From the Editor’s desk . . .

July 4: Swami Vivekananda’s Death Anniversary
Religious Fraternity Day

G. G. Parekh and Neeraj Jain

Swami Vivekananda breathed his last on July 4, 1902.

This great Hindu saint was a firm believer in equality of all religions. He preached that all religions upheld the same ideals of “attainment of liberty and cessation of misery”, and preached equal respect and dignity for all religions, values that were later enshrined in the Indian Constitution.

When Vivekananda preached equal respect for all communities, he clarified that this did not mean tolerance. On the contrary, he berated tolerance as “blasphemy”. He stated:

Our watchword . . . will be acceptance, and not exclusion. . . . I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian’s church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhistic temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and in his Law.

He criticised the imposition of religious values of one community on others. At this time when religious fanatics have launched a violent campaign to force the vegetarian eating habits of the Brahmin minority on the entire people, which has even resulted in several instances of mob lynching of Muslims across the country, it is important to recall Vivekananda’s wise words:

We leave everybody free to know, select, and follow whatever suits and helps him. Thus, for example, eating meat may help one, eating fruit another. Each is welcome to his own peculiarity, but he has no right to criticise the conduct of others . . . much less to insist that others should follow his way . . .

The terrible mistake of religion was to interfere in social matters. . . .

What business had the priests to interfere (to the misery of millions of human beings) in every social matter?

Here is a glorious example of Vivekananda’s spirit of respect for all religions: One of his disciples, Swami Akhandananda, was building an orphanage in Bengal.
Vivekananda wrote to him saying:

Admit boys of all religions—Hindu, Mohammedan, Christian . . . and further advised,

But never tamper with their religion. The only thing you will have to do is to make separate arrangements for their food etc. . . .

Vivekananda stood firmly against religious fundamentalism, and expressed his deep anguish at the communal divisions, violence and bloodshed unleashed by fundamentalist forces on society. He said:

Though there is nothing that has brought to man more blessings than religion, yet at the same time, there is nothing that has brought more horror than religion. Nothing has made more for peace and love than religion; nothing has engendered fiercer hatred than religion. Nothing has made the brotherhood of man more tangible than religion; nothing has bred more bitter enmity between man and man than religion. Nothing has built more charitable institutions, more hospitals for men, and even for animals, than religion; nothing has deluged the world with more blood than religion.

In his writings, Swami Vivekananda warned against religious fundamentalists’ attempts to divide Hindus and Muslims. He held Islam in high esteem, as is obvious from his letter to Mohammed Sarfaraz Husain written on 10 June 1898:

If ever any religion approached this equality in an appreciable manner, it is Islam and Islam alone.

And therefore, he emphatically stated that if India is to progress, if India in the future is to rise “glorious and invincible”, there must not only be cooperation between Hinduism and Islam, but their confluence. He wrote:

For our own motherland a junction of the two great systems, Hinduism and Islam —Vedanta brain and Islam body—is the only hope.

Vivekananda’s views are completely antithetical to the fundamentalists who, through the RSS and its offshoots, pursue a vicious offensive to undermine the Indian Constitution, destroy the country’s secular fabric and convert India into a Hindu Rashtra. Three decades before the RSS’s formation, when the monster of religious nationalism was hardly born, this far-sighted Swami gave the call:

All sect ideas and tribal or national ideas of religion must be given up. That each tribe or nation should have its own particular God and think that every other is wrong is a superstition that should belong to the past. All such ideas must be abandoned.

At a time a spectre of fascism looms over the country, when fundamentalist gangs are running riot spreading hatred and intolerance, attacking and even killing Muslims with impunity on the slightest excuse, it is important to remember Swami Vivekananda and spread his message of respect and dignity for all religions, and his call to the Youth of the country to dedicate their lives for the upliftment of the poor, be they Hindus, Muslims or Christians.

We endorse this appeal.

(All quotations are from: “Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda”, www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info, and have been taken from the booklet: Dattaprasad Dabholkar, “Rationalist, Scientific, Socialist Vivekananda”, www.lokayat.org.in.)
Global Inequality in a Time of Climate Emergency

Tom Athanasiou

Something has changed, as most everyone in the climate movement agrees, and we have plenty of signposts that track the shift, from David Wallace-Well’s 2017 *New York Magazine* piece, *The Uninhabitable Earth*, to last year’s *Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy*, a paper downloaded by the hundreds of thousands. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change made the shift official with its own dramatic contribution, the landmark *Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C*. All of a sudden, the air has become crisper, the view clearer, the danger before us more obvious. Classic climate denialism has lost its legitimacy and stands revealed as just a right-wing scam. And everyone knows it. How could we not? The natural world has given us rainstorms and firestorms as reminders. Innovative new activism has given us the *Green New Deal*, a watershed by any reckoning, and the *Extinction Rebellion* has given us its unforgettable new protest exhortation: “Tell the truth!”

If we had to choose one voice, one single slogan, to represent the pivot we’re now passing through, as Wen Stephenson suggests in the *Nation*, we might well pick the Czech playwright and ex-president Vaclav Havel and his notion of “living in truth.” More of us are choosing to live that life. We’ve become sick of the lies. Even the comforting lies.

So where does this all leave us? Three key points.

First, despair is looming, and for good reason. Take a look at *Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene*, the so-called “Hothouse Earth” paper, or at least know its bottom line: Our environmental “tipping points” have actually become “tipping cascades,” and these cascades, once they really get moving, will amplify each other in ways all but impossible to stop. By the time our global temperatures arrive at 2°C, if indeed they do, we will face a real risk of runaway feedback.

Second, we have the technology, and the money, to save ourselves. Take a look at the ongoing work of *Project Drawdown* or skim *Carbon Tracker’s 2020 Vision* report. Encouragement everywhere, along the lines of “superconducting windmill generators and utility-scale flow batteries.” As for the money, suffice it to say that “we” will have plenty of it, plenty of financial and institutional capacity, once we pry this capacity out of the hands, or rather the tax havens, of the elites.

Third, we have to prepare for the possibility of a proper awakening. We can certainly hope that the more people understand the depth of the danger—the Earth will be fine, but many species will not make it, and our civilisation may not either—the greater will grow people’s frustration, their anger, and their willingness to contemplate transformations appropriately scaled to the danger. But “living in truth,” by itself, cannot be a transition strategy, just a beginning. If we plan on “living in truth,” we had best go all the way.

We stand now in an awkward spot: We know how much trouble we’re in, but we don’t know what we’re going to do about it. More precisely, we don’t have a strategy, or even a positive, attractive transition story that we actually believe in, in the sense of believing we have a transition plan that could actually meet the challenge. We won’t have this believable plan until we recognise the ultimate “truth”: that our climate crisis remains inherently and irreducibly global. Our response must be the same.

Two things will save our civilisation. The green technology revolution, now arriving in force, offers up the first. But we also need sustained and visionary *planetary-scale cooperation*, and such cooperation will only be possible if our climate mobilisation simultaneously mitigates today’s levels of extreme economic inequality. Economic justice at the international level has to be part of our core story.

Inequality amounts to more, we need to realise, than just a problem of poverty. We have fundamentally a problem of wealth. The *Climate Equity Reference Project* is working to clarify this problem, and I’m going to take the liberty here to pull a few charts it has prepared to support the Civil Society Equity Review Coalition, an effort now evaluating the fairness—and unfairness—of the national pledges of action emerging under the *Paris Agreement* signed in 2015.

Consider the “champagne glass” in Chart 1, a figure that represents the income distribution of humanity as a whole. This stacked figure’s ten deciles each represent the income of...
one tenth of our global population, and you’ll quickly notice that this champagne glass doesn’t look like any glass you’d actually want to put to your lips. That’s because our global income distribution stats define a very sharp edge indeed, with the richest 10 percent of humanity—the dark gray decile—receiving 52 percent of all global income and the richest 1 percent and 0.1 percent receiving an outsized share of that total.

In contrast, the poorest half of the world’s people—the five lowest population deciles that define the stem of the glass—receive less than one-tenth of total global income, an amazingly radical stratification that cannot be justified by any even remotely defensible theory of justice.

But step back a second. Why is this discussion about climate crisis talking about income distribution? The first reason: Greenhouse gas emissions, whether calculated for individuals, nations, or income groups, highly correlate with income.

The second: Today’s extreme levels of income stratification—and, even more fundamentally, wealth stratification—have become a global existential danger. Extreme economic inequality turns out to be a social poison that makes it almost impossible for us to mobilise to save ourselves and our civilisation.

Note that, as per the champagne glass in Chart 1, our wealthiest live starkly different lives from our poorest, many of whom (still) survive on less than $2 per day and in so doing generate an almost negligible amount of greenhouse gas emissions.

Between these two extremely rich and poor groups sits what many call the “global middle class,” a term hardly appropriate when applied to the middle of the global income distribution, given the rich-world connotations of comfort and security that come with middle-class status. In fact, most of the people in the so-called “global middle class” rate as extremely poor.

Consider an individual with an income of $20 per day. That income may be ten times higher than an abject poverty threshold of $2 per day, but even at this $20 level almost all household income immediately goes to the daily struggle of meeting basic needs. Fully two-thirds of humanity live on less than $20-per-day, including nearly half of the “middle” 40 percent in our champagne glass.

Disparities in emissions closely parallel disparities in income. Wealthy people overwhelmingly reside within the world’s wealthy countries, and their “luxury emissions”—to use the jargon of the global climate justice movement—support lifestyles that simply cannot, without some extremely hypothetical technological miracle, be shared by all. Clearly, in any fair approach to international cooperation, these wealthy populations, with their luxury emissions, would be treated differently from poorer populations.

We can approach the issues here by taking a different view of the three global income classes defined in the champagne glass above, this time focusing on the nations from where the members of these classes hail. Chart 2 offers that different view, with three pie charts that represent, by their sizes, the share of global income that goes to the top 10 percent, the middle 40 percent, and the bottom 50 percent of the global population distribution.

As you can see from the top pie chart, the majority of the people in the top 10 percent live as citizens of the “old rich” countries, more than half in the United States, Canada, and the European Union, with many of the others from Japan, New Zealand, and Australia. Notably, a good fraction does go to people from China, though even at this very rough level of detail—the global top 10 percent hardly consists of only the truly wealthy—we see far fewer Chinese than Americans and far, far fewer in per-capita terms. (Note: ROW means Rest of World in Chart 2.) Global emissions, the New York Times recently told us, could be cut by a third if humanity’s richest 10
percent cut its use of energy to the same level as affluent, comfortable Europe.” Our globe’s richest 10 percent—the richest 500 million adults—bear responsibility for about 50 percent of all global emissions.

The second pie chart, sized to represent the middle 40 percent of the global income distribution, defines a considerable range of incomes. This middle class contains far more Chinese than does the top decile. It also contains significant numbers of people from the United States and Europe. The crucial point here: At home, many “middle 40 percent” people would be considered poor. But in the global scheme of things they rate as not so very poor, a critical point that helps us think about the justice of rich-world consumption patterns.

