social divisions.

Although he uses the term *harijan* for untouchable 'brethren', Gandhi stoutly refused to recognise that caste-based divisions could actually be analytical categories for understanding the complex network of structures of injustice in the Hindu society. Ambedkar draws the distinction between untouchables and caste Hindus; he also suggests the possibility of using the categories of *savarna* and *avarna*, where the latter would include untouchables and tribals, aborigines, etc. Before him, Phule visualised the categorisation in terms of *shudra-atishudra* and 'trivarniks' or those with 'dvij' status. The logic behind such categorisation is to locate the main contradiction in the caste-ridden society, either as *varna* or as 'dvij' status. While Gandhi would accept the empirical reality of caste, he was not prepared to posit in it the ideological basis of anti-caste struggle. Hence, his insistence on identifying the untouchables as part of the Hindu fold. The relative unimportance of caste question in the Gandhian discourse is prominently expressed in the writings of almost all Gandhian intellectuals who tend to virtually exclude the issue of caste from their expositions of Gandhism

### **Bane of Capitalism**

The Gandhian discourse evolved through and along with his struggles against racism and colonialism. These struggles amply acquainted him with the evil side of western society. Yet, Gandhi was not trapped in formulating anti-west nationalism. He realised that

the malady of the West lay in its peculiar production process. The modern process of production led to commodification and consequent degradation of human character. Therefore, Gandhi directed his attention to the modern lifestyle and the artificial generation of false materiality. The transformation of human beings into consumers from producers was the main step in the degeneration of human society.

In this sense, the Gandhian discourse can be squarely situated in the context of the problematique of capitalism. Although Gandhi rarely attacked capitalism directly, his analysis of modern civilisation unmistakably indicts capitalism. His assessment of the exploitative nature of the modern process of production, dehumanising effects of consumerism and his overall assessment of the modern society do not make sense unless understood as analysis of the capitalist social order. Had Gandhi not been demolishing the claims of capitalism, he would not have given so much prominence to the *Daridranarayan*. His entire project hinges upon the juxtaposition between *Daridranarayan* and the satanical nature of capitalist enterprise. Gandhi's advocacy of a simple life, insistence on abnegation of wants and *swadeshi* must be seen as counterpoints to crass materiality and instrumental interdependence nurtured by capitalism. In this sense, Gandhi's *swadeshi* calls for redefinition of the scope of material development and an outright rejection of capitalism as the instrument of development. It must be borne in mind that Gandhi was not opposed to modern civilisation per se but as a social order based on capitalism.

Where does Ambedkar stand in

relation to this Gandhian position, regarding capitalism and modern civilisation? Two points are striking in this context. Firstly, for the most part of his political career, Ambedkar did not employ his expertise in economics to his political agenda. Secondly, his early economic treatises do not substantially depart from the ideological position and standard wisdom prevalent in economics during his time.

It may be said that the main concern of Ambedkar was to understand sociologically the operation of the caste system and to understand the socio-religious justifications of the same. His political struggles, too, occurred on very different terrain from the economic. Thus, though he was aware of the economic aspects of caste system he chose to concentrate on the social, cultural, religious and political aspects of caste. Besides, Ambedkar's writings manifest a constant vacillation on his part as far as assessment of modern capitalist economy is concerned. For one thing, he was not persuaded by the soundness of communist economics. For another, Ambedkar was wary of any alternative that would tend to glorify or justify a semblance of the 'old order' in which caste occupied a pivotal role. Thus, autonomous village communities, small industry, mutual dependence, etc, were not appreciated by him for fear of indirectly furthering caste interests. He might have looked upon forces of modernity as cutting at the root of caste society and therefore was not convinced of the 'evils' involved in modernity.

And yet it would be wrong to believe that Ambedkar upheld capitalism uncritically. Not only was he critical of many aspects of

capitalist economy, Ambedkar was even prepared to reject it for a more egalitarian and democratic system of production. Ambedkar has noted the political fallout of capitalism, viz, sham democracy. Therefore, it is not correct to say that Ambedkar was against taking up economic issues or developing a critique of capitalism. He was not averse to a search for an alternative economic system although he did not devote his energies to this project. But his emphasis on caste question give an impression that he had no sympathy for a radical economic agenda, and has resulted in many of his followers literally seeing 'red' at the mention of economic issues! This has led to a false dichotomisation between the caste question and economic questions. Ambedkar's speeches and Marathi writings suggest that he did not subscribe to such a dichotomisation. He was aware of the threat to liberty, equality and fraternity not only from brahminism but from capitalism also.

### **Perspectives on Tradition**

It is interesting to see how Gandhi and Ambedkar negotiate with tradition. Gandhi engages in a creative dialogue with tradition. He tries to find out the element of truth in tradition and emphasises it. In many cases he attaches new meanings to traditional symbols. He gives an impression that he is asking for nothing new in substance, but for the continuation of the 'old' tradition. The secret of Gandhi's ability to arouse revolutionary potential among the masses lies partly in this method of not claiming anything revolutionary, and in the appeal to the conscience of the masses through tradition. For this purpose, while choosing popular traditional

symbols, Gandhi emphasised those symbols which have been associated with truth and justice. Assuming the role of interpreter of our 'great tradition', Gandhi takes the liberty of developing his own normative framework on the basis of tradition.

Ambedka, on the other hand, was in search of the ideology of exploitation. He felt that tradition was this ideology. Injustice based on caste could not have continued unless it was legitimised by tradition. He also believed that the tradition of Hindu society was predominated by brahminical interests. As such, he could not ignore the role of tradition in situating caste as a moral code of Hindu society. This prompted Ambedkar to take a critical view of the entire Hindu (brahminical) tradition. It is also possible that Ambedkar realised the role of tradition in the contemporary context. All reform was stalled throughout the 19th century in the name of 'our great tradition' and its correctness. Thus, it was not tradition but forces upholding tradition that must have made Ambedkar a staunch critic of tradition. Yet, did he really forsake tradition in its entirety? Much of Ambedkar's critical attack on tradition was directed against glorification of brahminical tradition. It is possible to argue that Ambedkar was engaged in demolishing the tradition of brahminism and rejecting the Vedic ideological tradition. But he was not rejecting all traditions, or else how could he search in that same tradition the path of the dhamma? Nor was he opposed to liberating traditions in the form of different sects. He was complaining against a lack of adequate emancipatory space within the traditional framework.

