Ayodhya Verdict: Judges Missed Chance to Speak With Courage

Apoorvanand

That unanimity hurt. It did. One had hoped, or wished to have a hope, that there would be a chink in the armour somewhere. An ambiguity. The absence of it—the full glare of a “unanimous” majoritarianism—came like a stab in the heart of the idea of India.

To be frank, there was not much expectation from the top court after it had sped up the NRC process and delayed the hearing of petitions over the revocation of Jammu and Kashmir’s special status. When we saw the spirit behind a habeas corpus petition extinguished before our eyes, we should have realised that not much could be expected.

Yet, people kept thinking that there would be a voice within, which would represent that “little voice” of the Mahatma. With the courage to speak gently to noise. That would be the lifeline which India’s drowning secularism would hold on to. We were mistaken.

Unanimously, it was decided that whatever the facts are, when it comes to the “balance of probabilities”, the Hindu side should win. Notwithstanding the fact that it could not prove its exclusive possession of the land, that the existence of a mosque was indisputable, that Muslims had continued to offer namaz at the mosque till 1949, that the mosque was desecrated by an illegal act that year in which idols of Hindu deities were smuggled into its innermost part, that the mosque was demolished through a violent and illegal act in 1992.

Notwithstanding all that, which the learned bench itself records, it felt compelled, when it came to the “balance of probabilities”, to make a choice. And that was made. To do that, the court asked the Muslims what were they doing before 1857. Though they opined that there was a mosque there, and the court also accepts this, the five judges declared that the Muslims could not provide them conclusive evidence of their exclusive possession of the inner courtyard before 1857.

All we need do is read this part of the 1,045 page judgment to understand what the court is arguing:

The Hindus and the Muslims have contested claims to the offering of worship within the three domed structure in the inner courtyard. The Hindu side should win. Notwithstanding the fact that it could not prove its exclusive possession of the land, that the existence of a mosque was indisputable, that Muslims had continued to offer namaz at the mosque till 1949, that the mosque was desecrated by an illegal act that year in which idols of Hindu deities were smuggled into its innermost part, that the mosque was demolished through a violent and illegal act in 1992.

...
of probabilities to establish worship by the Hindus prior to the annexation of Oudh by the British in 1857. The Muslims have offered no evidence to indicate that they were in exclusive possession of the inner structure prior to 1857 since the date of the construction in the sixteenth century.

After the setting up of the grill-brick wall, the structure of the mosque continued to exist and there is evidence to indicate that namaz was offered within its precincts. The report of the Waqf Inspector of December 1949 indicates that Muslims were being obstructed from free and unimpeded access to the mosque for the purposes of offering namaz. However, there is evidence to show that namaz was offered in the structure of the mosque and the last Friday namaz performed was on 16 December 1949. The exclusion of the Muslims from worship and possession took place on the intervening night.

"Preponderance of probabilities" vs a standing mosque. What would you decide? Muslims are asked to furnish proof of "exclusive possession" of the inner courtyard "before 1857" or not?

As a retired Supreme Court judge, Justice A.K. Ganguly, has rightly observed, the court had no business to turn its head so hard into the far recesses of history. That is the land of probabilities, conjectures, where courts should not venture. There is no conclusive evidence there.

But we all know that it was difficult for the court to adjudicate the matter in any other manner, given the political circumstances. So we see our commentators sympathising with the burden on the bench. That it is impossible to maintain balance under such heavy strain and that the balance has to tilt one way or the other. They ask for understanding.

Even in these times of balancing, the choice before us is to either live a lie or to step out of the web of lies. When a consensus is being crafted, even one voice can break it. The fact that we could not hear this voice in the court does not mean we will not hear it elsewhere. It is there that India will live, hopefully.

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What the Ayodhya Judgment Means for the Future of the Republic

Siddharth Varadarajan

The Supreme Court’s verdict in the Ayodhya matter has settled the ‘title suit’ in favour of the main Hindu plaintiff—essentially the Vishwa Hindu Parishad—but it is clear that there is much more at stake for the country than the ownership of 2.77 acres of land on which a mosque stood for 470 years until it was demolished in an act of political vandalism unparalleled in the modern world.

The Supreme Court has undone some of the dangerous ‘faith-based’ logic of the high court and acknowledged the manner in which Ram idols were planted in the mosque was illegal and that the mosque’s demolition in 1992 was “an egregious violation of the rule of law”. Yet, the forces responsible for the demolition now find themselves in legal possession of the land. The site will be managed by a trust that the government will set up. And the government and ruling party have in their ranks individuals who have actually been chargesheeted for conspiring to demolish the mosque.

For more than a quarter of a century, ‘Ayodhya’ has served as a metaphor for the politics of revanchism—one which combines the deployment of a manufactured mythology around the figure of Rama, with mob violence, majoritarianism and a spectacular contempt for the rule of law.

The aim of this politics is to upend the republic with its premise of equality for all citizens and replace it with a system in which India’s religious minorities, to begin with, and then other marginalised sections of the population, are forced to live in perpetual insecurity.

If India’s democratic institutions had been robust, the demolition of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992 should have permanently...
ended this politics instead of merely marking the end of its first phase. Today, that politics has reached a new high water mark, presumably not its final one given the fillip a large section of the national media and now the Supreme Court have given it. Armed with the court’s imprimatur, the Sangh parivar will do its best to erase the taint of mob justice—which has been the strength but also the weakness of its movement. In August, BJP leaders boasted of how they had used Article 370 to kill Article 370. Now they hope to use law to kill justice.

We can pretend all we like that the Supreme Court was only adjudicating a civil dispute. In reality, there was nothing ‘civil’ about what a judge on the bench had called “one of the most important cases in the world”. The dispute cannot be divorced from the politics which has driven it.

The title suit in the Babri Masjid matter has been going on in one form or the other since 1949, mainly in the local courts of Faizabad, where Ayodhya is located. It took on national salience in the 1980s, thanks to the cynical politics of Lal Krishna Advani, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Rajiv Gandhi and now forgotten villains like Vir Bahadur Singh and Arun Nehru.

BJP leaders conspired to demolish the mosque on December 6, 1992 and a Congress prime minister, Narasimha Rao, allowed them to get away with the crime. So did the Supreme Court judges of the day. Twenty-seven years later, the demolition case continues to linger. Even when all the evidence is recorded and arguments made, the outcome is uncertain since it is no secret that the prosecuting agency—the Central Bureau of Investigation—has wilfully dropped the ball.

Justice S.A. Bobde was right in observing in his interview to India Today—shortly after being named as the next Chief Justice of India—that there have been governments of all political persuasions in power at the Centre since the Ayodhya case first emerged in 1949. Yet the fact that the case ended up being fast-tracked at a time when the party in power today is one which openly asserts its partisanship on Ayodhya should be reason enough to worry us about happens next to the Republic. We already have a draft citizenship law which explicitly excludes Muslim refugees. A law has been passed that criminalises the abandonment of wives by Muslim men but not men of other religions. It is not a coincidence that the only part of India where the constitutional protections of liberty and free speech do not apply is a Muslim majority region, Kashmir.