The third pie chart’s most notable feature? Its small size. This chart represents half of the world’s people, the poorer half, and the people in it rate as very poor indeed. They receive less than a tenth of global total income. Note, too, that some very poor people do live in the United States, Europe, and other regions of the developed world. But the developed world does not have enough of them to rate a visible slice of the bottom pie chart.

In all this, the single most important takeaway has to be that our “twice divided world”—riven on one axis between the rich and the poor and on another by the North and the South—gives almost everyone good reason to feel confused, angry and afraid. This is no small thing. To face the rigours of emergency climate mobilisation, we need to stand together. Our inequality makes this standing together more difficult. In particular, the dynamics of globalisation as they have unfolded under neoliberal capitalism have pitted the rich-world’s poor against the poor-world’s poor struggling to enter the “global middle class.” The poisonous consequences of this tension have become obvious everywhere.

Then we have the problem of the truly rich, who elude the analysis above. These rich do not all reside in wealthy countries. To be sure, the “old rich” countries do host the vast majority of the rich—12 percent of Americans rest in the global 1 percent, a group with an entry threshold of about a million dollars. But top 1 percenters appear everywhere. Even poor countries like India have a small wealthy stratum, full of deep pockets who share an inherent conflict of interest.

How to sort all this out? One good way: Look at where the money—and the capacity to address the climate crisis—actually sits. Taking this look gives us a nuanced picture that both resembles and refutes the classic model of the post-colonial world and its globe divided between “developed” and “developing” countries. It’s not quite like that anymore.

Zoom in from the global 1 percent to the world’s “ultra-high net worth individuals,” the elite the annual Credit Suisse Global Wealth Report defines as having at least $50 million, and you’ll see that 47 percent of these ultra-rich reside in the United States, 22 percent in Europe, and 11 percent in China. In this distribution, the shape of history remains still clearly visible, but so does the emerging world, which if recent trends continue stands primed to see an income-distribution convergence between China and the United States.

All this weighs heavily on the climate transition, for inequalities in wealth translate directly into inequalities in power. Wealthy elites set frames and agendas and also overbear fragile democracies with their preferences. They engineer trade relations that undermine community resilience around the world, spread disinformation, and sabotage efforts to mobilise at a necessary scale. This power explains a big part of why we’ve arrived at our current reckoning. And, remember, we could easily have worse to come.

Societies under environmental pressure tend to stumble toward collapse when their elites, those who set collective priorities and allocate resources, distance themselves from the realities and afflictions of their population as a whole and come to act so much by the logic of narrow self-interest that they become blind to the larger predicament. We can say the same for a world where rich countries let poor countries fall to
famine and rising seas, blind to the near certainty that, down this road, they will ultimately share the same fate.

If we’re going to stabilise the climate system, we’re going to have to do so within the political-economic maelstrom of our twice-divided world, and we had best give some time to understanding its dynamics. These dynamics, to be sure, go beyond income—race in particular rates a critically important force in human affairs, and so do other dimensions of structural oppression—but it’s fair to say that the forces now buffeting society rest rooted in extreme income inequality.

Unfortunately, we’re not exactly on the road to centering inequality in our thinking. But then again, we’re not on the road to centering any really global view of the climate challenge, and this absolutely must change. Today’s Green New Deal vision, fantastically useful though it may be for foregrounding domestic inequality, does not seem likely to do the same for international inequality.

The US Green New Deal has, thankfully, made a tentative move towards global solidarity, recognising this past February the need to “help other countries achieve a Green New Deal,” though offering nothing substantive to back this up. Minimally, every national campaign needs an international justice plank, because we’re not going to get anywhere near the Paris temperature targets without international sharing and cooperation. And we’re not going to get near those targets either without taking the global justice challenge into proper account, for the simple reason that any meaningfully deep and rapid global climate mobilisation is going to be expensive. We’re going to have to figure out how to pay for it.

I’d like to suggest that we think about Paris, the Green New Deal, and the green technology revolution as building blocks. The question becomes how to put them together. We will clearly need to redirect trillion-dollar investment flows from the “brown” projects that attract them to green projects, and that in turn will mean thinking globally, pumping massive amounts of public money into a Green Climate Fund and other cooperation mechanisms that can animate the Paris system.

In practice, this will mean achieving the first-round pledges of national action, all around the world, even as we push our respective nations—poor nations as well as wealthy nations—to put stronger pledges on the books. Remember the IPCC deadline: We need to be aiming for a global emissions level about 45 percent below the 2010 level by 2030. We’re not going to hit that target with bottom-up action alone.

To meet that target with a properly scaled response, we’ll have to get down to hard and practical questions about making the climate transition fair, globally as well as within wealthy nations like the United States. And that will mean a kind of transformational justice, yet to be fully invented, that takes proper account of both the national rich and the global rich on one side and the national poor and the global poor on the other. Both of these divides could not be more real. Both, taken together, define our real conditions of life.

Our bottom lines? Most people on our planet remain very poor, and the global rich have a lot of money. They also have the power to decide whether we sink or swim. Think about it.

(Tom Athanasiou currently co-directs the Climate Equity Reference Project.)

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Letter to the Election Commission of India

Written by 64 former civil servants, endorsed by 83 veterans, academics and other concerned citizens.

Shri Sunil Arora,
Chief Election Commissioner,
Shri Ashok Lavasa,
Election Commissioner,
Shri Sushil Chandra,
Election Commissioner,
Election Commission of India.

Sirs,

Serious Irregularities in the Conduct of General Elections, 2019

- We are a group of former civil servants that takes up, from time to time, matters of exceptional national interest, seeking to remind our cherished democratic institutions of their responsibility to uphold the lofty ideals of the Constitution.
- We write to you today to draw your attention to the several very troubling and still unexplained issues pertaining to the conduct of the General Elections, 2019, by the Election Commission of India (ECI).
- From time to time, the media has reported on various irregularities in the conduct of the 2019 General
Elections. While we accept that not every media report is accurate or true, the ECI’s non-rebuttal of an untrue or inaccurate story leaves the public to draw its own conclusion: that the ECI has no valid explanation to offer. The mere dismissal of the allegations as baseless, without an explanation as to why they should be so considered, is unsatisfactory. As the custodian of the most precious commodity in a democracy – the people’s mandate – it is your duty to be transparent, and accountable to the Constitution and the people of India.

- The 2019 General Elections appear to have been one of the least free and fair elections that the country has had in the past three decades or so. In the past, despite the efforts of criminal elements, musclemen, and unscrupulous politicians, the persons who graced the ECI did their best to ensure that elections were conducted as freely and fairly as possible. In these General Elections, however, an impression has gathered ground that our democratic process is being subverted and undermined by the very constitutional authority empowered to safeguard its sanctity. It was rare in the past for any serious doubts to be raised about the impartiality, integrity and competence of the ECI. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about the present ECI and the way it has conducted the General Elections of 2019. So blatant have been the acts of omission and commission by the ECI that even former Elections Commissioners and CECs have been compelled, albeit reluctantly, to question the decisions of their successors in office.

- The bias of the Election Commission towards one particular party became evident from the date of announcement of the elections. The announcements of the 2004, 2009 and 2014 Lok Sabha Elections were made by the ECI on February 29, March 1 and March 5 respectively of those years. The announcements of State Assembly elections, due in April-May, also used to be made between March 1 and March 5. But this convention was not followed for the 2019 Lok Sabha Election and the announcement was delayed, without any explanation or justification, till March 10, 2019. This led to the reasonable doubt that the ECI deliberately delayed the announcement to enable Prime Minister Narendra Modi to complete the inauguration blitz of a slew of projects (157 of them) that he had scheduled between February 8 and March 9. Instead of the government adjusting the dates of its inaugural functions to the ECI’s (well known) schedule for announcement of elections, we have here a case of the ECI adjusting itself to the government’s schedule, thereby raising questions about its independence and impartiality.

- The election schedule raised many eyebrows. It was the longest election in the country’s history, and gave room for suspicion that it had openly and unabashedly favoured the ruling party at the Centre. There was no apparent rationale to the number of polling days fixed for different States. In States like Tamil Nadu (39 seats), Kerala (20), Andhra Pradesh (25) and Telangana (17) where the BJP is weak and had no likelihood of winning, the polling was held in a single phase. In States with comparable or fewer Lok Sabha constituencies such as Karnataka (28), Madhya Pradesh (29), Rajasthan (25) and Odisha (21), where the BJP faced tough competition or was likely to gain ground, the polling was scheduled in multiple phases, possibly to give the Prime Minister more time for campaigning. The polling for the Varanasi constituency from where the Prime Minister contested was conveniently slotted in the last phase of polling on May 19, 2019.

- Several reports were published in the media of large scale voter exclusion[1], with some reports suggesting that voters from certain minority groups were the most affected. While we do not believe that these charges were necessarily true, it was incumbent upon the ECI to investigate them and respond promptly. Many voters who had exercised their mandates in earlier elections found their names missing. The ECI’s failure to effectively answer these allegations further tarnished its reputation.

- The blatant flouting of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) by many candidates, in particular the making of hate speeches and communally loaded statements by candidates, primarily of the BJP, was, initially, blithely ignored by the ECI on the plea that it had no powers to take action. For example, Mr. Amit Shah was reported to have said that illegal immigrants would be thrown into the Bay of Bengal[2], a statement which clearly invited action under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and the Representation of People Act. Only when pulled up by the Supreme Court did the ECI suddenly discover its powers, even then exercising them selectively on the small fry and ignoring the more egregious cases of violation by the Prime Minister and the BJP Party President. Even the strongest action that it took, viz.
the curtailing of the campaigning in the last phase in West Bengal, was done in a manner so that the PM’s campaign could be completed before the ban came into effect. Its partisanship confirmed, the approach of the ECI further emboldened the Prime Minister, Mr. Amit Shah and other party representatives.

- The Prime Minister’s blatant misuse of the Pulwama and Balakot issues to whip up nationalistic, or more correctly, jingoistic fervour and channel it in favour of the BJP was another shocking violation of the MCC. The Election Commission strangely did not even issue a show cause notice to the PM for these repeated violations though the incidents were reported by the State Election Commissioners and there was a divide within the ECI itself on whether or not there was a breach of the MCC. The ECI ignored the difference of opinion and merely dismissed the incidents. The dissenting opinions of Commissioner Ashok Lavasa should have been published as is done in the case of the judiciary. In our opinion, Article 19 of the Constitution and the citizens’ right to information have been violated.

- The bias of the ECI was glaringly apparent in the case relating to Mr. Mohammed Mohsin, the IAS officer who was sent to Odisha as a special election observer. Mr. Mohsin was suspended for checking the PM’s helicopter for any non-permissible cargo. According to the ECI, the official had not acted in conformity with the ECI’s instructions of not checking SPG protected persons. Constitutional obligations were trumped by administrative instructions. It was pointed out, even at that time, that similar checks had been carried out on the helicopters of the Odisha CM Mr. Naveen Patnaik and the then Petroleum Minister Mr. Dharmendra Pradhan, with no objections from the dignitaries concerned. However, the ECI could not and did not explain its double standards.