Tradition in an unequal society

will always be caught in crossfire. Those defending inequality will cogently place it as part of tradition and will seek to glorify tradition as 'anadi', 'sanatan' and infallible. While those opposing inequality will seek to condemn the same heritage for all the sins in society. Gandhi, sensing the emotional power of tradition, appropriated it in order to save it from chauvinist glorifications. But even an appropriation of tradition requires a strong critique. Such a critique is a constant reminder that tradition may have the potential of aligning with forces which perpetuate inequality. An all-round criticism of tradition further sensitises us to the fact that in many cases, tradition actually gives credence to the system of exploitation. In other words, the supporters of inequality are always comfortable under the umbrella of tradition. Thus, appropriation of tradition and employing it for purposes of building a just society requires a strong will to reject large parts of tradition and situating tradition in a different context from the one historically associated with it. In this sense, Ambedkar's critical assessment of tradition provides a useful counterpoint to the Gandhian attempt of appropriating tradition. And the Gandhian project, too, does not presuppose an uncritical appropriation of all tradition.

### Meeting Ground

In a very general sense both Gandhi and Ambedkar strived to visualise a community based on justice and fraternity. The Gandhian discourse seeks to identify the elements of community in the form of love, non-violence, dignity of human life and dignity of physical labour and a non-exploitative process of production symbolised

by rejection of greed. From the vantage point of this vision of the community, Gandhian discourse makes an assessment of colonial and capitalist reality. It develops a trenchant critique of modernity. The Ambedkarian discourse unfolds in a different manner. It commences from the critical evaluation of Indian social reality. Therefore, it concentrates on the Hindu social order, its religious ideology and Hindu tradition. Thus, Ambedkar's discourse takes the form of critique of Hindu religion and society. Ambedkar was constantly aware of the need to situate this critique on a solid basis of communitarian vision. Although liberty, equality and fraternity beckoned him constantly, Ambedkar transcends liberalism and socialism to finally arrive at the conception of the dhamma.

The difference in the structures of their discourses notwithstanding, Gandhi and Ambedkar thus came to share similar visions. Both believed that social transformation could come about only by social action. Therefore, they relied heavily on mobilising people against injustice. Social action perceived by Gandhi and Ambedkar was democratic; it was in the form of popular struggles. Gandhi many times appeared to be favouring compromises and avoiding 'conflict'. Ambedkar, too, is seen by many (even his followers) as a supporter of non-agitational politics. But the core of their politics as well as their position on social action leave us in no doubt that Gandhi and Ambedkar not only pursued popular struggles but they valued struggles as essential and enriching. They did not visualise removal of injustice without struggles and without popular participation. Further, Gandhi and Ambedkar

would have no difficulty in agreeing upon the value of non-violence.

The discourses of Gandhi and Ambedkar respect the materiality of human life. Fulfilment of material needs, and a stable and enriched material life are seen by both as forming the basis of human activity. Moreover, Gandhi and Ambedkar have a striking similarity in their views on morality. They believe moral values to be eternal and necessary for co-ordinating material social life.

At the root of this similarity is the common conception of secular religion. This conception rejected all rituals, bypassed the question of existence of God and the other world, and brought morality to the centre-stage of discussion of religion. It is not a mere coincidence that both Gandhi and Ambedkar are considered as heretics by religious orthodoxies of Hinduism and Buddhism, respectively. Both claim that religion and scriptures need to be understood in the light of conscience and morality. Wherever scriptures contradict conscience, religion demands that conscience should be followed. In this sense they were sceptical not only about scriptures, but 'priestly authorities' deciding the meaning of scriptures. This view cut at the root of any notion of an organised, closed religion. Gandhi and Ambedkar remove religion from the realm of metaphysics and situate it on the terrain of secular matters such as truth, compassion, love, conscience, social responsibility and enlightened sense of morality. Understood thus, Gandhi's sanatan dharma and Ambedkar's dhamma do not confine themselves to individual and private pursuits of good life but operate as the moral framework for social action. Religion becomes

secular and part of the 'public' sphere. When the so-called religious people were busy counting numbers, Gandhi and Ambedkar tried to turn religiosity of the common man into a force for social transformation.

Struggle for truth and non-violence has to incorporate caste struggle because caste is a structure of violence and injustice. Just as Gandhi denounces the satanic culture of the West, Gandhism can be a denunciation of caste-based injustice. Gandhi does not forbid the use of soul-force against the satanic tendencies in one's own society. If contemporary Gandhism fights shy of caste struggles, it has lost the core of Gandhi's discourse. Such a restrictive interpretation of Gandhi will have to be rejected in favour of a creative interpretation. Non-recognition of categories like shudra-atishudra does not form the core of Gandhism. In fact, use of a term like 'daridranarayan' presupposes readiness to understand social reality on the basis of exploitative relations. Therefore, political mapping of social forces on caste basis can be incorporated into the Gandhian discourse. Gandhi's strong rejection of religious authority behind untouchability, his later views on intercaste marriage, his non-orthodox interpretation of varna in his early years and loss of interest in varna in later years, and the constant exhortation to become 'shudra'—to engage in physical labour—all point to the possibility that the caste question can form a legitimate concern of the Gandhian discourse. It should be of some interest that Gandhi does not eulogise the 'trivarniks' or their roles while constantly upholding the dignity of labour. His sanatan dharma is characteristically

uninfluenced by brahminism.

Similarly, Ambedkar's position on capitalism and modernity can be extended and reinterpreted. He located the primary source of exploitation in the caste system in the Indian context. But he never disputed the exploitative character of capitalism. His espousal of socialism (like in the programme of the Independent Labour Party) and state socialism apart, he tended to take the view that concentration of wealth and exploitation gave rise to 'dukkha'. His conception of dhamma makes it clear that Ambedkar made a distinction between material well-being and insatiable lust. This is the ground on which critique of modernist life can be made within his discourse. It is true that Ambedkar's rejection of tradition and traditional life-style appears to be modernistic. But it must not be forgotten that Ambedkar had to take into consideration the immediate interests of untouchables. Thus, his plea to move to cities need not be understood as a modernist project. Also, Gandhi's espousal of village life should not be seen as justification of existing village life. Grounding Ambedkar's interpretation in his conception of dhamma can open up the possibility of bridging the distance between Gandhi and Ambedkar.

The discourses of Gandhi and Ambedkar were not antithetical. Therefore, it is possible to think in terms of common concerns and potential grounds for dialogue between the two discourses. Further, both Gandhi and Ambedkar were concerned with the question of emancipation. As such, a broadening of the scope of their discourses is all the more essential. As mentioned earlier, at the present moment, the

very legitimacy of their emancipatory project is being challenged. The dominant discourse today tends to underplay the caste question and legitimises capitalism. On

the other hand, the movements of social transformation appear to be fragmented or stagnant. The theoretical strength required to meet this challenge can be gained partly

by building bridges between the two rich discourses of our times.