Possible scenarios

While legal analysts had expected the five-judge bench to deliver a nuanced verdict that would not lend itself to shrill triumphalism by either side to the dispute, the clarity of the court’s ruling in favour of the temple will boost the morale of the Sangh parivar.

The fact that the ruling party—and hence the government—is committed to the construction of a Ram temple at the site of the Babri Masjid means the path is now clear for speedy implementation of the project. The court has asked for the government to constitute a board but apart from insisting on the inclusion of a representative of the Nirmohi Akhara—the third claimant to the title suit—it does not appear to have even sought the exclusion of individuals and organisations implicated in the 1992 demolition.

Even before the verdict, when there was a chance that court might uphold the Sunni Waqf Board’s claim, there was never any question of the Babri Masjid being rebuilt at the same site. Had they won, there would have been enormous pressure on the plaintiffs to give up their claim to the land. Indeed, in the fag hours of the Supreme Court hearings, the Waqf board chairman signed on to a controversial ‘mediation’ proposal under which he consented to the withdrawal of the appeal against the high court judgment in exchange for assurances that no other Muslim places of worship would be taken over thereafter. The other Muslim plaintiffs immediately cried foul. The fact that the main ‘Hindu’ plaintiffs—essentially the Vishwa Hindu Parishad—were not even prepared to sign on to such an assurance is a sure sign that this “most important case in the world” will likely be followed by others.

The Supreme Court has asked the government to allocate five acres for the construction of a mosque at a suitable place in Ayodhya, forgetting that the case’s significance was not about the availability of a mosque but whether it is permissible for anyone in India to use violence to dispossess a person or a community. Sadly, that question now appears to have been answered, implicitly, in the affirmative. Worse, the dispossession is acknowledged and ‘compensated’ with five acres elsewhere but those who did the dispossessing are still allowed to enjoy the benefits of their crime.

Bizarrely, the court has declared that while there was some evidence of Hindus worshipping
at the disputed site, there is no documentary evidence of namaz prior to 1857 so hence by the “balance of probabilities” it is giving the land to the Hindu side. It should be readily apparent that this logic can also be applied to other mosques which the Hindutva organisations claim. Once the Ayodhya temple has been milked of all political mileage, the Sangh will up the ante elsewhere.

None of this should surprise us since we were never dealing with a civil dispute between litigants operating on a level playing field but a naked power play. One in which the political agenda of the ‘cultural’ Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is not hidden and the biases of the Uttar Pradesh and Central governments are on open display. That is also why the Supreme Court’s insistence on mediation was so misplaced.

**Fate of criminal case**

Although the apex court chose to prioritise the title suit, fast tracking it to conclusion, it is not clear how the bench intends to firewall the demolition case from its verdict on the ‘property dispute’.

In his interview to India Today, Justice Bobde denied the court was attempting to legislate on matters of faith. He agreed with the suggestion that it is a “title dispute” but added: “The only thing is, what is the character of that structure, that is one of the issues. But even that structure doesn’t exist any more.”

Shouldn’t one of the issues then also have been why “that structure”—i.e. the Babri Masjid—“doesn’t exist any more”?

The main beneficiaries of the Supreme Court’s verdict on Saturday are organically linked to the main accused in the crime of demolishing the mosque. If the Ayodhya case is really one of the most important cases in the world, it is so because of the violence it is associated with. Can this case really be settled, then, without punishing the leaders responsible for that violence?

The five-judge bench represented an impressive array of judicial wisdom. Sadly, their judgment offers no pointers on this fundamental question.

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A recent working paper published by the Centre for Sustainable Employment, Azim Premji University has contested official claims on employment, showing an “unprecedented” fall in total employment from 2011–12 to 2017–18.

Written by Santosh Mehrotra and Jajati K. Parida, the study says employment dropped by 9 million between these years—“for the first time in India’s history”.

While these are not new observations, this is perhaps the first such formal study to establish through official data that total employment is declining and a reserve army of unemployed youth (both openly unemployed and disheartened) is rising “massively”. The study also shows a trend of increasing contractualisation in both government and private jobs.

Though the share of regular and formal employment increased marginally overall, most jobs are still being generated by micro and small units of the unorganised and private sectors (68% of the total non-farm employment during 2017–18), the study found. The share of informal jobs has increased in the public sector as well, indicating a lack of decent government jobs.

**Sector-wise decline**

The agricultural sector registered a decline in employment at the rate of 4.5 million per annum (about 27 million in total) during 2011–12 and 2017–18. The share of employment in the agricultural and allied sector declined from 49 to about 44%.

The labour-intensive manufacturing sector registered a decline of 3.5 million jobs. The share of manufacturing in total employment has thus gone down from 12.6 to 12.1%—in fact, manufacturing jobs have fallen for the first time in India’s history. It’s not just a decline in growth rate but in absolute numbers too.

The authors note that, “falling manufacturing jobs is the opposite of the goal of ‘Make in India’, and the opposite of what is desirable if the process of structural transformation is to be sustained”.

There’s a slowdown in construction job growth. Non-manufacturing jobs (mostly construction) which created about 4 million jobs every year from 2004–05 to 2011–12 created only about 0.6 million per annum during 2011–12 and 2017–18.

The only sector to witness
sustained job growth (3 million per annum) was services. There has been a 17.3 million rise in regular salaried workers in this sector during 2011–12 and 2017–18. However, the quality of jobs in this sector are mostly poor.

The study says:

“While falling total and youth employment in agriculture is good news from the structural transformation point of view, falling manufacturing employment and decelerating construction employment growth are bad news for the economy, which moved up to lower middle income status just over a decade ago. To sustain the growth of income, improve standard of living, and to reduce poverty, employment opportunities in manufacturing and construction (although a transitory sector) is necessary. Because this would not only sustain the structural transformation process, it would also help sustain growth of GDP over the long run.”

Speaking to The Wire, Mehrotra said that the number of entrants into the labour force has been increasing since 2011–12. It was very small between 2004–05 and 2011–12 (only 2 million per annum); after that, the number has risen in the last six years to roughly 5 million per annum. At the same time, non-agricultural job growth has declined. When these facts are combined, it indicates that there is an increase in the open unemployment rate. The supply of labour is increasing while the demand for it is decreasing.

According to The Indian Express, this result is “in stark contrast to the recent study by Laveesh Bhandari and Amaresh Dubey, which was commissioned by the Economic Advisory Council to the prime minister”. This study had claimed that total employment grew from 433 million in 2011–12 to 457 million in 2017–18.

The latest study by Mehrotra and Parida, however, says that employment fell from 474 million in 2011–12 to 465 million in 2017–18.

A major reason for this difference could be because the estimates for 2004–05 and 2011–12 in the study by Bhandari and Dubey (412 million and 433 million respectively) are much lower than that in Mehrotra and Parida (459 and 474). Mehrotra believes that it’s almost certainly because they have used only Usual Principal Status (UPS) and not Usual Principal and Subsidiary Status (UPSS) in their calculations.

Under UPS, a person is considered part of the labour force if s/he works for 183 days or more in a year. Under UPSS, a person who has worked even for 30 days in a year is considered employed.