- A serious matter in which the ECI exonerated the government of wrongdoing was the misuse of official machinery. The Niti Aayog had officially written to the various UTs and some districts in the country to provide local information about the area since the PM was likely to visit these places. This was done so that the information could be used in the Prime Minister’s election campaigns. Even though this was a blatant violation of the MCC, the EC merely dismissed the complaint. Why did the ECI treat the MCC in such a cavalier fashion and apply it in so obviously discriminatory a manner? Action was also called for under the Representation of People Act.

- The refusal of the ECI to take note of the many media violations – particularly by the ruling party – caused a great deal of concern to the public. The most blatant violation of this was the opening of a new channel called Namo TV which continuously telecast speeches and events about the Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Namo TV had, strangely, neither obtained permission from the Information and Broadcasting Ministry to go on air nor had it complied with the many regulations necessary to start a new channel. Even though the ECI ordered the channel to be closed, Namo TV continued to telecast almost until the end of the elections. Procrastination, silence and inaction characterized ECI’s responses in so many matters. There were other violations as well: a programme anchored by the actor Akshay Kumar centred on the PM’s unofficial persona, which was telecast by several TV channels while the elections were underway, giving the PM’s campaign an undue edge over those of others; the media attention given to the PM’s meditation in a cave in Kedarnath, even while the last phase of the polling was going on was another such instance. As far as we are aware, none of these expenses have been added to the PM’s electoral expenses.

- In terms of transparency of electoral funding, this election was the most opaque ever, both because of the widespread use of electoral bonds, and also because of the enormous amounts of cash, gold and drugs, amounting to Rs 3456 crores, which were seized during the polls. While the ECI acted strongly in the matter of the seizure of cash in Tamilnadu, cancelling the polling in one Parliamentary constituency, it has not acted as strongly in other cases. Though Rs 1.8 crore was recovered from the Arunachal CM’s convoy, there is no information of what action was taken by the ECI on this clear violation of rule and norm. Where, one might ask, was the level playing field?

- The use of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) for polling has been a subject of much controversy. Despite the ECI’s repeated statements that the EVMs used in India are tamper-proof, doubts on that score have persisted, particularly because the ECI has not been transparent in its responses to various reports. There were widespread reports of a mismatch in the number of
EVMs manufactured by the two authorized PSUs and those in the inventory of the ECI. According to one media report[3], responses to an RTI query have revealed that as many as 20 lakh EVMs that the manufacturers affirm having delivered to the ECI were apparently not in the ECI’s possession. To queries about this huge discrepancy, the ECI’s response[4] has been a bland denial, leaving no-one any the wiser. Complete facts and figures need to be revealed for public scrutiny.

• People’s confidence in the EVMs would have been greater if the ECI had been more cooperative about using the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPATs) in a manner that would confirm the results of the EVMs, but from the beginning the ECI was extremely reluctant to match the number of votes recorded in EVMs with the votes in the VVPAT machines on any significant scale, despite representations by different groups, including political parties. The ECI stated that tallying the votes of 50% of the VVPATs with the EVMs would take about 6 days (even though it is a well-known fact that in the past 100% of paper ballots were counted in 12 – 18 hours). The ECI insisted that the purpose of verification would be served if such tallying was done in only one EVM per Assembly constituency. On the insistence of the Supreme Court, the ECI agreed to increase this number to 5 EVMs per constituency. The ECI’s refusal to listen to, and accept, globally adopted statistical tools to determine the number of VVPATs that need to be counted to rule out any errors, or to lay down the steps that would have to be taken in case of a mismatch between the EVM and VVPAT counts, has left a cloud of confusion in the mind of the electorate.[5]

• Between the last day of polling and Counting Day, there were several reports of unexplained movement of EVMs[6] to and from the strong rooms in various states. These movements have not been satisfactorily explained, and the ECI’s bland denial[7], without explaining exactly which EVMs were being transported, and why, does not inspire trust or confidence.

• The request by a large number of parties to tally the EVM and VVPAT votes at the beginning of Counting Day was also turned down by the ECI without any specific reason. This was a simple request and would have satisfied many of the political parties. In fact, at every stage the ECI has refused to accommodate any request that could bolster the confidence of the electorate that the elections were conducted freely and fairly. Matching of five VVPATs as mandated by the SC was relegated to the end of the counting process – so that few would remain to watch the outcome. The result of this exercise is not quite clear from the media reports. It appears, though, that the mismatch between the number of votes cast, the numbers recorded by the EVMs, and as reported in the VVPATs[8] has been quite numerous – some media reports put the number at affecting more than 370 Lok Sabha Constituencies.[9]

• Reports about the mismatch in EVM, VVPAT and votes cast numbers are being explained away as being insignificant, since in almost all the cases, the victory margin (almost invariably of candidates put up by the BJP or its allies) is far greater than the discrepancy[10]. During the paper ballot days, discrepancies in counting used to be ignored if they were too small to make a difference to the final result. But that logic does not apply to VVPAT-based audit of EVMs. Here, even a small discrepancy between the EVM count and the VVPAT in the chosen sample of EVMs, and a small discrepancy between the EVM count and the votes polled in a polling booth as reported by the Presiding Officer in Form 17C at the end of the poling day are very serious matters and are symptomatic of a greater malaise. While the Returning Officers and even Counting Agents may be taking it lightly due to deficiency in their understanding of an appropriate statistical sample, surely the ECI knows better. Accepting this argument is akin to an accountant saying that in a balance sheet of crores, an un-reconciled few hundred rupees do not matter, and the accounts should be accepted. When we are using electronic systems, even a discrepancy of one vote throws the entire election into doubt.

• A well-known academic recently wrote,”….we can only raise questions on the basis of scattered information available to us. It is not our job as citizens to offer proof of wrong-doing of the highest institutions of the land, when these institutions function in so opaque a manner. It is our job to raise questions about visible anomalies. It is the responsibility of the Election Commission to explain the anomalies.”[11]

• Our Election Commission used to be the envy of the entire world, including developed countries, for its ability to conduct free and fair elections despite the huge logistical
challenges and the hundreds of millions of voters. It is indeed, saddening to witness the process of the demise of that legacy. If it continues, it is bound to strike at the very heart of that founding document the people of India proudly gave themselves – the Constitution of India – and the democratic ethos that is the very basis of the Indian Republic.

• Viewed in totality, there is no doubt that the mandate of 2019 has been thrown into serious doubt. The concerns raised are too central to the well-being of our democracy for the ECI to leave unexplained. In the interests of ensuring that this never happens again, the ECI needs to proactively issue public clarifications in respect of each of these reported irregularities, and put in place steps to prevent such incidents from occurring in future. This is essential to restore the people’s faith in our electoral process.

Yours sincerely,

Signed by:
S.P. Ambrose IAS (Retd.), Mohinderpal Aulakh, G. Balachandhran, Vappala Balachandran, Gopalan Balagopal, Chandrahekhar Balakrishnan, Sharad Behar, Madhu Bhaduri, Pradip Bhattacharya and several other retired senior civil servants.

Endorsed by:
Admiral L.Ramdas, Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat, Lt Gen C.A.Barretto, Lt Gen Vijay Oberoi, Abhay Kumar Dubey, Abhijit Roy, and several other veterans, academics and other concerned citizens.

The Lie Of The Century

Jafar M. Ramini

Well it’s happened. It’s real. Mr Jared Kushner, the son-in-law and Senior Advisor of President Trump has delivered 136 pages of lies, suppositions and conjuring tricks to seduce or compel us Palestinians to accept our fate and surrender our rights. What rights? As far as this document is concerned Palestinians have no rights whatsoever and as for a Palestinian perspective, what is that?

The Palestinians were not even invited to Manama, let alone considered. What about the Israelis? Were they there? Were they invited? On the face of it, no, but in reality they were amply represented. What is Jared Kushner if not the team captain for the Greater Israel Project? After all, he is Jewish, an ardent Zionist, an investor in the illegal settlements in Palestine and an advocate, par excellence, for Israeli survival and supremacy.

The Lie Of The Century, as I call it, is just that. A lie. From beginning to end, every word, every supposition of this long-winded deception is to ensure that the Greater Israel Project will advance unhindered and we, the Palestinians, are to accept the crumbs off the table of our land-lords. Or perish.

But, hang on a minute, how could an occupier who seized our land by brute force be made a legitimate land-lord over us? The answer is simple. In the Trumpian universe all that matters are power and Mammon. Isn’t this what the ‘Deal of The Century’ is all about? American/Israeli power exercised over us Palestinians without mercy? And what about the money? Oh yes, there is money, but it is not American nor Israeli money. It’s Arab money. To be extorted from despotic, Arabic regimes in the Gulf, as per usual. Trump demands and the Arab Regimes of the Gulf and Saudi Arabia oblige. If they don’t, as Mr Trump intimated, their shaky thrones wouldn’t last a week without US protection.

Mr Kushner promised $50 billion in Arab money to be divided between Palestine, Jordan and Egypt. Nowhere in the document was there any mention of Palestinian political rights, the right of return of the Palestinian refugees or even the Israeli occupation of Palestine. All was conveniently kicked into touch because it doesn’t matter, you see. What matters is Israeli survival and supremacy and the continued, rapid march of the Greater Israel Project.

I say ‘rapid march’ because who is to stop it? The Palestinians do not have an army, an airforce, a navy or even a coalition to stop this march. Jordan has already succumbed to American threats and promises of prosperity. The same goes for Egypt. Especially under the hand-picked President Abdul Fatah Alsisi, whose sole purpose is to neuter Egypt and serve as a facilitator for American and Israeli hegemony in our area.

Syria? Western powers, Israel and despotic Arab/Muslim states have made sure that Syria is taken out of the equation by embroiling it in a 7-year long devastating war.

The Gulf States? Saudi Arabia? Instead of stopping this advance of Greater Israel they are facilitating
it by making a frantic rush towards normalisation with Israel and to form a coalition of the willing to combat a perceived threat from another Muslim country, Iran. The honourable exception is the State of Kuwait who refused to attend this farce and reaffirmed its total support of Palestinian rights and aspirations. Let’s look closely at the word, ‘surrender’. Many of you might remember an article I wrote recently entitled, ‘Surrender Or Die’. It didn’t take too long for the Israelis to prove me right. There it is. From the Grand weasel’s mouth, none other than Danny Danon, the Israeli Ambassador to the UN. In an article entitled, ‘What’s Wrong With Palestinian Surrender’, published in the New York Times on June 24th, one day before the Manama ‘Workshop’, he wrote, “Surrender is the recognition that in a contest, staying the course will prove costlier than submission.”

There you have it. To the victor the spoils.

And then comes the other Grand Weasel, Mr Jared Kushner, to deliver the message of surrender to a room full of weasels. All these aforementioned weasels, who have been gnawing at our heels for over a century omitted to consider one vital point. The Palestinian character and pride.