(Suhās Palshikar taught political science at Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune.)

## More Than a Reformer, Jyotirao Phule Was an Architect of Ideas

Umesh Kumar

B.R. Ambedkar's fascination with Jyotirao Phule goes beyond the fact that he considered him a guru. Ambedkar, recognising the intellectual legacy of Phule, wished to project him on the national scene. More particularly, Ambedkar may have been influenced by Phule's radical anti-caste movements, his uplifting of the conditions of peasantry and his liberation of women.

Indian society is in a state of flux today—the way it was during the time of Phule (1827–1890). Issues surrounding caste, inferior status of women, the pathetic condition of farmers are all problems that continue to haunt India since colonial times. And so continues the country's quest to break from these chains of oppression, mental slavery and subjugation.

In today's time, we must revisit the thought and ideology of an indigenous thinker like Phule. Such an attempt, it is argued, has the potential to (re)interpret our contemporary social reality.

### Taking on Brahmanical supremacy

As an iconic and revolutionary intellectual from Maharashtra, Phule's organising principles were both inclusive and dichotomous. He addressed stree-shudra-atishudra (women, OBCs, Dalits and tribals in today's vocabulary) as one category which was dichotomously fighting

against Brahmanical supremacy (he rarely used the word Hindu or Hinduism. He preferred Brahmanism instead).

He called it *brahmanache varchaswa or brahmanvarchaswadi* in Marathi. Moreover, Phule was the first intellectual to realise that Brahmanism did not necessarily mean exclusively related to the Brahman caste, but a kind of ideological, religious (*dharmic*) (super)structure that perpetuates and naturalises the exploitation of the majority.

Phule sought to reform society through revolutionary means. His renaissance desire for societal transformation was a break from his contemporaries. With the establishments of Prarthana Samaj, Poona Sarvajanik Sabha, Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj in Maharashtra and elsewhere, Phule's contemporaries were trying to reform Hindu society by remaining within the sacredness of the Hindu fold—a hallmark of the first-generation Indian renaissance thinkers.

Phule did not break entirely from this tradition but he did not believe in the sacredness of Hindu religion either. Staying within the Hindu fold, Phule's intellectual faculty first attacked the twin concepts of dharma and caste—the central pillars of Brahmanical supremacy. And this attack was in full—not in bits and pieces like that of his half-hearted

contemporaries.

According to him, the best way to deal with this repressive structure was to oppose it completely and dilute its sacredness. He decoded that Brahmanism derives its legitimacy from its sacred texts and that, in turn, rely heavily on the *avatar-kalpna* (imaginative incarnation).

In his book titled *Gulamgiri* (Slavery), Phule debunks different Brahmanical godheads. With such writings, he attempted to provide an intellectual and ideological foundation for a sustained critique of the caste system. Phule's writing is not history in the normative sense. For him, history writing was not truth-writing but a mere utilitarian device for the subversion, debunking and destruction of the established truth(s) perpetuated by the Brahmanical supremacy.

### Social reforms

However, devastating criticism was not the only weapon in Phule's armoury of social reform. He also attempted to reform the stree-shudra-atishudra from within. The establishment of Satyashodhak Samaj (the society of truth seekers) in 1873 was a crucial step. It reflected Phule's intellectual rationalism where the primary emphasis was on 'truth-seeking' by positioning the individual at the centre.

The other vital mandate of the

samaj was to conduct ‘religious’ ceremonies sans Brahman priests and to compulsorily educate the next generation. When the orthodox of the times charged that the samaj could not be called a religious body because it has no religious text (*dharmagranth*) of its own, Phule wrote *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma Pustak* (Book of the Public Religion of Truth). As an alternative, the emphasis of *Satya Dharma* was again to outset the Brahman from his overriding position.

Phule’s concept of dharma was rather simple and unambiguous. For him, it was a platform of passionate equalitarianism minus any discrimination. Further, Phule clearly saw the role of dharma and caste in the production relations of Indian society.

Phule lays bare these production relations with his careful investigations of the peasant question in colonial India. He is perhaps the first Indian intellectual who made agriculture—its process and production—a major concern for his thought experiment. His book *Shetkaryacha Asud* (The Cultivator’s Whipcord) familiarises us with the graphic description of farmers’ conditions—their hungry bellies and rag-wrapped bodies coupled with the continuous harassments from moneylenders.

He recommended the active role of the state in agrarian policies—the need for soil conservation, rain harvesting and building of bunds (*bandhara*), usage of advanced technology for cattle breeding and specific professional education for peasants and their children, etc.—so as to relieve peasantry from its miserable condition. However, as a pre-industrial thinker, the glaring limitation of Phule’s agrarian scheme

is that he understood peasantry as a monolithic category.

### Education and gender

Another area in which Phule contributed immensely is India’s gender question. He invariably linked the liberation of women with education. He himself taught his young wife Savitribai. Later, with her and some liberal associates, Phule opened a string of schools from 1848–1855, including a special school for all caste girls. He was a staunch advocate of widow remarriage and a front-runner for child adoption. The Phule couple themselves adopted the son of a Brahman widow.

He openly defended Pandita Ramabai’s decision to convert to Christianity and Tarabai Shinde’s polemical monograph *Stree Purush Tulana* (A Comparison between Women and Men), amidst Brahmanical orthodoxy. Gail Omvedt makes an interesting observation that Phule does not use the common salutation of *manoos* (human being)

but rather *streepurush* (women and men). By using such a salutation, Phule challenges the subsumed status of women within men. The word *streepurush* accentuates the gendered differentiation and pleads for the quest of equality at the same time. Further, he did not make any distinction within the category of *stree* (women)—stressing the fact that a Brahman woman is as much prone to gender discrimination as of any other caste.

Phule’s intellectual heritage—which sowed the initial seeds of India’s social revolution—remains unfulfilled even today. More than a reformer, he was an architect of ideas. By building an alternative system of ideas he attempted to decode the nuances of our social reality. The questions that bothered Phule continue to haunt us today. Perhaps with greater intensity. There is an immediate need to engage with Phule in a way we have never before.

(Umesh Kumar teaches English studies at the Department of English, Banaras Hindu University.)

## Noam Chomsky and the Question of Individual Choice

Anjan Basu

A broad theme that runs through everything that Noam Chomsky has written over 50 years or more is individual choice.