However, for the 2017–18 figure, both the studies seem to have used both principal and subsidiary status as the results are very close (457 and 465 respectively).

Real wages, which were increasing from 2004–05 to 2011–12 because of job growth (Mehrotra says 7.5 million new non-agricultural jobs were being created at a time when fewer people were entering the labour force), have stagnated or fell. “We have gone back to the period of 1996–2004 in terms of real wages, they’re flat or they’ve fallen,” Mehrotra says.

Though the final conclusion can only be arrived at when the consumer expenditure survey is out, the authors’ inference is that poverty has not declined in the last six years. Even though the latest official consumption survey is not out yet, Himanshu, associate professor at JNU’s Centre for Economic Studies and Planning compared two Periodic Labour Force Surveys in 2014–15 and 2017–18 and found that the consumption expenditure of rural and urban Indian households has been falling. “We know from macro data that private consumption as a proportion of the GDP has actually fallen in the last 6 years, and household savings have fallen very sharply. When you put that together, it is very clear that stagnation in real wages is showing up in declining expenditure and a fall in household savings,” Mehrotra says.

The study also shows that there has been some improvement in the share of informal workers in the total workforce—it has gone down from 93% to 90.7%. Informal workers are defined as those who have no death and disability insurance and old age pension. The reasons for his decline could be due to factors like the government paying the workers’ share of EPFO contributions for three years and increase in registration of firms due under GST (which could have encouraged EPFO registration as well).

Within the organised sector, however, there is an interesting paradox—the share of those who have social security has increased in the organised sector, reversing an erstwhile trend, but the number of workers with short term contracts has also gone up.

In conclusion, the authors suggest a comprehensive employment policy combined with an industrial policy “to address agrarian transformation, boost real wages in rural areas, ensure industrial development, taking skill issues into consideration”.

Courtesy: The Wire
Sinking MGNREGA

Subodh Varma

It would have seemed natural—indeed, imperative—that, as India grapples with a deadly slowdown, with agricultural economy growing only at around 2% and rural joblessness hovering at a shocking 8%, the government would infuse some energy in the implementation of the rural jobs guarantee scheme (MGNREGA). This would put more money in the hands of rural poor and not only help them survive this crisis but it would also give a fillip to the economy as a whole.

However, quite the reverse seems to be happening. Latest data available on the official MGNREGA website shows that till October this year, a staggering 2.51 crore households were refused work under the scheme despite having demanded it. That means 19%, or about one in five of all those who came looking for work in the scheme, were turned back. Over 13.2 crore households demanded work (which is a record in itself) as per official records while 10.71 crore were provided work.

This is the highest rate of refusal in recent years, as can be seen in the accompanying chart. In fact, the sharp increase in refusals in the current year is striking. It is almost a 33% increase over last year.

A state by state analysis shows that Andhra Pradesh (AP) and Telangana lead all other states in refusing work. In AP, some 61 lakh households were turned back, that is, 35% of all who applied. In Telangana, nearly 24 lakh refusals are recorded, 32% of all applicants.

Other states with such significant turn-backs include Haryana (28%), Bihar (26%), Karnataka (21%), Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh (20% each), Punjab (24%) and Gujarat and Rajasthan (18% each).

Funding Collapse

While Central fund releases are slightly less than usual till this time of the year, this squeeze has been aggravated by low releases from state governments which contribute 10% of the funds. This year, the Centre had released Rs 51,950 crore till date out of the total Central allocation of Rs 60,000 crore for MGNREGA in the Union Budget. That’s about 86% of the total budget kept for the scheme. Another five months are left in the year and how the scheme is going to be implemented henceforth is anybody’s guess. Remember that this year’s MGNREGA allocation was Rs 1000 crore less than last year’s Revised Estimate of spending.

So, this year, the scheme was handicapped from the start.

But the worrying part in the financial statement till date is this: states seem to have released much less than would be expected and till date, no opening balance is being shown for any of the states. All are starting off with zero opening balance.

Last year had ended with states together in the red for about Rs 3716 crore. That means liabilities or dues amounting to that much were pending last year. This happens every year because of the tight-fisted policy of the Central government. So, this amount too would have been settled first from this year’s releases, whether Central or State.

But ‘zero’ opening balance (OB) is bizarre. Last year, the aggregate opening balance for all states put together was a hefty Rs 2064 crore. Either there is some accounting issue, like non-submission of utilisation certificates or some other imbroglio.
Unspent Funds & Pending Payments

But the real reason why money is not being spent—which is reflected in high refusal rates—seems to be that states are holding on to funds due to a general funds crunch emanating from the economic slowdown. This could be because the Centre has advised them to be tight fisted, or it could be their own thinking.

Whatever be the case, all states put together have an unspent balance of over Rs 12,546 crore and pending dues of Rs 5428 crore till date. Clearly, spending is being very tightly restricted. And, this is happening whether it’s a BJP government or a Congress government or even one of the regional party’s government at the state’s helm.

This unfortunate state of affairs should be seen in the context of the fact that this year, precisely because of the slowdown, demand for work has increased much more. Recent floods and destruction of crops has also caused a spike in demand for MNGREGA work. Yet the govt. is failing to step up. In fact, motivated by the neoliberal dogma of squeezing government funding, less funds are being spent. This means more misery and distress for common people—and the situation will worsen in the coming months.

(Subodh Varma is a senior Indian journalist.)

Dangerous Agreement to Sign

Prabhat Patnaik

On October 24–25, there were widespread peasant protests all over the country against the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) involving sixteen nations which India is currently negotiating. As negotiations near completion, such protests are escalating, with the All India Kisan Sabha planning to organise a nation-wide protest on November 4, just before the RCEP agreement is due to be signed. And the Kerala government too is organising a protest.

The sixteen nations involved in the RCEP comprise the ten ASEAN countries, and six others with each of whom the ASEAN has separate Free Trade Agreements, namely Japan, China, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and India. These sixteen countries account for nearly half of the world’s population, 40 per cent of the world’s production and 30 per cent of the world’s trade. If the agreement is signed it will be one of the biggest such agreements. This very fact makes the “hush-hush” manner in which it is being negotiated all the more reprehensible.

Indeed the undemocratic manner of its planned genesis is quite staggering. Negotiations are being conducted in utmost secrecy; and sometime in early November, if the governments agree, then the FTA will be signed, and will become a fait accompli. The people of all these countries, including India, will not have any say whatsoever on what befalls them on account of it.

In India’s case, quite apart from the utterly undemocratic manner in which the government is taking the country into this FTA, there is an additional factor. Under the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution, which demarcates the domains of jurisdiction of the centre and the states, agriculture belongs to the states’ domain. The RCEP, indeed any FTA of its kind, necessarily impinges on agriculture; and yet the states are not even consulted about its terms. It is a blatant and fundamental violation of the Constitutional rights of the states that the centre acts unilaterally in a sphere belonging to the states’ domain.