Surrender is not in our character. We’d rather die standing up, defending our rights than exist, kneeling at the feet of our self-appointed land-lords and benefactors. Just in case any of those weasels calling for our surrender might have any interest in what we Palestinians want, here is how Executive Member of the PLO, Dr Hanan Ashrawi, put it:

“First lift the seize of Gaza, stop the Israeli theft of our land, resources and funds, give us our freedom of movement and control over our borders, airspace, territorial waters, etc. Then watch us build a vibrant and prosperous economy as a free and sovereign people.”

Budget Blues for an Economy in Red

Subodh Varma

In February this year, the outgoing Modi government presented an Interim Budget since general elections were imminent. The ruling BJP won a decisive mandate again and so, it will be the same BJP government led by the same prime minister that will present the full Budget on July 5. The only change is that India now has a new finance minister in Nirmala Sitharaman – but that’s unlikely to change anything.

The economy of the country has, however, slowly but surely drifted into a deeper crisis. Some of it is systemic, some accidental. Whether the government has the wherewithal – both in terms of vision as well as resources – to tackle this crisis will become clear in the Budget. Have a look at the looming dark clouds.

Agriculture

The biggest worry at present is the uncertainty of monsoon rains. After four consecutive deficient monsoons (that left parts of the country drought-stricken), the current monsoon too is delayed. This has meant that farmers have postponed sowing, not knowing whether rains will come, and if so, when. In all, about 25% less area has been sowed for the kharif season compared to the normal, which is an average of the previous five seasons.

As can be seen from the table above, derived from the All India Crop Situation Report for the week dated June 28, shortfall in sowing is as much as 70% in pulses, 44% in oilseeds and 41% in cotton. For rice, it is 24%, similar to coarse cereals.

All this can change if the monsoon advances quickly. There is a lot of flexibility for the farmers in sowing times. But the sands are running out fast, the window is closing. Another deficient monsoon and the farmers’ misery will increase exponentially. The government may be banking on giving Rs 6,000 to every farmer (extending the earlier

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<th>Table: Sowing Status for Kharif, 2019</th>
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scheme which was limited to small and marginal farmers), but that is peanuts compared to the immense losses farmers will suffer if the monsoon falters. Remember: 55% of India’s cultivation is still rain-fed, that is, it draws sustenance from monsoon rains, not irrigation.

Industry

The situation is far more serious in the industrial sector. Over the last year, the Index of Industrial Production (IIP) has remained more or less stagnant, as can be seen from the chart 1, derived from official data. What this means is that there is virtually no growth in industrial production across all sectors represented by the composite index. This means that there is no growth in employment.

Now, take a look at the chart 2 which gives the growth in bank credit to the manufacturing sector. This is a measure of how much expansion in productive capacity is taking place, because bank credit is used for that purpose primarily.

There is barely any growth after 2015. Industrialists are not wanting more credit because they don’t see any point in expanding productive capacities. Why? Because there is insufficient demand for their products.

There are several other indicators that confirm this industrial slowdown. Petroleum product consumption has slowed down. Consumption of industrial fuels, including furnace oil, pet coke, bitumen and others, declined by 8.4% and 9.3%, continuing with the weak trend marked since August 2018. Goods movement on Indian Railways, was growing at only 2.9% year on year in May 2019, slower than most months of 2017-18 and 2018-19, according to Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE). Movement of pig iron, steel and cement also has slowed down. Air cargo traffic has slipped into negative territory in April 2019. At ports, commodity traffic increased, but mainly because of an 11% rise in oil imports.

Meanwhile, merchandise trade deficit increased to $30.7 billion in April-May of 2019, up from $28.3 billion in the same period last year. Export earnings grew by just 2.4% in this period compared to 12-13% growth last year, according to CMIE.

Passenger car sales have dropped to a 23-month low, and two-wheeler sales fell for the fifth month consecutively. Commercial vehicles sales declined for the sixth straight month. All of this shows that the industrial sector is in the grips of a crisis.

Employment

The continuing crisis in jobs will only deepen as the economy slows down, and additionally, if the monsoon fails. Unemployment is already steady at 7-8% according to CMIE. There were 404.25 million people employed in India according to the latest estimates from the January-April 2019 CMIE survey data. This means that 1.5 million
One year after a popular insurrection of people at the polls on July 1, 2018, that led to the victory of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) in the Presidential elections in Mexico, he is trying to do his best to rebuild the nation. The challenge is enormous; even though the President is moved by a deep yearning for social justice, he is finding that fundamental change is much more than banishing structural corruption in the federal government, and that to build something new there has to be a dismantling of the old neoliberal and colonial state that sits on very solid foundations.

The past 12 months of AMLO’s presidency can be summarised into 10 keys that allow us to understand a Mexico in the process of transformation, even if it is not as deep or as fast as we would like:

1. Economy at the centre: The economy is the most important key. Guaranteeing the material living conditions of the population must be the main objective of any transformation process. Raising the minimum wage by 16.2% in his first month of governance was a good way to start. The bottom line is the redistribution, even if partial, of wealth via social redistributive programs. If social programs can quickly reach millions of people, as AMLO has proposed, along with progressive labour reform that increases the rights of the working class, Mexico can return to the path of growth and achieve the goal set by AMLO of achieving a 4% increase in GDP by the end of his 6-year term. This formula of achieving growth on the basis of an increase in domestic demand in the short term, and (re) industrialising the country in the medium-long term, has worked with considerable success in several other countries of the Latin American continent where progressive policies are being implemented; even though it frightens the right, this model actually follows Keynes, not Marx.

2. Austerity, by example: Before embarking on implementing an economic agenda to transform and genuinely develop the nation, to set an example with his own praxis, AMLO first took a firm decision of practising republican austerity. He has drastically reduced the thousands of staff employed for presidential security, reduced his own salary and those of other public employees getting very high salaries, sold off the presidential plane, and declared that he would continue to stay in his own home and transformed the lavish presidential residence and compound into a museum.

3. Fighting poverty and violence: These two are actually interconnected, and so the fight against each of them can only be waged together. Central to the implementation of the neoliberal model in Mexico was the ‘shock doctrine’. The consequent poverty created the conditions for the growing influence of criminal gangs and narco-trafficking, which in turn led to the most savage violence that has left Mexico strewn with mass graves. And the remains in these graves have always been those of Mexico’s indigenous communities, of poor brown-skinned people. Social programs should not only aim at allowing the poor and the indigenous communities drowned by neoliberalism to breathe, but should also lay the foundations for freeing the masses from this entrapment of poverty and violence in the medium to long term. That he is serious about healing the wounds of decades of neoliberalism was made clear in one of his first decisions that he took after becoming president – on December 3, he signed a decree to create a special commission to investigate the Ayotzinapa 43 case, in which 43 students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College were kidnapped by the local criminal gangs and killed on September 26, 2014. The appointment of Omar Gómez Trejo as the head of the Special Investigation and Litigation Unit set up to investigate this case...
is particularly promising, given his deep knowledge of the case and his experience in international human rights bodies. With this, AMLO has made clear that the government is serious about tackling organised crime.

4. Criminal economy: Closely accompanying the ‘shock doctrine’ is Mexico’s criminal economy, which includes but has become much bigger than the narco economy, and today represents more than 10% of Mexico’s GDP. The ‘war on drugs’ waged by the previous presidents was actually a sham; it did not touch the criminal economy, which continued to prosper, but on the other hand has left behind a tally of 250,000 dead and 40,000 people missing. Tackling this criminal economy is one of AMLO’s biggest challenges. Among the measures proposed by the president to tackle this are: taking the military off the streets and replacing them with better-trained, better-paid, more professional police; rewriting drug laws to regulate marijuana while pardoning nonviolent drug offenders; providing reparations and support for victims of the drug war; and, ramping up social programs, education, and job alternatives in violent, poor regions. At some point, he will also have to take on the challenge of re-establishing government control over large parts of the country that have virtually been taken over by these criminal gangs.

5. National Guard: A key role in recovering territorial sovereignty is going to be played by the National Guard, a new police force proposed by AMLO. With widespread corruption in the local and state police forces, who often are in collusion with the criminal gangs running riot in the country, setting up a new security force that restores sovereignty and security over large parts of the national territory is fundamental. While seeking to enforce the law, the National Guard must act with a human rights perspective, not repressing social protests, not repressing the migrants who pass through Mexico—no human being is illegal, it is the mafias that transport and traffic migrants that are illegal. Whether he succeeds in setting up such a police force, how it will be deployed, how it will act, will be important issues that determine how successful López Obrador’s government has been at the end of its six-year term.

6. Dealing with Trump: Another of the challenges facing AMLO is negotiating with the whimsical White House tenant. AMLO knows that between now and November 2020, when elections in the USA are due, he is going to be subjected to all kinds of pressures, including political-economic blackmail, from Trump. At some point, he will have to confront Trump, and not give in. For the present, he has chosen a non-confrontationist path to gain time, and so has agreed to send the National Guard to the porous southern border, a decision that has provoked intense debate in Mexico and led to much criticism. One possible way in which AMLO can put counter pressure on the USA is by raising the issue of flow of illegal money and arms from the USA into Mexico: while drug trafficking and human trafficking go in a south-north direction, arms trafficking and money laundering do so in the opposite direction.

7. International Politics: While he has repeated a thousand times that the best foreign policy is a good domestic policy, the role Mexico will play in international politics will be another important key for analysing the AMLO presidency. That he will not shirk from taking a progressive stand is already obvious from the stands being taken by Mexico in the Venezuelan crisis. Mexico has proposed a new four-stage process to achieve peace in Venezuela, that has come to be known as the "Montevideo Mechanism". It has also snubbed the so-called Lima Group that describes the re-election of President Nicolas Maduro as “illegitimate,” preferring instead to maintain good diplomatic relations with the Venezuelan government. Mexico is also hosting meeting of several of the main progressive leaders of Latin America in July this year in Puebla, indicating that it is gearing up to play a central role in the new wave of left and national-popular movement of the continent.

8. Forthcoming Elections in 2021: Legislative elections are scheduled to be held in Mexico in 2021, when voters will elect the 500 deputies to sit in the Chamber of Deputies. AMLO has announced that he will organise a recall referendum on his presidency on the same date as the federal elections, and if that is not possible, just before that. This will enable him to put himself at the centre of the federal elections too, helping his party, Morena, gain control over the legislature.

9. Politicisation of the masses: AMLO is seeking to involve the masses in political debates. He is touring the country regularly, organising face to face meeting
with people, discussing with them his policies and inviting them to voice their opinions and criticisms and point out shortcomings. He responds to questions from journalists every morning. This has helped politicise the country, involve people in voicing opinion on how the government should prioritise its spending, make them debate government policies. This is one important way of deepening democracy. This has led to a sharp jump in his approval ratings to 70%, well above the 53% that voted for him on July 1, 2018.

10. Social and environmental conflicts: One of the biggest weaknesses of the so-called ‘fourth transformation’ taking place in the country is the numerous social and environmental conflicts that are taking place all across Mexico. This is the legacy of the neoliberal governments that have been in power in Mexico for the past several decades. That is why it is necessary that all the big star megaprojects of the AMLO government, from the Dos Bocas refinery to the Mayan Train—that will be passing through an important and fragile ecological corridor—must be implemented with full respect for environmental laws and agreements, together with free, prior and informed consultation with the indigenous peoples who inhabit those territories.