The choice, Chomsky was convinced early, is as compelling as it is narrow. In the 2017 book *Optimism over Despair*, when the political economist C.J. Polychroniou asks him, “Are you overall optimistic about the future of humanity, given the kind of creatures we are?”, Chomsky gives

nearly the exact same answer he had given 17 years earlier to a young journalist at Chennai’s Asian College of Journalism who had wondered if the venerable professor was being “a little too optimistic” in a world which seemed to hold little promise of positive change:

“We have two choices. We can be pessimistic, give up, and help ensure that the worst will happen. Or we can be optimistic, grasp the opportunities that surely exist, and

*maybe help make the world a better place. Not much of a choice."*

"Not much of a choice", Chomsky has never tired of reminding everyone who cares to listen. He makes it plain—without saying it in these words, for he hates to declaim or sound dramatic—that, to be human, one has to stick with that narrow choice.

It was true in the mid-1960s, when he plunged into anti-Vietnam War activism; and it remains true today when vast communities are struggling to come to terms with the devastations caused by corporate greed and climate change. Chomsky continues to engage without let-up with the most basic questions confronting human society—inequality, injustice and unfreedoms of many different kinds. When the 'Occupy Wall Street' movement erupted across US cities in September, 2011, pitting "(w)e (who) are the 99%" against the insanely-rich 1% who manipulate public policy with impunity, he joined in with gusto, speaking at rallies and public meetings and writing about what it was all about.

### **Moral values matter**

As a scientist, Chomsky always locates the question of rational choice at the centre of any debate about issues of real public interest. That is not to say, though, that he is concerned with rationality alone. Far from it, in fact. Chomsky has written extensively about how a 'rational' debate can be so constructed as to completely undermine—indeed, subvert—the irreducible moral values implicit in a choice.

With withering scorn, he wrote in his 1969 classic, *American Power and the New Mandarins*, about well-known American liberals who

managed to successfully mask the immorality of the war on Vietnam, projecting the debate around the war as primarily one about the proportionality of its costs to its likely outcome. In a talk given at Harvard in June 1966 in the course of the anti-war protests—later published as the celebrated essay *The Responsibility of Intellectuals*—Chomsky argues that Americans "can hardly avoid asking (themselves) to what extent the American people bear responsibility for the savage American assault on a largely helpless rural population in Vietnam." He closes the essay with these memorable words:

*"Let me . . . return to (Dwight) Macdonald (the American writer-activist) and the responsibility of intellectuals. Macdonald quotes an interview with a death-camp paymaster who bursts into tears when told that the Russians would hang him. 'Why should they? What have I done?', he asked. Macdonald concludes: 'Only those who are willing to resist authority themselves when it conflicts too intolerably with their personal moral code, only they have the right to condemn the death-camp paymaster.' The question, 'What have I done?', is one that we may well ask ourselves, as we read, each day, of fresh atrocities in Vietnam—as we create, or mouth, or tolerate the deceptions that will be used to justify the next 'defence of freedom'."*

This is the moral code that Chomsky assimilated early on. He lives his life by it, and his own judgment of others is premised in the same code. He tells us why:

*"Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyse actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions. In the Western*

*world at least, they have the power that comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression. For a privileged minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortions and misrepresentation, ideology, and class interest through which the events of current history are presented to us."*

It follows from here that

*"It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies. This, at least, may seem enough of a truism to pass without comment. Not so, however. For the modern intellectual, it is not at all obvious."*

The intellectual, then, has a simple—but also stark—choice to make: he can either ask himself if he is being true to his calling (by speaking the truth and exposing lies); or, if he is willing to be suborned by the powers-that-be, he may end up asking himself someday, à la the Nazi death-camp pay-master, 'What have I done?'

### **Chomsky's own journey**

Chomsky's choice had been made as an undergraduate in the mid-1940s, for his political and moral consciousness had been formed, as he himself places on record, "by the horrors of the 1930s, by the war in Ethiopia, the Russian purges, the China incident, the Spanish Civil War, the Nazi atrocities, the western reaction to these events and, in part, complicity in them . . .".

His astringent, unceasing critique of American foreign policy through the 1970s and 1980s earned him a place on Richard Nixon's infamous 'Enemies List'. His formidable reputation as the foremost language

theorist/philosopher of the 20th century (as well as the most-often-cited humanities scholar in all academic work across the world) probably saved his job at MIT, but the doors to mainstream media and publishing were firmly barred to him for much of his life. Even the funding of the many frontline research programmes that he helmed at the MIT's School of Modern Languages and Linguistics (including in such cutting-edge areas as psycholinguistics and neurolinguistics) ran into rough weather often enough.

The question of choice has taken on a special sense of urgency in relation to the culture of mass media today, in India as much as, say, in the US. Chomsky has always believed that the much-vaunted freedom of expression in liberal democracies is largely a sham, because powerful interest groups, solidly invested in maintaining and strengthening the status quo, manage to limit the spectrum of public discourse with great skill. Once the contours of debates have been firmly drawn—and any outliers irrevocably 'demonstrated' to be deviant—public opinion is conditioned to stay within those clearly-marked boundaries and not stray beyond them. Chomsky famously called this process 'the manufacturing of consent'.

If mainstream US media have finessed this process over many years, the Indian media today is no longer behind them. Thus, when under-trial, or simply jailed-without-trial, prisoners are killed in 'encounters' with the police, the media often think nothing of underplaying these state-sponsored murders, and report in punctilious detail on the 'unsavoury antecedents' of the victims. At a time

like this, something as routine as the discharge of basic journalistic duties—reporting what is really happening on the ground and nailing lies peddled by officialdom—itself becomes an act of deliberate and careful choice.

### The need for resistance

At the height of the anti-Vietnam War protests, Chomsky recognised active resistance as a valid choice for dissenters, though he freely admits that activism per se does not quite agree with him personally. In the concluding chapter of *American Power and the New Mandarins*, he has this to say on the options in the specific context of the US in the 1960s:

*"Given the enormous dangers of escalation (of the Vietnam conflict) and its hateful character, it makes sense . . . to search for ways to raise the domestic cost of American aggression, to raise it to a point where it cannot be overlooked by those who have to calculate such costs. One must then consider in what ways it is possible to pose a serious threat (to the war effort). Many possibilities come to mind: a general strike, university strikes, attempts to hamper war production and supply, and so on. . . . Resistance is in part a moral responsibility, in part a tactic to affect government policy. In particular, with respect to support for draft resistance, I feel that it is a moral responsibility that cannot be shirked. . . ."*

In the event, Chomsky did participate in civil disobedience movements himself, marching on Washington with tens of thousands of others to return thousands of draft cards to the attorney general's office. He also campaigned widely across university campuses and

participated in some memorable teach-ins, including one electrifying episode just outside the gates of the Pentagon which has entered modern American folklore, in a manner of speaking.