In the United States, any such international agreement has to obtain Congressional approval, even after it has been signed by the executive, before it becomes effective; but in India, even though there is a strong legal opinion that the Indian Constitution too demands such a course, successive central governments have simply gone ahead and signed FTAs without submitting them for parliamentary approval.

In fact the FTA with the ASEAN itself had been signed by the UPA-II government in an entirely unilateral manner. The government of Kerala had major concerns then about the effect of that FTA on the producers of edible oils in the state, and an official delegation led by V.S. Achuthanandan, the chief minister at that time, had come to Delhi...
to express those concerns to the central government. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh who met the delegation along with several of his cabinet colleagues, had given his personal assurance that Kerala would be consulted before the agreement was finally signed. Yet when the delegation arrived back in the state capital, it heard that the FTA had already been signed! The BJP government, which has scant regard for federalism anyway, has simply carried this wilful violation of the constitutional rights of the states further forward.

Even though the exact terms of the agreement are shrouded in secrecy, the peasantry has every reason to oppose it, because any such free trade agreement which has agriculture within its ambit will be necessarily anti-peasant. The prospect of subsidised dairy exports from Australia and New Zealand undercutting Indian producers has already attracted attention; and so has the prospect of cheap edible oil exports from Indonesia and Malaysia which will particularly hurt producers in Kerala.

True, the Indo–ASEAN FTA already allows such exports of edible oils into India but it also permits the imposition of tariffs; under the proposed RCEP there will be little scope for that. In fact, precisely for this reason, the prospects of other crop imports like wheat and cotton also loom large, which will have a pervasive impact on the Indian agricultural sector.

Since the agricultural sector employs nearly half the total workforce in the country, and has already been witnessing a severe crisis, which has arisen because of neoliberalism but which has been compounded by the BJP government’s follies, like demonetisation, the RCEP’s potential for damaging the economy is immense.

But that is not all. There is an insistence reportedly under the RCEP on an IPR regime which will not only make it more restrictive but also make it impossible for peasants to use their own seeds without inviting legal action. The greater restrictiveness of the patent regime will certainly affect the pharmaceutical sector and makes drugs more expensive for consumers.

Such a prospect contradicts the argument usually advanced in favour of the RCEP, that it would result in a cheapening of goods to the benefit of consumers, owing to cheaper imports. Besides, this argument is exactly similar to the one advanced by the colonial regime during the days of the British Raj to justify the deindustrialisation that had occurred in India in that period. The emergence of mass unemployment and mass poverty, which had been caused by the import of cheap machine-made manufactured goods at that time had been sought to be justified by the claim that such cheap imports improved the living standards of the consumers of such goods.

But it is not just a question of asserting that as against the mass unemployment and destitution caused by cheap imports, the fact that some people will have a better living standard as a result of such cheap imports is quite inconsequential. There is a more subtle point involved here.

The destitution of the peasantry that cheap imports will bring about, will swell the reserve army of labour which will adversely affect the entire working people, by reducing their wage-bargaining strength. In addition, it will also compound the recession that the economy is rapidly plunging into, via the multiplier effects of the reduced incomes of the peasantry and the other working people.

Those who are supposed to become better off because of cheap imports, must be persons whose money incomes remain unchanged despite the destitution of the peasantry. But if the destitution of the peasantry is going to affect the entire economy, then there will be hardly anybody among the working people with unchanged incomes. The fate of the peasantry in other words affects the people’s fate at large, and its destitution affects a very wide segment of society.

True, this fact may get camouflaged under certain circumstances by other phenomena, such as the boom in the economy engendered by asset-price bubbles. Indeed it has remained camouflaged until now as the agrarian crisis has hardly impinged on the middle class; but in the current situation when the boom is over, no such camouflaging is possible, so that any further agrarian destitution will now have a pervasive effect on society, with very few being left solely as beneficiaries of cheap imports.

The RCEP moreover will affect not just the agricultural sector, but also manufacturing, where India will be flooded by imports from East Asia. Iron and steel, marine products, chemical products, electronic products and even textiles, are sectors that are worried about the effect of tariff reductions under the RCEP.

But then, some may say, if India is so uncompetitive across the spectrum, wouldn’t it be better to have a shake-down by closing all
these inefficient units anyway? This question however betrays a lack of understanding of economics. If the goods produced by any society, no matter how “expensive” in terms of resources they may be, are all used by that society, then there will be a high level of employment and consumption within it. But if the people in that society demand goods other than what is produced within it, then not only will employment and output fall (unless offset by an equivalent amount of exports), but so will consumption, with no necessary prospects of any revival. The “free trade” and “efficiency” arguments in other words are a pure ideological legacy of capitalist economics which have no general validity; the sooner we forget them the better.

So far we have only seen the unemployment-causing or destitution-causing effects of RCEP. Alongside such destitution however there will be a widening of the country’s current account deficit (which in fact is a reflection of this destitution). The Indo–ASEAN FTA has already widened our current deficit with the ASEAN bloc; this will widen further under the RCEP, as will our deficit with China. Signing the RCEP in short will mean borrowing a larger amount (to pay for the wider current deficit) purely for the sake of causing destitution in the country!

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

Thiruvalluvar in Saffron, Strong Backlash in Tamil Nadu

Bharathy Singaravel

On Saturday, November 2, the Tamil Nadu BJP posted a couplet by the legendary Tamil poet, Thiruvalluvar. The chosen verse was taken from the Kadavul Vazhthu (In Praise of the Creator) chapter of Valluvar's Tirukkural—the famed compilation of 1330 kurrals (as the couplets are known). Gopalkrishna Gandhi in his 2015 translations of the text “The Tirukkural – A New English Version” interprets the verse: “Your learning’s idle, incomplete. If you haven’t placed it at the source’s feet”. The TN BJP’s Twitter handle along with quoting the original Tamil text added that the “education of those who profess atheism and spurn the faithful is pointless”. The TN BJP’s Twitter handle along with quoting the original Tamil text added that the “education of those who profess atheism and spurn the faithful is pointless”. Further, it claimed that the Dravida Kazhagam (DK), the DMK and the CPI (M) were the sort of forces that Valluvar had warned against. Lastly, attached to the tweet was a picture of Valluvar dressed in saffron robes, holy ash smeared on his forehead and wearing rudraksha beads.

This is not the first time the BJP has attempted to appropriate Tamil culture. Perhaps because of the thorough routing the party faced in Tamil Nadu during the General Elections and the unpopularity of the Prime Minister, evidenced in the black-flag protests and #GoBackModi that erupts during his visits to the state, the BJP appears to be making attempts to change their regional approach. Modi met the Chinese President Xi Jingping in Mamallapuram clad in a white veshti and shirt. He quoted the Tirukkural in Thailand. These overtures do not seem to be making much of an impression on the people.

Unsurprisingly, the tweet set off a storm of backlash. #BJPInsultsThiruvalluvar was used over 10,000 times. Thiruvalluvar has conventionally been depicted in an ascetic white robe and with no religious markings on his body. The celebrated poet who probably lived and wrote sometime between 2 BCE and 5 CE has long been a towering icon of Tamil culture. In the 1970s, Valluvar Kottam commemorating the poet was commissioned by then Chief Minister and DMK Leader, M. Karunanidhi. Under the DMK’s auspices, the 133ft tall Thiruvalluvar Statue at Kanyakumari was finally unveiled in 2000.