These 10 keys display a cartographic political and social map of the fourth transformation. They show the enormous and deep rooted changes taking place, and also point out some weaknesses and challenges that the new government has to confront as it attempts to advance the fourth transformation. The reason for pointing out the weaknesses is to further the intense debate taking place in Mexico over the changes being ushered in by Lopez Obrador.

It is true that AMLO is not Chavez. If anything, he resembles Lula during the time he was in office, who without excessively touching the interests of the elites, transformed Brazil by lifting 40 million people out of poverty. But AMLO has also promised that in the second half of the six-year period, structural constitutional reforms will be made to expand rights and guarantee social justice. It is to be seen if the new government can successfully implement a progressive fiscal reform to deepen the fourth transformation, getting the rich and those who earn high incomes to pay more taxes so that the enormous poverty and inequality gripping Mexico can be reduced.

[Courtesy: Resumen Latinoamericano, a California (USA) based weekly newsletter that publishes information in solidarity with Latin America and the third world.]

**Four Ways in Which India's Water Blessings Are Turning Into Disasters**

**Himanshu Thakkar**

Blessings are complicated. They come with a lot of attachments. And if you cannot manage them, you could invite disasters.

India is a blessed country in so many ways as far as water endowment is concerned. We are blessed with monsoons, rivers, aquifers, the Himalaya, rich traditional techniques and management systems, to name a few. But the cumulative impact of our mismanagement over the last several decades is now coming out in the form of a many-headed crisis.

Unfortunately, the government treats water management as its exclusive monopoly. To call for a people’s movement for water conservation in such a situation would be disingenuous, to say the least—particularly when the water resources establishment is doing everything against sage advice. For example, the Ken-Betwa river interlinking project, the government’s top priority among such projects, involves cutting down 46 lakh trees in drought-prone Bundelkhand to facilitate the export of water to other areas. Imagine how much water the 46 lakh trees can harvest.

Or consider this other example: Between April 25 and June 12, 2019, the Bhakra, Pong and Ranjit Sagar dams, on the Sutlej, Beas and Ravi rivers respectively, released over two billion cubic metres of water; it being the non-agricultural season, most of this water flowed away to Pakistan. This contradicted the public statements of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the erstwhile Union water resources minister Nitin Gadkari, both of whom had declared that not a drop of water would flow out of India’s share of Indus waters to Pakistan. Even if we leave aside this issue, it is well-known that Punjab and Haryana suffer massive groundwater depletions every year. Then why was the dam water not...
used to recharge groundwater?

This brings us to the following question: what are the key dimensions of India’s water management crisis? We discuss the four most important ones below.

I. The groundwater lifeline

Most of the water India uses today comes from over 30 million wells and tubewells. Irrigation is India’s biggest water need, and over two-thirds of the irrigated area uses groundwater. About 85% of the rural domestic supply and over 55% of the urban and industrial water supply comes from groundwater, and these numbers have only been climbing for at least four decades now. In fact, some estimates show that over 90% of the additional water that India used since about 1980 has come from groundwater. It sounds like an immutable blessing. But that’s not how blessings work.

Data from the Central Ground Water Board shows that in about 70% of the areas, groundwater is being depleted. In fact, in many places, it has been exhausted or is on the verge of exhaustion. Its quality is deteriorating. Warning signs have been visible for decades now, but the government has done little to address the crisis.

In fact, India’s water resources establishment, led by the Big Dam ideologues at the Central Water Commission, has ensured that the government doesn’t even acknowledge that groundwater is India’s water lifeline. That would be the first step. Such an acknowledgement, through the National Water Policy, would mean that India’s water resources policy, plans and programmes can then make and implement plans to preserve this lifeline.

This would need action on four fronts. First, we need to understand where groundwater recharge happens, and protect recharge mechanisms like forests, floodplains, rivers, wetlands and local water bodies. Second, we need to enhance recharge from these mechanisms where possible. Third, we need to create more recharge mechanisms, including reverse borewells. Fourth, and most important, we need to regulate groundwater use.

Groundwater regulation depends upon the its location and contours. Groundwater occurs in aquifers. Aquifers in most places are local, and groundwater use is also local. Ergo, regulation has to start at the local level, enabled by legal, institutional and financial instruments. For cities and industries, this may include pricing mechanisms, with higher price for higher users and an element of cross subsidisation for the poorer people.

Unfortunately, the government has taken no effective action to regulate groundwater. The Central Ground Water Authority, set up under the Supreme Court’s orders in 1996, has been acting like a licensing body rather than a regulating body. Regulation does not mean you pay and exploit. It would mean restricting and stopping wasteful and unjustified water-use activities in critical areas. Regulation should ensure that water withdrawal is within the limits of annual recharge.

II. The degraded catchments

While Chennai’s water scarcity grabbed headlines this summer, few remembered that only in July 2018, all the dams on the Cauvery, the most important river basin of Tamil Nadu, were so full that water had to be released to the already-flooded downstream rivers. The Mullaperiyar dam provided another bounty to Tamil Nadu in August 2018.

When the Cauvery dams were overflowing around July 24, 2018, the southwest monsoon in the basin was actually below normal. What does this phenomenon—of overflowing dams less than halfway through the monsoon, despite the rainfall being below normal, followed by an unprecedented water crisis less than a year later—signify? The answer would be relevant for most river basins in India: it signifies that our catchments have a lower capacity to capture, store and recharge rainwater than before. So rainfall in catchment areas quickly ends up in the rivers and reservoirs, leading to floods during the monsoon but dry riverbeds and water scarcity soon after.

Deforestation, destruction of wetlands and other water bodies, and the declining capacity of the soil to hold moisture, are all contributing to this tragedy. So the way to reverse the scarcity crisis is to take action in all these areas and reverse this decline.

III. The urban water policy vacuum

The urban water footprint is going up in multiple ways, but the urban water sector is operating in a policy vacuum. There are no specific policies, guidelines or regulations to guide the sector. Under the circumstances, the cities don’t harvest rain, don’t recharge the groundwater, don’t reduce transmission and distribution losses, don’t adopt other demand-side
measures, don’t protect their water bodies, and don’t treat and recycle their sewage. Instead, they demand lazy, easy solutions like more and bigger dams, more river interlinking projects and/or massive desalination projects. The government has a Smart City programme but, inexplicably, there is no mention of making the cities water-smart.

As a first step towards correcting this situation, India urgently needs a National Urban Water Policy that will define what a water-smart city is and provide best-practice guidelines for various aspects of the urban water sector.

IV. Outdated water institutions

India’s water institutions were established soon after Independence, though some were older. They operate with an outdated mindset and within an institutional architecture. An overhaul has long been overdue.

That India’s water institutions are plagued by multiple crises is best symbolised by the fact that we don’t even have reliable information about water in India. This is because the Central Water Commission, which heads India’s water institutions, is involved in many functions that are in conflict with each other. We need an independent institution, along the lines of the US Geological Survey, whose principal mandate is to gather all the key water related statistics on a daily basis and promptly place them in the public domain. But such an institute should have no role in water resources development or management.

Similarly, we need a National Rivers Commission to monitor the state of India’s rivers and produce reports and recommendations about what ails these water bodies. Similarly, river-basin organisations will have to be inter-state bodies that develop all the relevant knowledge about the state of the country’s river basins.

***

Prime Minister Modi, in his Mann Ki Baat on June 30, 2019, the first episode in his second term, highlighted the importance of water conservation and then used the 8% figure: “You will be surprised that only 8% of the water received from rains in the entire year is harvested in our country.” Where does that 8% come from? Modi did not elaborate, but India’s annual rainfall is around 4,000 BCM, 8% of which comes to 320 BCM. That is approximately the storage capacity of India’s big dams. If he was referring to this, the mistake he made was that big dams are not rainwater-harvesting options, they are storage options.

Then again, they aren’t the only or best storage options. That award goes to groundwater aquifers, which are benign, naturally gifted, low cost, low impact and efficient. Wetlands, local water bodies and the soil are similarly qualified alternatives. But by mentioning this 8% storage figure, the prime minister is privileging big dams while ignoring all the other storage options. And until our water-resources establishment does not get out of this bias for big dams and big projects, there is little hope that our water blessings will not become disasters.

[Himanshu Thakkar is the coordinator of the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People (SANDRP) and a water expert.]
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When finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman’s Budget speech omitted numbers relating to the government’s overall revenue and expenditure, for both the previous and current years, this was widely commented on. After all, these numbers are the reason for having a Budget speech in the first place—to provide parliament and the general public a quick overview of the state of the Central government’s finances. Her response to this criticism was that all these numbers are available in the supplementary material provided in the Budget documents, so there is no need to go into them in the speech.

But most people do not go through the supplementary material, and that is why finance ministers typically provide a basic summary. But now a more serious reason for this omission has appeared, because it turns out that the numbers provided in the documents—at least as far as the revenue and expenditure of the previous year (2018–19) are concerned—are not just misleading but actually false.

The proof of this comes in the finance ministry’s own Economic Survey of 2018-19. Volume II contains a statistical appendix, in which Table 2.5 on Page A59 provides the receipts and expenditure of the Central government. The last column of this table provides the ‘provisional actuals’—that is to say, the real amounts as per the finance ministry’s own calculations—for the year 2018–19. (Since this Survey was brought out in July, rather than in February or March, it gave ample time for the ministry to record the actual receipts and spending of the fiscal year that ended on March 31, 2019.) These are presumably the numbers emanating from the office of the Comptroller General of Accounts and therefore must be taken to be correct.

The results are devastating, because they reveal massive shortfalls and discrepancies in both receipts and expenditures—which are not reflected in the budget documents. In other words, most of the numbers stated as the “Revised Estimates” for 2018–19 do not tally with the government’s own estimates of actual revenues and expenditure in that year, as shown in the Economic Survey. This is certainly surprising, because the numbers must have come from the
same finance ministry that prepared the Budget documents, so why did they not provide this data in the Budget documents? That aside, the sheer extent of the difference, which is massive, makes the matter all the more alarming.

The biggest discrepancy—and shortfall—is in the tax revenues retained by the Centre, which were actually lower than the revised estimates by a whopping Rs 1,65,176 crore, or as much as 13.5% of the revised estimates of total tax revenues.

This was presumably largely because of the well-known shortfall in Goods and Services Tax collections. The Central government managed this essentially by containing its own spending, so that actual total expenditure was actually lower than the revised estimate by as much as Rs 1,45,813 crore, or 13.4%. In other words, the entire Budget shrank massively, by around 1% of GDP—but none of this is reflected in the budget statements provided to the public!

This has many implications. For one, according to the provisional actual figures of receipts and spending, the fiscal deficit was greater than stated in the revised estimate by as much as Rs 1,45,813 crore, or 13.4%. In other words, the entire Budget shrank massively, by around 1% of GDP—but none of this is reflected in the budget statements provided to the public!