In his *essay On Resistance*, Chomsky quotes the great civil rights leader A.J. Muste in the context of the Vietnam War: "The problem after a war is with the victor. He thinks he has just proved that war and violence pay. Who will now teach him a lesson?"

One of the brightest minds of the post-second-world-war world and a consummate teacher himself, Chomsky has spent the best part of his life teaching lessons to successive American administrations. It is remarkable how he retains his penchant for teaching lessons to the arrogant and the powerful even at the age of 90. Incredibly, he has also agreed to teach a term (presumably to undergrads) at Arizona State University-Tempe in the upcoming academic year, his first major academic commitment outside of the MIT. The choices that Noam Chomsky makes have sometimes baffled some people, but look closely, and you will find a unity of purpose in all of them.

*(Anjan Basu freelances as a translator of poetry, literary critic and commentator.)*

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# Modinomics = Corporatonomics Part III: Modi’s Budgets and the Social Sectors

Neeraj Jain

*In the previous four issues of Janata, we first published two articles on Modinomics = Falsonomics, and then in the next two articles, we have analysed Modinomics. We have shown that the Modi Government, if it wants, can raise enough resources to increase its expenditures on the social sectors. Instead, it is giving away huge subsidies to the tune of several lakh crore rupees to the corporate houses. In this article, we discuss the overall allocation for the social sectors during the past five years of Modi’s rule, and then specifically discuss budget allocations for education.*

### Public social sector expenditures: India vs other countries

Most developed countries have a very elaborate social security network for their citizens, including unemployment allowance, universal health coverage, free

school education and free or cheap university education, old age pension, maternity benefits, disability benefits, family allowance such as child care allowance, allowances for those too poor to make a living, and much more. Governments spend substantial sums for providing these social services to their people. The average public social sector expenditures of the 34 countries of the OECD have been around 20% of GDP for the last many years, and for the EU-27 have been even higher at around 30% of GDP.<sup>1</sup>

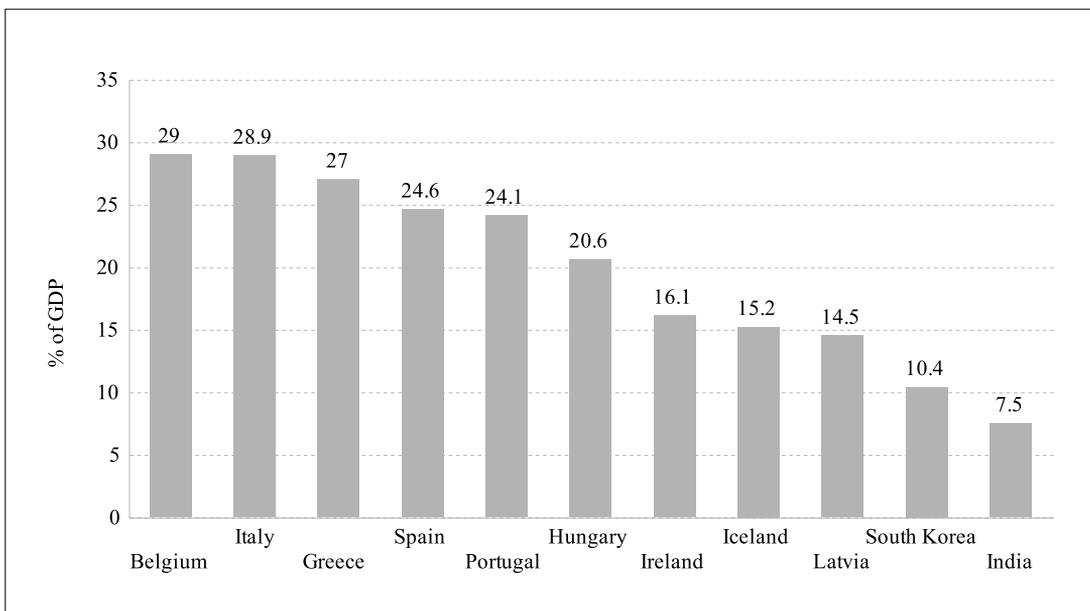
In contrast, India’s social sector expenditures are just around 7% of GDP. They are not only way below the developed countries, as a recent report of the Reserve Bank of India admits, India’s social sector expenditures are also “woefully below peers” (see Chart 1).<sup>2</sup>

The major part of the social

sector expenditure in the country is done by the States. The *Economic Survey 2017–18* puts the total social sector expenditure of Centre and States combined (2017–18 BE) at Rs 10.94 lakh crore, which is around 6.6% of GDP. Of this, the Centre’s share is Rs 1.95 lakh crore (2017–18 Budget document), which works out to only 17.8% of the total social sector expenditure, Centre and States combined. This figure of Rs 1.95 lakh crore is 9.08% of the total budget outlay. The social sector expenditure of 2018 and 2019 are not specifically mentioned in the budget, but assuming that as a percentage of the total budget outlay, they are constant, then it means the social sector expenditures in 2018–19 and 2019–20 would be around Rs 2.22 lakh crore and Rs 2.53 lakh crore respectively.

Is it not possible for the Modi Government to increase the total social sector expenditure of the government (Centre + States combined) to at least 15% of GDP? That is actually not much; it is only half the level of EU-27. That would require a total social sector expenditure of Rs 31.5 lakh crore in 2019–20. Assuming that the Centre spends 25% of it, this would require the social sector expenditure of the Centre to go up to

Chart 1: Social Sector Expenditures as % of GDP<sup>3</sup>



Rs 7.88 lakh crore from the Rs 2.53 lakh crore at present—an increase of just Rs 5.3 lakh crore. The Centre, if it so wants, can easily afford this by reducing the loan write-offs of the corporate houses, or reducing the tax concessions to the rich, or by cancelling the mineral leases given to corporate houses at very low royalty rates, or . . .

### **Boosting demand by increasing social sector expenditures**

Let us for a moment drop this fact-based critical examination of the budget from a socialist perspective, and examine it purely from the perspective of mainstream capitalist economics. In the *Economic Survey 2017–18* presented by Arvind Subramanian, the Chief Economic Advisor of the Government of India, he devotes a good deal of space to a discussion of the serious decline in gross investment in India as a proportion of the GDP. The Survey notes: “The ratio of gross fixed capital formation to GDP climbed from 26.5% in 2003, reached a peak of 35.6% in 2007, and then slid back to 26.4% in 2017.” It admits that such sharp swings in investment rates “have never occurred in India’s history”, and that while “the past 15 years have been a special period for the entire global economy, no other country seems to have gone through such a large investment boom and bust during this period.” The Survey frankly and ominously adds: “India’s investment decline seems particularly difficult to reverse . . . The deeper the slowdown, the slower and shallower the recovery.” And as we have pointed out in a previous article<sup>4</sup>, government data shows that the economy has further slowed down in 2018.