Thiruvalluvar’s couplets continue to be memorised in Tamil Nadu schools. They cover a wide range of topics from the divine to love to advise for rulers. In Tamil culture, he is hardly viewed as a religious figure.

Speaking to the Indian Cultural Forum, political analyst and writer Arunan Kathiresa called the BJP’s representation “ideological fraud”. “Firstly, it needs to be noted that in Thiruvalluvar’s time, Hinduism, as we know it today, did not even exist. Jainism, Buddhism and Vedic doctrines existed” he said. “The Tirukkural was a direct opposition to Vedic doctrine. It opposes the varna system. Those in the BJP who are quoting portions to suit their representation, need to read the text and understand its essence properly.” He added, “the BJP is trying to co-opt Thiruvalluvar. They are trying to forcibly convert him to their religion. They have no great leaders

This is not the first time the BJP has attempted to appropriate Tamil culture. Perhaps because of the thorough routing the party faced in Tamil Nadu during the General Elections and the unpopularity of the Prime Minister, evidenced in the black-flag protests and #GoBackModi that erupts during his visits to the state, the BJP appears to be making attempts to change their regional approach. Modi met the Chinese President Xi Jingping in Mamallapuram clad in a white veshti and shirt. He quoted the Tirukkural in Thailand. These overtures do not seem to be making much of an impression on the people.

Unsurprisingly, the tweet set off a storm of backlash. #BJPInsultsThiruvalluvar was used over 10,000 times. Thiruvalluvar has conventionally been depicted in an ascetic white robe and with no religious markings on his body. The celebrated poet who probably lived and wrote sometime between 2 BCE and 5 CE has long been a towering icon of Tamil culture. In the 1970s, Valluvar Kottam commemorating the poet was commissioned by then Chief Minister and DMK Leader, M. Karunanidhi. Under the DMK’s auspices, the 133ft tall Thiruvalluvar Statue at Kanyakumari was finally unveiled in 2000.

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of their own, so they co-opt Sardar Patel, a Congress leader. They have no great literary figures or thinkers of their own, so they try to co-opt Thiruvalluvar. We must speak out against this betrayal of rationality and historical evidence.”

(Bharathy Singaravel is a member of the Editorial Collective of the Indian Writers Forum and a writer.)

The Coup in Bolivia: Five Lessons

Atilio Borón

The Bolivian tragedy eloquently teaches several lessons that our peoples and popular social and political forces must learn and record in their consciences forever. Here, a brief enumeration.

First, no matter how much the economy is managed in an exemplary way as the Evo government did, growth, redistribution, flow of investments are guaranteed and all macro and microeconomic indicators are improved, the right and imperialism will never accept a government that does not serve its interests.

Second, we must study the manuals published by various US agencies and their spokesmen disguised as academics or journalists to be able to perceive the offensive signals in time. These writings invariably highlight the need to destroy the reputation of the popular leader, which in specialised jargon is called character assassination as a thief, corrupt, dictator or ignorant. This is the task entrusted to social communicators, self-proclaimed as “independent journalists”, who in favor of their quasi-monopoly control of the media drill the brains of the population with such defamations, accompanied, in the case at hand, by messages of hate directed against native peoples and the poor in general.

Third, once the above has come, it is the turn of the political leadership and the economic elites claiming “a change”, ending Evo’s “dictatorship” that, as the unpresentable Vargas Llosa wrote a few days ago, that is a “demagogue who wants eternalise in power.” I suppose he will be toasting with champagne in Madrid seeing the images of the fascist hordes looting, burning, chaining journalists to a post, shaving a woman mayor and painting her in red and destroying the minutes of the last election to fulfill the gift mandate Mario and free Bolivia from an evil demagogue. I mention his case because it has been and is the immoral standard bearer of this vile attack, of this limitless felony that crucifies popular leaderships.

Fourth: the “security forces” enter the scene. In this case we are talking about institutions controlled by numerous agencies, military and civil, of the United States government. They train them, arm them, do joint exercises and educate them politically. I had the opportunity to verify it when, at the invitation of Evo, I inaugurated a course on “Anti-imperialism” for senior officers of the three forces. On that occasion I was embarrassed by the degree of penetration of the most reactionary American slogans inherited from the Cold War era and by the undisputed irritation caused by the fact that an indigenous was president of his country. What those “security forces” did was to withdraw from the scene and leave the field free for the uncontrolled performance of the fascist hordes—such as those that acted in Ukraine, in Libya, in Iraq, in Syria to overthrow, or try to do so in the latter case, annoying leaders for the empire—and thus intimidate the population, the militancy and the government figures themselves. That is, a new socio-political figure: military coup “by omission”, letting the reactionary gangs, recruited and financed by the right, impose their law. Once the terror reigns and before the defenselessness of the government the outcome was inevitable.

Fifth, security and public order should never have been entrusted in Bolivia to institutions such as the police and the army, colonised by imperialism and its lackeys of the indigenous right. When the offensive against Evo was launched, a policy of appeasement and not responding to the provocations of the fascists was chosen. This served to embolden them and increase the bet: first, demand ballot; later, fraud and new elections; next, elections but without Evo (as in Brazil, without Lula); later, resignation of Evo; finally, given his reluctance to accept blackmail, sow terror with the complicity of police and military and force Evo to resign. From manual, all from manual. Will we learn these lessons?

(Atilio A. Borón is a researcher and writer on politics, economics, international relations and imperialism, with a primary focus on Latin America and the Caribbean.)
Bolivia’s President Evo Morales was overthrown in a military coup on November 10. He is now in Mexico. Before he left office, Morales had been involved in a long project to bring economic and social democracy to his long-exploited country. It is important to recall that Bolivia has suffered a series of coups, often conducted by the military and the oligarchy on behalf of transnational mining companies. Initially, these were tin firms, but tin is no longer the main target in Bolivia. The main target is its massive deposits of lithium, crucial for the electric car.

Over the past 13 years, Morales has tried to build a different relationship between his country and its resources. He has not wanted the resources to benefit the transnational mining firms, but rather to benefit his own population. Part of that promise was met as Bolivia’s poverty rate has declined, and as Bolivia’s population was able to improve its social indicators. Nationalisation of resources combined with the use of its income to fund social development has played a role. The attitude of the Morales government toward the transnational firms produced a harsh response from them, many of them taking Bolivia to court.

Over the course of the past few years, Bolivia has struggled to raise investment to develop the lithium reserves in a way that brings the wealth back into the country for its people. Morales’ Vice President Álvaro García Linera had said that lithium is the “fuel that will feed the world.” Bolivia was unable to make deals with Western transnational firms; it decided to partner with Chinese firms. This made the Morales government vulnerable. It had walked into the new Cold War between the West and China. The coup against Morales cannot be understood without a glance at this clash.