But that is a rather minor matter compared to the more serious issue that if these provisional actual figures are to be believed, then none of the revised estimates for 2018–19 are correct. This has particularly serious implications for the past pattern of spending. Obviously, very significant cuts were made in public expenditure last year in the wake of the decline in tax revenues, which continue to reflect the disastrous GST implementation. But how do we know which items of expenditure were curtailed, and by how much?

Is this not essential for parliament and the general public to know? When a Budget is passed by parliament, the debate and discussion are essentially about allocations—so if the government has unilaterally made severe cuts to particular items of expenditure, these must be brought to public notice. Providing the earlier revised estimates without openly stating the more correct provisional actual figures, is more than just nonchalance or disrespect—it amounts to lying before parliament and the people. How can we trust any numbers coming out of the government if this is the manner in which they choose to hide the truth?

These numbers also cast into serious doubt the revenue projections for the coming year. If the provisional actual figures are accepted, then the proposed increase in revenues in the current budget for 2019–20 are so optimistic as to be completely unrealistic. Thus, total revenues would have to increase by 25.3% in the current year—i.e. by nearly Rs 4,00,000 crore—over what was actually achieved last year. This is not just a tall order considering the expected nominal GDP growth of 12%, it is close to unattainable.

If that does not happen, the government once again will find itself cash-strapped in the middle of the year, and once again there will be a tendency to make severe—and opaque—cuts, and in a manner that is not approved by parliament.

These low tax numbers also point to another issue that has been festering with this government: doubts about the credibility of the GDP figures. According to the new data, total tax revenues increased by only 9.2% last year, that is well below the stated growth of nominal GDP of 11.3%. Since most of the shortfall was due to indirect taxes (especially GST), it is likely that the rate of increase of indirect tax revenue was even lower. Indirect tax collections are generally seen to track nominal GDP, since they reflect turnover. So did tax evasion suddenly increase? Or is it that the many doubts that have been expressed about the GDP numbers are actually quite justified?

Another implication of these shockingly low tax numbers for the previous year is that the revenues accruing to state governments must also have fallen significantly short of their expectation. This has the capacity to play havoc with state finances, since states naturally plan their budgets on the basis of some expected revenues from their share of Central taxes and GST revenues.

The public finances of the country are clearly in a mess—and more importantly, the entire Budget exercise is now open to serious question. The finance ministry must respond at once, and if necessary present a new Budget with properly worked out figures that have some semblance of veracity.

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Spectre of Fascism
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The debate over inequality has become hotter world-wide. While Trump had introduced substantial tax cuts for the rich in 2017, and Britain’s Boris Johnson, the front-runner to succeed Teresa May, has promised to do the same if he becomes Prime Minister, there are strong proposals for taxing the rich which have also been mooted. Bernie Sanders had such a proposal for the US during the time that he was seeking the Presidential nomination of the Democratic Party. And now a group of 18 individuals in the US, including George Soros, each of whom is a billionaire, is asking for a “modest wealth tax” on the fortunes of the top 0.1 percent of the population. They have written a letter to all Presidential candidates asking for such a tax to be introduced. The cynical may say that they are doing so because they expect a higher wealth tax to be imposed anyway in the near future, and want to ensure that it remains modest; but whatever the reason, they too have joined the debate on the side of the proponents of greater equality.

The years of neo-liberalism have seen very substantial increases in income and wealth inequality everywhere in the world, a point that has been emphatically made (without mentioning neo-liberalism) by Thomas Piketty, the French economist. The reasons advanced by Piketty for this phenomenon do not stand scrutiny, and need not detain us here. There is however a very obvious reason for this which he does not discuss. This has to do with the massive worldwide shift of income from wage-earners to surplus-earners because of globalisation.

The current globalisation has entailed much freer flows of capital, including finance, from the advanced capitalist countries to the countries of the Third World, especially in Asia. This has meant that American firms now invest in Third World countries, to take advantage of their comparatively lower wages, for manufacturing products for export to the US itself and to other countries of the world. American workers therefore are now competing against Third World workers, whose wages are close to a subsistence level because of the massive labour reserves that exist in the these countries as a legacy of colonial “deindustrialisation”. While the wage differences between the advanced country and Third World workers do not disappear altogether as a result of this mobility of capital, nonetheless the wages in the advanced countries cease to rise, as the workers there are now exposed to the baneful consequences of the massive Third World labour reserves.

At the same time, these labour reserves do not disappear in the Third World, both because of the rapid rate of growth of labour productivity, and also because of the squeeze on petty production, including peasant agriculture, imposed under globalisation, which causes an exodus of distressed peasants to the towns in search of non-existent employment opportunities. As a result, the wage-restraining effect of the Third World labour reserves now gets generalised beyond their respective economies, to the workers all over the world, even as these labour reserves themselves do not disappear, but on the contrary keep getting replenished.

Hence, wages everywhere cease to increase, even as labour productivity keeps increasing. This is what causes a shift of income distribution from wage-earners to surplus-earners all across the globe, both in the advanced countries and also in the Third World. This shift in income distribution also accentuates wealth inequality. An example will make this last point clear.

Suppose output, say, in the US, is 100, of which 60 accrues as wage-bill, all of which is consumed by the workers, and 40 as surplus, of which 20 is consumed by the capitalists and 20 saved. This 100 is produced with a capital stock of 400. If, because of an income distribution shift, 20 of the wage-bill now accrues to the capitalists, but the workers maintain their consumption at the old level by borrowing (indirectly from the capitalists via the banking system), then the capitalists’ wealth increases from 400 (the capital stock) to 420 (capital stock plus loans to workers). Since the workers wealth was zero to start with, and becomes minus 20 in the new situation, wealth inequality has increased.

This is just one of the factors behind the increase in wealth inequality; and such borrowing-financed workers’ consumption did occur in the US. There were other
factors too, including capital gains, that underlay the growth in wealth inequality. According to a Federal Reserve report, the wealthiest 1 percent of Americans added $21 trillion to their wealth over the last three decades, while the bottom 50 percent saw a reduction in their wealth by $900 billion. Trump has recently discouraged the relocation of activities to the Third World mentioned above, by introducing a set of protectionist measures; but he has also announced tax-cuts, which we mentioned earlier, to compensate the capitalists for whatever losses such protectionism may cause them.

Ironically however, while the debate over inequality has become hotter elsewhere in the world, in India there is hardly any debate at all. The increase in wealth and income inequality here has been phenomenal. According to a study by Piketty and Chancel using income tax data, the share of the top 1 percent in the total national income in 2013–14, the latest year for which they have made the study, was 21.7 percent. This was higher than at any time since 1922 when income tax was introduced in India. In other words, even when there were Maharajahs, income distribution had not been as unequal as it has been of late. The rapidity of the increase in inequality can be gauged from the fact that in 1982, the share of the top 1 percent in national income had been only 6.2 percent, compared to 21.7 percent in 2013–14. This just shows that the dirigiste period had kept wealth inequality in check, while the period of economic “liberalisation” has seen a veritable explosion in inequality.

This is also true of wealth inequality. The top 1 percent of households own as much as almost 60 percent of total wealth at present; and this too has been rising rapidly in the period of economic “liberalisation”. Indeed wealth inequality in India today is higher than even in the US. And yet there is very little noise about this massive growth in wealth and income inequality in the last few years. Even the World Economic Forum, the rich people’s club that meets at Davos every year, has shown its concern about this growth in inequality in the world economy. It sees this increase as a threat to democracy, which is an obvious point though one does not normally expect capitalists to make it.

But in India the Modi government’s proximity to the super-rich, which is camouflaged by an aggressive propagation of Hindutva, keeps both parties, the Modi crowd and the super-rich, happy. And the threat to democracy comes precisely from this alliance between the Hindutva elements and the super-rich.

Even without considering wealth inequality, the renowned Polish Marxist economist Michal Kalecki had shown that wealth taxation was the best way of raising fiscal resources. If say Rs 100 had to be raised, then, between commodity taxation, income taxation, and wealth taxation, he had shown that wealth taxation was the best way of doing so. This is because government expenditure financed by wealth taxation increases employment by at least as much as expenditure financed by profit taxation (commodity taxation increases employment by much less than either of these two forms of taxation); at the same time, wealth taxation does not have any adverse effect on investment decisions, since the rate of return, taking profit after tax as the numerator, does not decline.

Hence, even leaving out all other considerations of wealth inequality such as its harmful effects on democracy, wealth taxation is the best form of financing government expenditure. When we add to it the equality argument, the case for wealth taxation increases several-fold. But capitalists would not allow wealth taxation to be introduced easily, notwithstanding the letter written by the American billionaires. It requires class struggle for wealth taxation to be introduced.

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When Words are Prey: What Demagogues do with Words

Brahma Prakash

On this riverbank, saints or thieves You’ll know as soon as they talk The character deep within Comes out by the road of the mouth

(Kabir, translated by Linda Hess and Sukhvindar Singh)

Words are the Casualty

The 2019 general elections in India will be remembered for the ugly war of words. It was not so much the clash of titans or the movement of contingents but the deployment of words that set this election apart from other elections in the near past. The war was not a poetic duel but an anti-poetic tirade where words became the ultimate sacrifice. While leaders, party workers, media personnel and security forces were camped out on the ground, the real elections were being fought with words. Words created mobs, mobs created words.

It looks odd to talk about words when people are being lynched in the streets. But we need to understand that the assault on words is not isolated from the lynching in the streets. In other words, the assault on words and the assault on life are inseparable acts. Victims have to be branded before they are lynched. Words must be disfigured before people are.

Words create space for communication. But when they are used as curses they eliminate the scope for any reasonable dialogue. Curses have only one form—the monologue. They result from extreme hate. We have seen how leaders like Pragya Thakur began their political careers with curses. She openly said that she had cursed Hemant Karkare. In such acts of hatred, it is not only the opponent who suffers but also the words.

Do words suffer? What happens to them? How have words changed in the last five years? One can observe that the meanings of some words have radically changed. Words like “republic”, “nation” and “democracy” have been twisted beyond recognition. Words and expressions such as “anti-national” and “tukde-tukde gang” were so viciously used in hate speeches that they became venom in the form of words. Words were morphed, misconstrued and robbed of their meaning. Some words have acquired new meanings which negate their very essence. We all know what has happened to beautiful words like faqirs, jogis and sadhus. Terms like vikas (development), mann ki baat (from the heart) and acche din (good days) have met a similar fate. The twisted, negated meanings have also been given a new force. It is through this intensified distortion that the bhakts have crafted a cult of opposition to any form of knowledge.

It is often said that demagogues do things with words—rhetoric, flattery, false claims and even surgical strikes. They do more than that, however. Words are not only means in the hands of demagogues; words are also hunted down by them. Words fall prey to the politics of demagoguery.

Before we move forward, let us see how our saints, poets and philosophers have used words to transform the world or create alternative ones. Often, these worlds did not exist in reality but only in aspiration and imagination. Words were their very soul.