The way out of this economic slowdown is to boost demand, and one way of doing it is by boosting

social sector spending. It is now fairly well established that government spending on social sectors such as education and health has significant positive multiplier effects.<sup>5</sup> [The fiscal multiplier is an estimate of the effect of government spending on economic growth. A multiplier greater than 1 corresponds to a positive growth stimulus (returning more than Re 1 for each rupee invested), whereas a multiplier less than one reflects a net loss from spending.]

However, as we show below, the government has not attempted to give a boost to the economy by expanding its social sector expenditures.

Jaitley/Goyal have no problem in giving lakhs of crores of rupees as subsidies to the rich in the name of ‘tax incentives’, or ‘investment subsidies’, or bank loan write-offs, and so on. But when it comes to increasing welfare spending on the poor, they claim that the government cannot afford that as the fiscal deficit needs to be curbed.

This is precisely what neoliberalism is all about—it means running the economy solely for the profiteering of giant foreign and Indian corporate houses, including shamelessly cutting down the public welfare expenditures on the poor and transferring the savings to the coffers of the corporate houses. Every government that has come to power at the Centre since the beginning of globalisation in 1991 has dutifully implemented these policies; the Modi Government is even more unashamedly implementing these policies.

Such is the nationalism of the BJP–RSS. It is confined to unfurling giant sized flags in universities, and forcing people to stand up while the national anthem is being played in cinema halls—while on the ground, it is doing shastang

dandavata before the international financial institutions and giant foreign corporations, betraying the interests of the common people.

Let us now take a look at the budget allocations for some of the more important social sectors.

### **More detailed analysis of social sectors under Modi rule**

#### ***School education: Back to the dark ages***

No country in the world has developed without making provisions for providing free, compulsory, equitable and good quality elementary education to ALL its children in the initial stages of its development, and later expanding it to secondary and higher secondary education. Since the private sector will only invest for profit, all countries, including the avowedly capitalist countries of the West, have done this entirely through public funding.

Unfortunately, because of inadequate spending on education since Independence, the condition of India’s education was dismal even when the BJP came to power. India has not been able to provide this to a majority of its children seven decades after independence.

- According to the Planning Commission of India, 42.4% children drop out of school before completing elementary education.<sup>6</sup>

And for those attending schools, the conditions in a majority of the schools are simply terrible:

- In a majority of the primary schools in the country, a single teacher is teaching two or three different classes at the same time in a single room (data for 2015)!<sup>7</sup>
- Even for all schools, upto higher secondary, 42% schools have 3 or less than 3 classrooms, and

50% schools have 3 or less than 3 teachers!<sup>8</sup>

- Nearly one-third of the schools do not have usable toilet facilities.<sup>9</sup>
- 47% primary schools do not have electricity; and 38% of all schools do not have electricity.
- An amazing 44% of primary schools do not even have a boundary wall, while 35% of all schools do not have a boundary wall.<sup>10</sup>
- With such dismal conditions, is it any wonder that a survey found that 48% of Class V students were unable to read Class II-level text; and 43% of Class VIII students could not divide numbers.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, for the well-to-do classes, there are a wide range of private schools of varying quality, both in terms of educational and extra-curricular facilities, with fees varying from Rs 1 lakh per year to as much as Rs 15 lakh per year and more.

Because of such a discriminatory school education system, only 15–17% of those enrolled in Class I are able to clear Class XII. The situation is worse for the marginalised sections: only about 8% of SCs and 6% of STs, about 10–11% OBCs and around 9% Muslims cross the Class XII barrier. This also means that almost 92% of Dalits and 94% of tribals and 90% of OBCs never become eligible for the benefits of reservation under the social justice agenda.<sup>12</sup>

The BJP came to power, promising to rectify the situation, and increasing spending on education (Centre + States combined) to 6% of GDP during their 2014 Lok Sabha election campaign. It has turned out to another jumla.

The above data of the state of India's schools were for 2015–16.

Yet, during its five years in power, the BJP has made an unprecedented 38% cut in its budget for school education (see Table 1). This only implies that the condition of government schools must have worsened considerably. The reason for this huge budget cut for school education is simple: the BJP wants to privatise school education completely. For this, the strategy adopted is simple: ruin the quality of government school system by cutting the funding of school education and keeping teaching posts vacant; children will automatically exit government schools, and those who can afford it will join private schools. The consequence: more than 2 lakh government schools have closed down till date.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Business of higher education***

Coming to higher education, the number of students in colleges, defined by the Gross Enrolment Ratio or GER (number of students as a percent proportion of the youth population in the age group 17–23 / 18–24) is way below the developed countries—the GER for India is only around 20, whereas for developed countries it is above 60, with several countries having a GER above 70.<sup>14</sup> An important reason for this

is the accelerating privatisation and commercialisation of higher education since the neoliberal reforms began in India in 1991—even before the BJP came to power, by 2011–12, total number of private higher educational institutions (including both degree and diploma institutions) accounted for more than two-thirds of all higher educational institutions, and for nearly 60% of student enrolment.<sup>15</sup>

Private higher educational institutions are all for-profit institutions; therefore, very few students can afford their fees. But the BJP has further slashed higher educational spending – during its five years in power, it has cut its spending on higher education (2018–19 RE over 2014–15 BE) by as much as 18% in real terms (see Table 1). Because of this, most government funded colleges are starved of funds and so, to meet their expenses, are being forced to increase student fees using all kinds of excuses. Consequently, studying in government funded educational institutions too is becoming unaffordable for students from poor families.

To cover up for this cut in higher education spending, Jaitley last

**Table 1: BJP Budget Allocations for Education, 2014 to 2019 (Rs crore)**

	2014–15 BE (1)	2018–19 RE (2)	2019–20	Reduction: (2) over (1), CAGR
Department of School Education and Literacy	55,115	50,114	56,387	38%
Department of Higher Education	27,656	33,512	37,461	18%
<b>Ministry of Human Resource Development: Total</b>	82,771	83,626	93,848	31%
MHRD Budget as % of GDP	0.66	0.44	0.45	
MHRD budget as % of total budget outlay	4.61	3.40	3.37	

year (2018) once again resorted to his standard ‘smoke-and-mirrors-routine’. In his budget speech, he announced: “Technology will be the biggest driver in improving the quality of education. We propose to increase the digital intensity in education and move gradually from ‘black board’ to ‘digital board’.” But how serious is he about this can be gauged from the fact that the allocation for ‘Digital India e-learning’ was reduced from an already inadequate Rs 518 crore in the 2017–18 RE to an even lower Rs 456 crore in the 2018–19 BE; the 2018–19 RE shows a marginally increased spending of Rs 511 crore.