**Clash with Transnational Firms**

When Evo Morales and the Movement for Socialism took power in 2006, the government immediately sought to undo decades of theft by transnational mining firms. Morales’ government seized several of the mining operations of the most powerful firms, such as Glencore, Jindal Steel & Power, Anglo-Argentine Pan American Energy, and South American Silver (now TriMetals Mining). It sent a message that business as usual was not going to continue.

Nonetheless, these large firms continued their operations—based on older contracts—in some areas of the country. For example, the Canadian transnational firm South American Silver had created a company in 2003—before Morales came to power—to mine the Malku Khota for silver and indium (a rare earth metal used in flat-screen televisions). South American Silver then began to extend its reach into its concessions. The land that it claimed was inhabited by indigenous Bolivians, who argued that the company was destroying its sacred spaces as well as promoting an atmosphere of violence.

On August 1, 2012, the Morales government—by Supreme Decree no. 1308—annulled the contract with South American Silver (TriMetals Mining), which then sought international arbitration and compensation. Canada’s government of Justin Trudeau—as part of a broader push on behalf of Canadian mining companies in South America—put an immense amount of pressure on Bolivia. In August 2019, TriMetals struck a deal with the Bolivian government for $25.8 million, about a tenth of what it had earlier demanded as compensation.

Jindal Steel, an Indian transnational corporation, had an old contract to mine iron ore from Bolivia’s El Mutún, a contract that was put on hold by the Morales government in 2007. In July 2012, Jindal Steel terminated the contract and sought international arbitration and compensation for its investment. In 2014, it won $22.5 million from Bolivia in a ruling from Paris-based International Chamber of Commerce. For another case against Bolivia, Jindal Steel demanded $100 million in compensation.

The Morales government seized three facilities from the Swiss-based transnational mining firm Glencore; these included a tin and zinc mine as well as two smelters. The mine’s expropriation took place after Glencore’s subsidiary clashed violently with miners.

Most aggressively, Pan American sued the Bolivian government for $1.5 billion for the expropriation of the Anglo-Argentinian company’s stake in natural gas producer Chaco by the state. Bolivia settled for $357 million in 2014.

The scale of these payouts is enormous. It was estimated in 2014 that the public and private payments made for nationalisation of these key sectors amounted to at least $1.9 billion (Bolivia’s GDP was at that time $28 billion).
In 2014, even the Financial Times agreed that Morales’s strategy was not entirely inappropriate. “Proof of the success of Morales’s economic model is that since coming to power he has tripled the size of the economy while ramping up record foreign reserves.”

Lithium

Bolivia’s key reserves are in lithium, which is essential for the electric car. Bolivia claims to have 70 percent of the world’s lithium reserves, mostly in the Salar de Uyuni salt flats. The complexity of the mining and processing has meant that Bolivia has not been able to develop the lithium industry on its own. It requires capital, and it requires expertise.

The salt flat is about 12,000 feet (3,600 meters) above sea level, and it receives high rainfall. This makes it difficult to use sun-based evaporation. Such simpler solutions are available to Chile’s Atacama Desert and in Argentina’s Hombre Muerto. More technical solutions are needed for Bolivia, which means that more investment is needed.

The nationalisation policy of the Morales government and the geographical complexity of Salar de Uyuni chased away several transnational mining firms. Eramet (France), FMC (United States) and Posco (South Korea) could not make deals with Bolivia, so they now operate in Argentina.

Morales made it clear that any development of the lithium had to be done with Bolivia’s Comibol—its national mining company—and Yacimientos de Litio Bolivianos (YLB)—its national lithium company—as equal partners.

Last year, Germany’s ACI Systems agreed to a deal with Bolivia. After protests from residents in the Salar de Uyuni region, Morales canceled that deal on November 4, 2019.

Chinese firms—such as TBEA Group and China Machinery Engineering—made a deal with YLB. It was being said that China’s Tianqi Lithium Group, which operates in Argentina, was going to make a deal with YLB. Both Chinese investment and the Bolivian lithium company were experimenting with new ways to both mine the lithium and to share the profits of the lithium. The idea that there might be a new social compact for the lithium was unacceptable to the main transnational mining companies.

Tesla (United States) and Pure Energy Minerals (Canada) both showed great interest in having a direct stake in Bolivian lithium. But they could not make a deal that would take into consideration the parameters set by the Morales government. Morales himself was a direct impediment to the takeover of the lithium fields by the non-Chinese transnational firms. He had to go.

After the coup, Tesla’s stock rose astronomically.

(Vijay Prashad is an Indian historian, editor and journalist.)
Lula is Free: Can Socialism Be Restored?

Ana Paula Vargas and Vijay Prashad

Just before 5 p.m. on Friday the 8th of November, Brazil’s former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva walked out of his prison in Curitiba, Brazil. Lula went to prison in April last year on a 12-year sentence. Five-hundred and eighty days of prison are now over, as the Federal Supreme Court ruled that inmates who have not yet exhausted their appeals should not be held in prison.

In addition to Lula, about 5,000 Brazilians—mostly poor and black—can be released based on the Supreme Court’s decision. Many of them have not been previously afforded the presumption of innocence, and large numbers of them have been in prison without proper legal defense.

The Supreme Court verdict was not directed at Lula, but at the undemocratic nature of the judicial system that had held people in prison before they had exhausted their appeals. Lula’s situation mirrored that of these thousands of other prisoners. It was as part of a judicial criticism of the unjust system that Lula was able to be free.

But as Lula walked out of his cell and into the Free Lula encampment across the road from the prison, he signaled the importance of the Free Lula (Lula Livre) campaign of international solidarity that went from Curitiba across Latin America, and indeed across the world. From the Free Lula encampment opposite his prison, comrades would hold vigils and wish him thrice a day greetings of “good morning,” “good afternoon,” and “good evening.” On November 8, Lula was able to be greeted not by shouts of solidarity, but in person.

The solidarity campaign drew in jurists and intellectuals, politicians and celebrities, a range of people who felt that the imprisonment of Lula was unjust. What had become very clear was that the legal mechanisms had become a political instrument of the elite to attack the left politicians and left movements. The collaboration between the government prosecutor and Judge Sérgio Moro indicates that there was a weaponisation of the law—what is known as lawfare—to prevent the Workers’ Party from winning elections, and to make sure that the Brazilian elites hold power. What “Free Lula” meant was not only the freedom of Lula, but also an end to lawfare as an instrument against the people.

Lula walked out of his cell, but the case against him—a case with little evidence—remains. Popular pressure will continue to completely annul this persecution of Lula. There is little doubt the Free Lula campaign will continue to mobilise support so that the courts declare that Lula is innocent and allow him his full political rights. The Operation Lava Jato (Operation Car Wash) was not just used to put Lula in prison, but to make sure that he—who is supremely popular in Brazil—cannot run for office again.

Lula emerged as a central figure of the Brazilian people during the historic strikes of 1978 and 1979, which played a key role in ending the military dictatorship in Brazil. Lula’s popularity comes both from the positive aspects of his presidency (when his government abolished poverty and expanded educational opportunities) and from his leadership against the neoliberal and neofascist governments of Michel Temer and Jair Bolsonaro. Out of prison, Lula’s voice will once more sharply turn on the hideous politics of Bolsonaro.