Words of the Poets, Healers and Philosophers

There are many names for “word” in Indian languages: shabda, vak, labz, bani, bol, vachana and several others. These names stand for truth, for promise and for greater evidence. Words have utmost importance in both elite and subaltern communities in India. One can think of shabd-Brahma and Nama-shabda as examples. Though several saints and poets were against texts, they were rarely against words. They saw creation, power and wisdom in words. They regarded words as jiva or life. They took words to be pramana or evidence. Sufis and saints perceived echoes of words pervading the universe through the nada (the unstuck sound). They saw life in words. It is through words that poets created their life-world. They saw words as characters dancing on the canvass. Saint-poets also warned against the use of words for self-praise. Kabir said, “utter only such words which are deprived of all your bodily pride.” The question that needs to be asked is what happens when words become expressions of bodily pride. Do they lose their essence, their vibrancy? Famous balladeer Gaddar from Telangana once told me, “You and I use words
in ways which are different. For you, the academic, words are merely numbers to finish an essay of 1500 words. I see life in every word.”

Words also have supreme significance in the magico-ritual world. Shamans heal through words; magicians strike through words; devotees call upon their gods through words. Words have been so important in the life of the Indian people that one mistaken utterance could work as an annihilating force. Spirits and energies have been thought to be embodied in words. Poets and healers have shown that words can be slain. They can be exterminated, wounded, or emptied of their spirit. The magical shabd-baan (word-arrow) can not only hurt the lover and the enemy, it can also injure words.

Activists and philosophers who dreamt about changing the world used words very carefully. Words were like pearls in their threads. They were stringing words together as they were stringing the broken pieces of life and struggles. It is said about Walter Benjamin that he rarely used words unnecessarily. Marx’s writings interweave life and words so intricately that the reader wonders whether she is reading a text or a life. Sartre’s The Words shows his quest for freedom and truth. Ambedkar’s Annihilation of Caste is not only an attack on the caste system but also an onslaught on the words that underpin that system. For activists and philosophers, words are full of life and action. Words go beyond dreary seminar papers and their word limits. They are compelling statements on life and death. They are powerful. It was the power of words that led to the killing of rationalists and truth-seekers like Kalburgi, Pansare and Lankesh.

**Words of the Demagogue**

While politics is not just about words, words do play a central role. It is the word that imagines the alternative world in the first instance. Martin Luther King’s speech “I have a dream” was first enacted in words before it spilled out into the streets. It was for the word that he was killed. The word is a question of life and death in a conscious society.

Words have been the real captives under the neoconservative and neoliberal regime of Modi. Therefore, whether it happened in reality or not, the surgical strike did happen in the realm of words. It was an operation carried out on words. Thus, under the current regime, not only are democracy, institutions and the constitution at stake, but so also are words. Words become the first victim when sensible and democratic voices are choked. It is the name and the act of naming that first reaches the mobs before the mobs reach the victims.

Coming back to the fundamental question—what a demagogue does with words—I delineate five major tricks that demagogues play with words and which Modi has mastered with resounding success. It is these manoeuvres that make the current war on language such a lethal one.

First, demagogues are adept at extracting words from their established contexts and meanings. They give new colour to words. They cut words from daily life and struggle and transport them to divine, magical and corporate realms. Divyang, meaning “divine body”, and Swachh Bharat, meaning “a clean India”, are some of the best examples of this act. Further, Modi has a knack for creating populist false etymologies using acronyms. He successfully creates nomina sacra (sacred names) through new symbolisms that resonate with a neo-conservative corporate culture. A telling example is Modi’s acronym for the Mars Orbiter Mission—MOM. “I was sure Mom won’t disappoint us,” said Modi after the success of the mission. In one stroke, the idea of the mission, and the ideal of the mother, are stripped of their established implications and fused together to form a conservative propaganda motif. Another instance worth citing is the statement—“Farmers are my TOP priority. TOP stands for Tomato, Onion, Potato.”

The very act of coining the acronym is being showcased here as Modi’s efforts at addressing the interests of farmers. Sadly, however, this TOP cannot be eaten—it is simply an empty and sadistic rhetorical ploy.

Second, when demagogues speak in monologue, the words often serve as nothing but cannon fodder. They shut up any space for dialogue and eliminate the possibility of debate. Demagogues and rabble rousers use poisonous invective to paralyse reasoned argument.

Third, demagogues often perform incantations in the emerging public sphere that would earlier be confined to the domain of ritual and prayer. Today such incantations—chants of “Jai Shri Ram” etc.—are being performed in parliament. When words and phrases become incantation, they are primarily used to charm and fantasise the masses, and to deflect them from reasoned deliberation. Incantations could also be in the nature of curses—maledictions that seek to intimidate the truth. In the act of the curse, the words themselves do not remain unaffected. They are poisoned and drained of their life-energies. They become hunting fields for frenzied mobs.

Fourth, demagogues tend to
be ruthless slayers of words. They throttle words in quite unbelievable ways. If they want to kill the shabda (word) of Kabir, they will invoke Kabir, but in a way that conjures away the essence of everything the saint-poet said. If they want to kill the spirit of Ambedkar’s politics, they will invoke his words in a way that they become unrecognisable. When the demagogue speaks about farmers’ concerns, one can take it for granted that farmers are under attack. The act of invocation becomes a ritual act of sacrifice in which the invoked figure has to be either sacrificed or contained.

Finally, while the very existence and influence of demagogues rests on claims of transforming the system; they are, in reality, afraid of any change that would genuinely serve the people and thus make their posturing redundant. The demagogues zealously guard their public image which they have carefully constructed through words. Words have given them the ability to project a false aura of selflessness and sacrifice. Any challenge to this image-mongering is dreaded by the demagogue. Such a challenge, of course, requires many things. But foremost among them is the task of reclaiming words and their usage from the cynical sway of demagoguery. Our poets, writers and activists would of course have to play a key role in this. They would have to reclaim words not just by restoring and reinventing their worlds of meaning, but also by clearing away the ugly curses and incantations that menace the public sphere today.

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Fake Food, Fake Meat

Vandana Shiva

The ontology and ecology of food

Food is not a commodity, it is not “stuff” put together mechanically and artificially in labs and factories. Food is life. Food holds the contributions of all beings that make the food web, and it holds the potential of maintaining and regenerating the web of life. Food also holds the potential for health and disease, depending on how it was grown and processed. Food is therefore the living currency of the web of life.

As an ancient Upanishad reminds us, “Everything is food, everything is something else’s food.”

Good Food and Real Food are the basis of health.

Bad food, industrial food, fake food is the basis of disease.

Hippocrates said “Let food be thy medicine”. In Ayurveda, India’s ancient science of life, food is called “sarvausadha”, the medicine that cures all disease.

Industrial food systems have reduced food to a commodity, to “stuff” that can then be constituted in the lab. In the process both the planet’s health and our health has been nearly destroyed.

75% of the planetary destruction of soil, water, biodiversity come from industrial agriculture, which also contributes to 75% of food related chronic diseases. It contributes 50% of the reenhouse gas emissions driving Climate Change. Chemical agriculture does not return organic matter and fertility to the soil. Instead it contributes to desertification and land degradation. It also demands more water since it destroys the soil’s natural water-holding capacity. Industrial food systems have destroyed the biodiversity of the planet both through the spread of monocultures and through the use of toxics and poisons—which are killing bees, butterflies, insects, birds, leading to the sixth mass extinction.

Biodiversity-intensive and poison-free agriculture, on the other hand, produces more nutrition per acre while rejuvenating the planet. It shows the path to “Zero Hunger” in times of climate change.

The industrial agriculture and toxic food model has been promoted as the only answer to economic and food security. However, globally, more than 1 billion people are hungry. More than 3 billion suffer from food-related chronic diseases.

Though it uses 75% of the land, yet industrial agriculture based on fossil fuel intensive, chemical intensive monoculture produces only 30% of the food we eat. Meanwhile, small, biodiverse farms using 25% of the land provide 70% of the food. At this rate, if the share of industrial agriculture and industrial food in our diet is increased to 45%, we will have a dead planet. One with with no life and no food.

The mad rush for Fake Food and Fake Meat, ignorant of the diversity of our foods and food cultures, and the role of biodiversity in maintaining the our health, is a recipe for accelerating the destruction of the planet and our health.

GMO soya is unsafe for the environment and the eater
In a recent article *How our commitment to consumers and our planet led us to use GM soy*, Pat Brown, CEO & Founder of Impossible Foods states that:

“We sought the safest and most environmentally responsible option that would allow us to scale our production and provide the Impossible Burger to consumers at a reasonable cost”.

Given the fact that 90% of the monarch butterflies have disappeared due to Roundup Ready Crops, and we are living through what scientists have called an “insectageddon”, using GMO soya is hardly an “environmentally responsible option”.

In writing this, Pat Brown reveals his total ignorance that weeds have evolved resistance to Roundup and have become “superweeds” now requiring more and more lethal herbicides. Bill Gates and DARPA are even calling for the use of gene drives to exterminate amaranth, a sacred and nutritious food in India, because the Palmer Amaranth has become a superweed in the Roundup Ready soya fields of the USA.

At a time when across the world the movement to ban GMOs and Roundup is growing, promoting GMO soya as “fake meat” is misleading the eater both in terms of the ontology of the burger, and on claims of safety.

The “Impossible Burger” based on GMO, Roundup sprayed soya is not a “safe” option. Zen Honeycutt and Moms across America recently announced:

“that the Impossible Burger tested positive for glyphosate. The levels of glyphosate detected in the Impossible Burger by Health Research Institute Laboratories were 11 X higher than the Beyond Meat Burger. The total result (glyphosate and it’s break down AMPA) was 11.3 ppb. Moms Across America also tested the Beyond Meat Burger and the results were 1 ppb.

“We are shocked to find that the Impossible Burger can have up to 11X higher levels of glyphosate residues than the Beyond Meat Burger according to these samples tested. This new product is being marketed as a solution for “healthy” eating, when in fact 11 ppb of glyphosate herbicide consumption can be highly dangerous. Only 0.1 ppb of glyphosate has been shown to destroy gut bacteria, which is where the stronghold of the immune system lies. I am gravely concerned that consumers are being misled to believe the Impossible Burger is healthy.”

Recent court cases have showcased the links of Roundup to cancer. With the build up of liabilities related to cancer cases, the investments in Roundup Ready GMO soya is blindness to the market.

Or the hope that fooling consumers can rescue Bayer/Monsanto.

There is another ontological confusion related to fake food. While claiming to get away from meat, “fake meat” is about selling meat-like products.

Pat Brown declares, “we use genetically engineered yeast to produce heme, the ‘magic’ molecule that makes meat taste like meat—and makes the Impossible Burger the only plant-based product to deliver the delicious explosion of flavor and aroma that meat-eating consumers crave.”

I had thought that the plant based diet was for vegans and vegetarians, not meat lovers.

**Big Food and Big Money is driving the Fake Food Goldrush**

Indeed, the promotion of fake foods seems to have more to do with giving new life to the failing GMO agriculture and the Junk Food Industry, and the threat to it from the rising of consciousness and awareness everywhere that organic, local, fresh food is real food which regenerates the planet and our health. In consequence, investment in “plant based food companies” has soared from near 0 in 2009 to $600m by 2018. And these companies are looking for more.