Even within the limited higher education budget, most of the funding is going to elite government institutions like the IITs and IIMS. The allocation for the University Grants Commission, that regulates the higher educational institutions in the country and provides grants to more than 10,000 institutions, has been halved in the five Modi budgets, from Rs 8,978 crore in 2014–15 BE to just Rs 4,687 crore in 2018–19 RE. The allocation for the All India Council for Technical Education, the regulator of engineering education in India, has remained dismally low during all the five Modi years and is a lowly Rs 452 crore in the 2018–19 RE. On the other hand, more than half of the higher education budgets have gone towards funding the so-called ‘institutions of excellence’ such as the IITs, IIMs and the Central Universities.

Last year (2018–19), the finance minister announced a new initiative, ‘Revitalising Infrastructure and Systems in Education’, or RISE, to “step up investments in research and related infrastructure in premier educational institutions”. He announced an investment of Rs 1,00,000 crore for this over the

next four years. The catch is, this investment is not going to be from the budget. Educational institutions will be given loans from a new non-bank finance company set up last year by the government, the Higher Education Financing Authority (HEFA), which will borrow money from the market for this. The college will have to repay the principal, the Central government will bear the interest costs. The budget will only fund the interest costs, for which the budget allocation for HEFA was Rs 2,750 crore in 2018–19 RE and Rs 2,100 crore in 2019–20. This means that universities and colleges will have to borrow from HEFA for upgrading themselves, which in turn means that they will have to increase student fees to repay the loans, making higher education even costlier. Yet another fraud on the people!

It was way back in the 1960s that the Kothari Commission had recommended that “if education is to develop adequately”, the proportion of GDP allocated to education should rise to 6% by 1985–86. Successive governments have continued to ignore this recommendation, and the total educational expenditure only gradually inched up to reach 3.31% in 2012–13 BE.<sup>16</sup>

Educationists estimate that given the huge under-spending on education over the past decades, the country probably needs to spend around 8% of the GDP today to achieve even modest goals in education development.

Be that as it may, Narendra Modi and the BJP had promised to increase spending on education (Centre + States combined) to 6% of GDP during their 2014 Lok Sabha election campaign. However, the Economic Survey 2017–18 admits that this has actually fallen under Modi rule, from 3.1% of GDP in 2013–14 to below 3% during the first four years of Modi rule, and was 2.7% in 2017–18 BE. With the Centre’s educational budget as a percentage of GDP falling from 0.48% in 2017–18 (A) to 0.44% in 2018–19 RE, the combined spending of Centre and States on education must be even lower in this year.

### Can’t Modi–Goyal increase the education budget?

If Modi was indeed serious about implementing his election promise, it would require a total educational spending (Centre + States) of Rs 12.6 lakh crore in 2019–20. Even if the Centre spends 25% of this so as to give a boost to total educational spending in the country (the Centre had spent 17.4% in 2017–18 BE), it would require Jaitley to allocate Rs 3.15 lakh crore for education, an increase of Rs 2.2 lakh crore over the actual allocation made in the

**Table 2: Allocation for Elite Higher Education Institutions (Rs crore)**

	2018–19 RE
<b>Department of Higher Education</b>	<b>33,512</b>
<i>Within this:</i>	
<i>IITs</i>	5,715
<i>Central Universities</i>	6,499
<i>IIMs</i>	372
<i>NIT</i>	3,721
<i>IISERs</i>	650
<i>IIIT</i>	440
<b>Total</b>	<b>17,397</b>
<i>University Grants Commission</i>	4,687

budget—not an unaffordable amount for a government that gives several times this amount as subsidies to the rich every year.

This increased spending would have to be directed towards:

- Gradually eliminating the multi-layered discriminatory school education system and replacing it by an egalitarian school system with equivalent norms and standards of at least the level of Kendriya Vidyalayas.
- Scrapping the policy of appointing contractual teachers; taking steps to ensure that all teachers, without exception, are fully qualified and appropriately ‘trained’ (i.e. educated) before recruitment and paid a regular salary scale with social security that is comparable throughout the country, as is the case with senior government officers.
- So far as higher education is concerned, government must increase its expenditure on higher education, open more government higher education institutions, and charge only affordable fees, with adequate number of scholarships for all students who cannot afford these fees. No student must be denied education in a higher education institution for lack of money.

**Cogs in corporate wheel**

The neoliberal model looks at everything, including education, from the perspective of maximising corporate profits. There is no need to look at education from the perspective of human development, as a means of unlocking the inherent potential of human beings, so that

they can enjoy an enhanced quality of life. All this is gibberish. The sole aim of education must be to prepare youth for employment in the assembly lines of multinational corporations. For this, the youth must be imparted the necessary skills, so that they can become cogs in the corporate wheel.

This philosophy also fits well with the fascist philosophy of the BJP–RSS regime, which wants to transform our youth into mindless automatons in the service of virulent Hindutva.

And so, while on the one hand, the Modi–Jaitley regime is slowly strangulating our higher educational institutions by starving them of funds, on the other hand, the government has hugely increased funding for skill development. The BJP Government inaugurated the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship soon after coming to power in 2014. Its main programme is the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana, the allocation for which has trebled since its inception in 2015–16 (Table 3).

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**Table 3: Budget Allocations for Skill Development (Rs crore)**

	2015–16 A	2018–19 RE	2019–20
Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana	991	2,765	2,932

## Who are Venezuela's Colectivos?

### Federico Fuentes

*The media calls them armed thugs and US Senator Marco Rubio wants them put on the terrorist list, but who are Venezuela's colectivos (collectives)? Green Left Weekly's Federico Fuentes met with some of them to find out.*

As we walked around the 23 de Enero barrio in Caracas, an announcement came through Cucaracho's walkie talkie: "We are in a war and the main target of this offensive is the popular movements, the colectivos. This is no coincidence: they know the colectivos are their main obstacle and 23 de Enero is the tip of the iceberg."

Cucaracho—"that's what they call me"—is a member of the Alexis Vive colectivo, which is active in this historically militant neighbourhood strategically located close to the presidential palace. Its history and location means 23 de Enero is regularly referred to as one of the main bases for the colectivos.