Over the course of the Free Lula struggle, it became clear that Lula was bigger than his political party—the Workers’ Party (PT)—and even bigger than Brazil’s left. He represents the Brazilian people—the people who are now struggling to maintain their homes in the favelas and in the encampments and in the settlements, struggling to hold onto the Amazon, struggling to study and heal, eat and smile.

It must be chilling for Bolsonaro to watch the television and see Lula walk confidently out of his prison and into the political domain. Elections have brought the left back to power in Argentina. The left retained power in Bolivian elections, only to be overthrown by a coup, but the people are fighting back. Even in Colombia, the left has made significant gains. Mass protests in Chile and Ecuador suggest the tide has turned in those two countries. Bolsonaro must know that the turn to the left in Brazil is imminent. The left now has its champion out on the streets.

(Ana Paula Vargas works at the Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research. Vijay Prashad is an Indian historian, editor and journalist.)
The Greatest Scam in History: How the Energy Companies Took Us All

Naomi Oreskes

It’s a tale for all time. What might be the greatest scam in history or, at least, the one that threatens to take history down with it. Think of it as the climate-change scam that beat science, big time.

Scientists have been seriously investigating the subject of human-made climate change since the late 1950s and political leaders have been discussing it for nearly as long. In 1961, Alvin Weinberg, the director of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, called carbon dioxide one of the “big problems” of the world “on whose solution the entire future of the human race depends.”

Fast-forward nearly 30 years and, in 1992, President George H.W. Bush signed the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), promising “concrete action to protect the planet.”

Today, with Puerto Rico still recovering from Hurricane Maria and fires burning across California, we know that did not happen. Despite hundreds of scientific reports and assessments, tens of thousands of peer-reviewed scientific papers, and countless conferences on the issue, man-made climate change is now a living crisis on this planet. Universities, foundations, churches, and individuals have indeed divested from fossil fuel companies and, led by a 16-year-old Swedish girl, citizens across the globe have taken to the streets to express their outrage. Children have refused to go to school on Fridays to protest the potential loss of their future. And if you need a measure of how long some of us have been at this, in December, the Conference of Parties to the UNFCCC will meet for the 25th time.

Scientists working on the issue have often told me that, once upon a time, they assumed, if they did their jobs, politicians would act upon the information. That, of course, hasn’t happened. Anything but, across much of the planet. Worse yet, science failed to have the necessary impact in significant part because of disinformation promoted by the major fossil-fuel companies, which have succeeded in diverting attention from climate change and successfully blocking meaningful action.

Making Climate Change Go Away

Much focus has been put on ExxonMobil’s history of disseminating disinformation, partly because of the documented discrepancies between what that company said in public about climate change and what its officials said (and funded) in private. Recently, a trial began in New York City accusing the company of misleading its investors, while Massachusetts is prosecuting ExxonMobil for misleading consumers as well.

If only it had just been that one company, but for more than 30 years, the fossil-fuel industry and its allies have denied the truth about anthropogenic global warming. They have systematically misled the American people and so purposely contributed to endless delays in dealing with the issue by, among other things, discounting and disparaging climate science, mispresenting scientific findings, and attempting to discredit climate scientists. These activities are documented in great detail in How Americans Were Deliberately Misled about Climate Change, a report I recently co-authored, as well as in my 2010 book and 2014 film, Merchants of Doubt.

A key aspect of the fossil-fuel industry’s disinformation campaign was the mobilisation of “third-party allies”: organisations and groups with which it would collaborate and that, in some cases, it would be responsible for creating.

In the 1990s, these allied outfits included the Global Climate Coalition, the Cooler Heads Coalition, Informed Citizens for the Environment and the Greening Earth Society. Like ExxonMobil, such groups endlessly promoted a public message of denial and doubt: that we weren’t really sure if climate change was happening; that the science wasn’t settled; that humanity could, in any case, readily adapt at a later date to any changes that did occur; and that addressing climate change directly would wreck the American economy. Two of these groups—Informed Citizens for the Environment and the Greening Earth Society—were, in fact, AstroTurf organisations, created and funded by a coal industry trade association but dressed up to look like grassroots citizens’ action organisations.

Similar messaging was pursued by a network of think-tanks promoting free market solutions to social problems, many with ties to the fossil-fuel industry. These included the George C. Marshall Institute, the Cato Institute, the Competitive Enterprise Institute,
the American Enterprise Institute and the Heartland Institute. Often their politically motivated contrarian claims were presented in formats that make them look like the scientific reports whose findings they were contradicting.

In 2009, for instance, the Cato Institute issued a report that precisely mimicked the format, layout and structure of the government’s US National Climate Assessment. Of course, it made claims thoroughly at odds with the actual report’s science. The industry also promoted disinformation through its trade associations, including the American Legislative Exchange Council, the American Petroleum Institute, the US Chamber of Commerce, the National Black Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers.

Both think-tanks and trade organisations have been involved in personal attacks on the reputations of scientists. One of the earliest documented was on climate scientist Benjamin Santer at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory who showed that the observed increase in global temperatures could not be attributed to increased solar radiation. He served as the lead author of the Second Assessment Report of the UN’s prestigious Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, or IPCC, responsible for the 1995 conclusion that “the balance of evidence suggests a discernible human impact on the climate system.” Santer became the target of a vicious, arguably defamatory attack by physicists from the George C. Marshall Institute who accused him of fraud. Other climate scientists, including Michael Mann, Jonathan Overpeck, Malcolm Hughes, Ray Bradley, Katharine Hayhoe and, I should note, myself, have been subject to harassment, investigation, hacked emails, and politically motivated freedom-of-information attacks.

**How to Play Climate Change for a Fool**

When it came to industry disinformation, the role of third-party allies was on full display at the House Committee on Oversight hearings on climate change in late October. As their sole witness, the Republicans on that committee invited Mandy Gunasekera, the founder and president of Energy45, a group whose purpose, in its own words, is to “support the Trump energy agenda.”

Energy45 is part of a group known, bluntly enough, as the CO2 Coalition and is a perfect example of what I’ve long thought of as zombie denialism in which older players spouting industry arguments suddenly reappear in new forms. In this case, in the 1990s and early 2000s, the George C. Marshall Institute was a leader in climate-change disinformation. From 1974–1999, its director, William O’Keefe, had also been the executive vice president and later CEO of the American Petroleum Institute. The Marshall Institute itself closed in 2015, only to re-emerge a few years later as the CO2 Coalition.

The comments of Republican committee members offer a sense of just how deeply the climate-change disinformation campaign is now lodged in the heart of the Trump administration and congressional Republicans as 2019 draws to an end and the planet visibly heats. Consider just six of their “facts”:

1) **The misleading claim that climate change will be “mild and manageable.”** There is no scientific evidence to support this. On the contrary, literally hundreds of scientific reports over the past few decades, including those US National Climate Assessments, have affirmed that any warming above 2 degrees Centigrade will lead to grave and perhaps catastrophic effects on “health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security, and economic growth.” The UN’s IPCC has recently noted that avoiding the worst impacts of global warming will “require rapid and far-reaching transitions in energy… infrastructure… and industrial systems.”

Recent events surrounding Hurricanes Sandy, Michael, Harvey, Maria and Dorian, as well as the devastating wildfire at the ironically named town of Paradise, California, in 2018 and the fires across much of that state this fall, have shown that the impacts of climate change are already part of our lives and becoming unmanageable. Or if you want another sign of where this country is at this moment, consider a new report from the Army War College indicating that “the Department of Defense (DoD) is precariously unprepared for the national security implications of climate change-induced global security challenges.” And if the Pentagon isn’t prepared to manage climate change, it’s hard to imagine any part of the US government that might be.

2) **The misleading claim that global prosperity is actually being driven by fossil fuels.** No one denies that fossil fuels drove the Industrial Revolution and, in doing so, contributed substantively to
rising living standards for hundreds of millions of people in Europe, North America and parts of Asia. But the claim that fossil fuels are the essence of global prosperity today is, at best, a half-truth because what is at stake here isn’t the past but the future. Disruptive climate change fueled by greenhouse gas emissions from the use of oil, coal and natural gas now threatens both the prosperity that parts of this planet have already achieved and future economic growth of just about any sort.

3) A misleading claim that fossil fuels represent “cheap energy.” Fossil fuels are not cheap. When their external costs are included—that is, not just the price of extracting, distributing and profiting from them, but what it will cost in all our lives once you add in the fires, extreme storms, flooding, health effects and everything else that their carbon emissions into the atmosphere will bring about—they couldn’t be more expensive. The International Monetary Fund estimates that the cost to consumers above and beyond what we pay at the pump or in our electricity bills already comes to more than $5 trillion dollars annually. That’s trillion, not billion. Put another way, we are all paying a massive, largely unnoticed subsidy to the oil, gas and coal industry to destroy our civilisation. Among other things, those subsidies already “damage the environment, cause... premature deaths through local air pollution, and exacerbate congestion and other adverse side effects of vehicle use.”

4) A misleading claim about poverty and fossil fuels. That fossil fuels are the solution to the energy needs of the world’s poor is a tale being heavily promoted by ExxonMobil, among others. The idea that ExxonMobil is suddenly concerned about the plight of the global poor is, of course, laughable or its executives wouldn’t be planning (as they are) for significant increases in fossil-fuel production between now and 2030, while downplaying the threat of climate change. As Pope Francis, global justice leader Mary Robinson and former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon—as well as countless scientists and advocates of poverty reduction and global justice—have repeatedly emphasised, climate change will, above all, hurt the poor. It is they who will first be uprooted from their homes (and homelands); it is they who will be migrating into an increasingly hostile and walled-in world; it is they who will truly feel the heat, literal and figurative, of it all. A fossil-fuel company that cared about the poor would obviously not be committed, above all else, to pursuing a business model based on oil and gas exploration and development. The cynicism of this argument is truly astonishing.

Moreover, while it’s true that the poor need affordable energy, it is not true that they need fossil fuels. More than a billion people worldwide lack access (or, at least, reliable access) to electricity, but many of them also lack access to an electricity grid, which means fossil fuels are of little use to them. For such communities, solar and wind power are the only reasonable ways to go, the only ones that could rapidly and affordably be put in place and made available.

5) Misleading assertions about the costs of renewable energy. The cheap fossil fuel narrative is regularly coupled with misleading assertions about the allegedly high costs of renewable energy. According to Bloomberg News, however, in two-thirds of the world, solar is already the cheapest form of newly installed electricity generation, cheaper than nuclear, natural gas or coal. Improvements in energy storage are needed to maximise the penetration of renewables, particularly in developed countries, but such improvements are happening quickly. Between 2010 and 2017, the price of battery storage decreased a startling 79% and most experts believe that, in the near future, many of the storage problems can and will be solved.

Science Isn’t Enough

And by the way, when it comes to the oil companies, that’s just to start down a far longer list of misinformation and false claims they’ve been peddling for years. In our 2010 book, Merchants of Doubt, Erik Conway and I showed that the strategies and tactics used by Big Energy to deny the harm of fossil-fuel use were, in many cases, remarkably similar to those long used by the tobacco industry to deny the harm of tobacco use—and this was no coincidence. Many of the same PR firms, advertising agencies and institutions were involved in both cases.

The tobacco industry was finally prosecuted by the Department of Justice, in part because of the ways in which the individual companies coordinated with each other and with third-party allies to present false information to consumers. Through congressional hearings and legal discovery, the industry was pegged with a wide range of activities it funded to mislead the American people. Something similar
has occurred with Big Energy and the harm fossil fuels are doing to our lives, our civilisation, our planet.

Still, a crucial question about the fossil-fuel industry remains to be fully explored: Which of its companies have funded the activities of the trade organisations and other third-party allies who deny the facts about climate change? In some cases, we already know the answers. In 2006, for instance, the Royal Society of the United Kingdom documented ExxonMobil’s funding of 39 organisations that promoted “inaccurate and misleading” views of climate science. The Society was able to identify $2.9 million spent to that end by that company in the year 2005 alone. That, of course, was just one year and clearly anything but the whole story.

Nearly all of these third-party allies are incorporated as 501(c)(3) institutions, which means they must be non-profit and nonpartisan. Often they claim to be involved in education (though mis-education would be the more accurate term). But they are clearly also involved in supporting an industry—Big Energy—that couldn’t be more for-profit and they have done many things to support what could only be called a partisan political agenda as well. After all, by its own admission, Energy45, to take just one example, exists to support the “Trump Energy Agenda.”

I’m an educator, not a lawyer, but as one I can say with confidence that the activities of these organisations are the opposite of educational. Typically, the Heartland Institute, for instance, has explicitly targeted schoolteachers with disinformation. In 2017, the institute sent a booklet to more than 200,000 of them, repeating the oft-cited contrarian claims that climate science is still a highly unsettled subject and that, even if climate change were occurring, it “would probably not be harmful.” Of this booklet, the director of the National Center for Science Education said, “It’s not science, but it’s dressed up to look like science. It’s clearly intended to confuse teachers.” The National Science Teaching Association has called it “propaganda” and advised teachers to place their copies in the recycling bin.

Yet, as much as we know about the activities of Heartland and other third-party allies of the fossil-fuel industry, because of loopholes in our laws we still lack basic information about who has funded and sustained them. Much of the funding at the moment still qualifies as “dark money.” Isn’t it time for citizens to demand that Congress investigate this network, as it and the Department of Justice once investigated the tobacco industry and its networks?

ExxonMobil loves to accuse me of being “an activist.” I am, in fact, a teacher and a scholar. Most of the time, I’d rather be home working on my next book, but that increasingly seems like less of an option when Big Energy’s climate-change scam is ongoing and our civilisation is, quite literally, at stake. When citizens are inactive, democracy fails—and this time, if democracy fails, as burning California shows, so much else could fail as well. Science isn’t enough. The rest of us are needed. And we are needed now.

(Naomi Oreskes is professor of the history of science and affiliated professor of earth and planetary sciences at Harvard University.)
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