Demonised by the international media and targeted by the opposition, the colectivos have become a symbol of scorn for President Nicolas Maduro's opponents. They are regularly portrayed in the media as armed gangs and the last bastion of support for Maduro's government. But the reality of the colectivos—like almost everything in Venezuela—is vastly different.

Many of the groups today labelled as colectivos predate Maduro and his predecessor Hugo Chavez. Others, like Alexis Vive, emerged during the Chavez presidency.

### Origins

Almost all of them are community organisations that

have flourished under Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution.

"They view the colectivos as similar to the insurgent groups in the Middle East that resisted invasion," explains Cucaracho. "That is why they demonise us. They see us as a barrier, as a final line of defence, but they don't come to see our reality."

Alexis Vive was instrumental in establishing the Panal 2021 commune. Promoted by Chavez, communes have become the main form of democratic community organising across the country.

The Panal 2021 commune, which incorporated about 3600 families in a sector of 23 de Enero, has its own self-managed enterprises such as a bakery and sugar-packaging plant, its own radio and cable TV station, its own transport and food distribution centres, and even its own local currency. Profits from all of the commune's enterprises are deposited in the communal bank and redistributed to projects decided upon by the community.

"The idea of the commune is to disperse power", explains Cucaracho, "so that the people are the ones who make the decisions. Our role is to train cadre and teach people about the strategic vision of the commune. But we are just like everyone else in the community: we join the same queues as everyone else, we help the elderly, we are part of the community."

This does not mean that colectivos limit themselves solely to community work.

In San Fernando, the capital of Apure state, I spoke to members of the Union of Motorizados—motorbike couriers who are regularly labelled as colectivo members.

"The opposition are the violent ones," one of them said. "They loot shops, set houses on fire. So what happens? We, the motorizados, come out and then they run away, they don't come back. You won't find us looting shops or creating chaos. But we are also not going to let others set people's houses on fire."

"The last time they protested," another said, referring to the wave of violent opposition protests that rocked the country in 2017, "they burnt down a nursery. What sort of protest is that? Those kids have got nothing to do with what is going on, so why are they being targeted?"

Junior is a member of the Bolivar and Zamora Revolutionary Current (CRBZ), another group denounced in the media as a colectivo, but which has its origins in a group of campaigners for peasant rights formed in the '90s. He was among those present on the Venezuela–Colombia border on February 23, when the United States sought to violate Venezuelan sovereignty under the pretext of bringing in "humanitarian aid".

Junior explained that the CRBZ decided to send some members to the border during those days. "It was an internal decision. Those of us who are the most politically clear, the most prepared, were the ones who went.

"We didn't go because the government told us to go. It was our political consciousness that took us there."

The build-up to the events on February 23 meant that the possibility of violence was ever present. Not knowing what to expect, Junior explained that they "psychologically prepared for the worst, for anything

that might come.

“You couldn’t go there thinking about your family, your children. So you had to go there thinking about your contribution to the revolution, to defending your country, the fact that you are going there to fight for your mum’s future, your dad’s future, the future of my children and the children of my children. We went to defend our sovereignty, the sovereignty of our country, of our nation. If a military intervention had occurred, we were there, ready, and they would have had to go through us, because we are a people willing to defend our sovereignty, willing to fight back to defend every centimetre of this territory.”

In the end, the opposition’s mission failed. Even the media’s lie that the Venezuelan armed forces had burnt trucks carrying humanitarian aid was revealed to be false when videos emerged showing opposition protesters had caused the fire.

According to that same media, colectivos had attacked protesters on the Venezuelan side of the border. But Junior recounted a different version of events.

“The border region of Tachira is very complicated,” he said. “The Venezuelan opposition there works with Colombian paramilitaries to increase their strength. On February 23, there were some small protests on this side of the border in disputed areas, areas where you have Colombian paramilitaries who are struggling to gain control of the area because it’s a strategic region for them. Their presence provides the opposition with logistics and force.”

Despite the paramilitary presence, the opposition was unable to generate the kind of violence they hoped for, though Junior explained that he, along with others from the CRBZ had to find alternate means to get home after opposition protesters set some of their vehicles on fire.

### Media Bias

“The media generally does not portray the reality of events. The reality is that the violence overwhelmingly comes from the opposition,” Junior said.

“The opposition always tries to provoke violence because they know the media will simply say the government is responsible, that the government represses the people, and use this as an excuse for intervention. The media always take the side of the opposition; they don’t tell the truth. They sell a message to the rest of the world that is false. They are not balanced in regard to their information and their reporting on what is happening here.”

Colectivo members I spoke to acknowledged that, in some cases, state intelligence agents had either infiltrated certain colectivos or masqueraded as ones to attack and intimidate opposition protests. But, although this was more the exception rather than the rule, it is these groups the media have focussed on.

Rafael Ramos, a postgraduate student at the Institute for High Studies in Diplomacy Pedro Gual explained that the media’s portrayal of the colectivos has a clear intention.

“This editorial line is pushed to make international public opinion believe that Chavismo has lost all its support. They are introducing the idea that Venezuela is supposedly a dictatorship, with no freedom of speech, and that Chavismo is just limited to a few remaining supporters who potentially have to be exterminated. Because they’re just a few people, then violence against Chavistas, the colectivos, is justified. The media dehumanises them, portrays them as non-human, so in the end it doesn’t matter if they treat them like animals or kill them.

“The image they are trying to portray internationally is an attempt

to justify violence.”

The colectivo members I spoke understand this.

“We are human beings, like everyone else,” said Robert Longa, whose voice I had heard through Cucaracho’s walkie talkie. “We live in the community, participate in the commune, attend assemblies, study and look for ways to produce food to deal with the crisis.

“But we are conscious that we are in a war. Not against the opposition because opposition doesn’t exist, they cannot overthrow Maduro. We are up against imperialism.

“They attack the colectivos because we are willing to defend our model. The colectivos are organised with the aim of deepening the Bolivarian Revolution through popular organisation and the creation of the communal state. We are strongly convinced that this is the correct way forward: a government of the people based on participatory democracy.

“We will resolve our problems within the revolution. We are Chavista and we will not betray Chavez.

“There are people that claim to be Chavista but that are killing Chavismo. There are people who have infiltrated state institutions and who work against us.

“The people want the revolution to be deepened. They want the bureaucrats kicked out once and for all; for the land to be given to the peasants and the factories to be taken over by the workers. We want a radicalisation of the revolution. We want all power to the people: that is what we seek.

“But for now our problem is with the gringos. Once we resolve this issue, then we will deal with our own internal problems.”

*[Federico Fuentes writes for Green Left Weekly, Australia.]*



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