Pat Brown declares, “If there’s one thing that we know, it’s that when an ancient unimprovable technology counters a better technology that is continuously improvable, it’s just a matter of time before the game is over.” He added, “I think our investors see this as a $3 trillion opportunity.”

This is about profits and control. He, and those jumping on the Fake Food Goldrush, have no discernible knowledge, or consciousness about, or compassion for living beings, the web of life, nor the role of living food in weaving that web.

Their sudden awakening to “plant based diets”, including GMO soya, is an ontological violation of food as a living system that connects us to the ecosystem and other beings, and indicates ignorance of the diversity of cultures that have used a diversity of plants in their diets.

Ecological sciences have been based on the recognition of the interconnections and interrelatedness between humans and nature, between diverse organisms, and within all living systems, including the human body. It has thus evolved as an ecological and a systems science, not a fragmented and reductionist
one. Diets have evolved according to climates and the local biodiversity the climate allows. The biodiversity of the soil, of the plants and our gut microbiome is one continuum. In Indian Civilisation, technologies are tools. Tools need to be assessed on ethical, social and ecological criteria. Tools/technologies have never been viewed as self-referential. They have been assessed in the context of contributing to the wellbeing of all.

Through fake food, evolution, biodiversity, and the web of life is being redefined as an “ancient unimprovable technology”, and displays ignorance of the sophisticated knowledges that have evolved in diverse agricultural and food cultures in diverse climate and ecosystems to sustain and renew the biodiversity, the ecosystems, the health of people and the planet.

The Eat Forum which brought out a report that tried to impose a monoculture diet of chemically grown, hyperindustrially processed food on the world has a partnership through FrESH with the junk food industry, and Big Ag such as Bayer, BASF, Cargill, Pepsico amongst others.

Fake food is thus building on a century and a half of food imperialism and food colonisation of our diverse food knowledges and food cultures.

Big Food and Big Money is behind the Fake Food Industry. Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos are funding startups.

We need to decolonise our food cultures and our minds of Food imperialism

The industrial west has always been arrogant, and ignorant, of the cultures it has colonised. “Fake Food” is just the latest step in a long history of food imperialism.

Soya is a gift of East Asia, where it has been a food for millennia. It was only eaten as fermented food to remove its anti-nutritive factors. But recently, GMO soya has created a soya imperialism, destroying plant diversity. It continues the destruction of the diversity of rich edible oils and plant-based proteins of Indian dals that we have documented.

Women from India’s slums called on me to bring our mustard back when GMO soya oil started to be dumped on India, and local oils and cold press units in villages were made illegal. That is when we started the ‘sarson (mustard) satyagraha’ to defend our healthy cold pressed oils from dumping of hexane-extracted GMO soya oil. Hexane is a neurotoxin.

While Indian peasants knew that pulses fix nitrogen, the west was industrialising agriculture based on synthetic nitrogen which contributes to greenhouse gases, dead zones in the ocean, and dead soils. While we ate a diversity of ‘dals’ in our daily ‘dal roti’, the British colonisers, who had no idea of the richness of the nutrition of pulses, reduced them to animal food. Chana became chick pea, gahat became horse gram, tur became pigeon pea.

We stand at a precipice of a planetary emergency, a health emergency, a crisis of farmers livelihoods. Fake Food will accelerate the rush to collapse. Real food gives us a chance to rejuvenate the earth, our food economies, food sovereignty and food cultures. Through real food we can decolonise our food cultures and our consciousness. We need to remember that food is living and gives us life.

Boycott GMO Impossible Burger. Make tofu. Cook Dal.

(Vandana Shiva is an Indian scholar, environmental activist, food sovereignty advocate, and alter-globalisation author, based in Delhi.)

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(Vandana Shiva is an Indian scholar, environmental activist, food sovereignty advocate, and alter-globalisation author, based in Delhi.)
Talking Sanctions, Endangering Peace

Suvrat Raju

More than a year ago, the US unilaterally abrogated the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and began to squeeze the Iranian economy using sanctions. The latest round of sanctions were announced in June. Iran announced a week later that it had exceeded a limit set by the JCPOA on its stockpile of nuclear fuel.

The US–Iran conflict is often portrayed in the media as one that involves two flawed actors struggling for supremacy on a complex West Asian stage. But a closer look reveals a simpler underlying reality: the Donald Trump administration is using the US’s clout in an old-fashioned attempt to assert the country’s hegemony; Iran is just doing whatever it can to resist US pressure.

The Shah connection

The roots of this dispute can be traced back to 1953, when the Central Intelligence Agency orchestrated a coup to remove Iran’s elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh. After instituting the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the US encouraged him to establish a nuclear programme.

The US built Iran’s first nuclear reactor in 1967. The Shah was clear that his ambitions went beyond nuclear energy, and extended to nuclear weapons. In 1974, he explained that Iran would acquire nuclear weapons “without a doubt, and sooner than one would think.” Nevertheless, the West continued to provide nuclear technology to his government.

After the Shah was toppled in 1979, the new government, under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, cancelled his plans for a large nuclear-energy sector, retaining only those facilities that had already been established. Khomeini also declared that nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) were *haram*—forbidden in Islam. Whatever one may think about Khomeini’s government, his spiritual injunctions were taken very seriously. When Iraq attacked Iran with chemical weapons, with the tacit support of the Ronald Reagan administration, Tehran refrained from responding in kind despite having the requisite technology.

It is possible that during the Iran–Iraq war, some elements within the Iranian establishment started exploring the possibility of developing a nuclear deterrent. Even if this was the case—and the evidence on the matter is far from conclusive—these activities were definitely stopped by 2003. In the same year, Khomeini’s successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, issued an unambiguous fatwa against nuclear weapons.

Soon after invading Iraq on the false pretext that it had WMDs, the US attempted to build a similar narrative around Iran, which had established a modest programme to enrich uranium to fuel its existing reactors. The US alleged that the fuel was intended for a bomb. These allegations were undercut by US intelligence agencies themselves who reported that “in fall 2003 Iran halted . . . nuclear weapons . . . activities”. In 2015, after a multi-year investigation, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) went further, declaring that “activities relevant to . . . a nuclear explosive . . . did not advance beyond feasibility and scientific studies” and, as a “coordinated effort”, were only carried out “prior to the end of 2003”.

In spite of these facts, successive US administrations imposed sanctions on Iran, demanding that it completely halt uranium enrichment. It was only during President Barack Obama’s second term that the US sought a temporary truce, leading to the JCPOA.

The JCPOA recognised Iran’s right to maintain a civilian nuclear programme, but placed significant restrictions on its size and scope for 10 to 15 years. Most importantly, Tehran reiterated that “under no circumstances” would it “seek . . . nuclear weapons.” The IAEA was granted unprecedented powers to inspect Iran’s nuclear activities, and has repeatedly verified Tehran’s compliance.

So, when the Trump administration ceased to abide by the JCPOA last year, this can only be interpreted as a message that the US was not interested in arms control, but rather in initiating a direct conflict with Tehran.

An economy devastated

Over the past year, the US has made threats, mobilised troops and warships, and provoked Tehran by flying military planes dangerously close to its border. However, Washington’s primary strategy has been to use economic measures as a weapon. It has prevented foreign entities from trading with Iran,
devastating the Iranian economy.

India has also been hurt by these policies. Until recently, Iran was one of India’s largest oil suppliers. Even though Iranian oil came with discounts on freight, and favourable terms of payment, the Indian government obeyed Washington’s dictates and stopped purchasing oil from Iran in May.

India’s investments in Iran’s Chabahar port are nominally exempt from US sanctions, but they have been damaged anyway since suppliers are reluctant to deliver equipment. The sanctions have also prevented ONGC Videsh, which discovered the Farzad B gas field off Iran’s coast, from pursuing its investments there.

Further, New Delhi has refused to explore several available strategies that could ameliorate the impact of sanctions. China has maintained some commercial ties with Iran by routing transactions through the Bank of Kunlun. US sanctions on this bank have been ineffective since it is carefully insulated from the US financial system. European countries have attempted to bypass sanctions through a special mechanism called INSTEX.

It is revealing that India has failed to join any of these initiatives or to develop its own solution. A few months ago, Prime Minister Modi boasted that India’s foreign policy had become “fearless, bold and decisive”. Is this fearlessness restricted to India’s interactions with its smaller neighbours, or is his government also willing to stand up to the biggest bully in the room and protect India’s interests from Washington’s destructive policies?

(Suvrat Raju is a physicist and is associated with the Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace.)

Rahul Gandhi Warns of Institutional Take Over of India

Countercurrents Collective

Taking responsibility for the Congress party’s poor performance in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, Rahul Gandhi, on, 3 July, 2019, resigned from the post of the Congress President.

He posted a four-page letter on Twitter, officially announcing his resignation as the Congress President. In this open letter Rahul Gandhi warns of institutional take over of India by the Sangh Parivar.

Full text of the letter:

It is an honour for me to serve the Congress Party, whose values and ideals have served as the lifeblood of our beautiful nation. I owe the country and my organisation a debt of tremendous gratitude and love.

As President of the Congress Party, I am responsible for the loss of the 2019 election. Accountability is critical for the future growth of our party. It is for this reason that I have resigned as Congress President.

Rebuilding the party requires hard decisions and numerous people will have to be made accountable for the failure of 2019. It would be unjust to hold others accountable but ignore my own responsibility as President of the party.

Many of my colleagues suggested that I nominate the next Congress President. While it is important for someone new to lead our party, it would not be correct for me to select that person. Ours is a party with a profound history and heritage, one of struggle and dignity that I deeply respect. It is woven into the fabric of India and I trust the party will make the best decision regarding who can lead us with courage, love and fidelity.

Immediately after resigning, I suggested to my colleagues in the Congress Working Committee that the way forward would be to entrust a group of people with the task of beginning the search for a new President, have empowered them to do so and committed my full support to this process and a smooth transition.

My fight has never been a simple battle for political power. I have no hatred or anger towards the BJP but every living cell in my body instinctively resists their idea of India. This resistance arises because my being is permeated with an Indian idea that is and has always been in direct conflict with theirs. This is not a new battle; it has been waged on our soil for thousands of years. Where they see differences, I see similarity. Where they see hatred, I see love. What they fear, I embrace. This compassionate idea permeates the hearts of millions and millions of my beloved fellow citizens. It is this idea of India that we will now vehemently defend.

The attack on our country and our cherished Constitution that is taking place is designed to destroy the fabric of our nation. In no way, shape or form am I stepping back from this fight. I am a loyal soldier of the Congress party and a devoted son of India and we continue to serve and protect her till my last breath.

We fought a strong and dignified election. Our campaign was one of
brotherhood, tolerance and respect for all of India’s people, religions and communities. I personally fought the Prime Minister, the RSS and the institutions they have captured with all my being. I fought because I love India. And I fought to defend the ideals India was built upon. At times, I stood completely alone and am extremely proud of it. I have learned so much from the spirit and dedication of our workers and party members, men and women who have taught me about love and decency.

A free and fair election requires the neutrality of a court. An election cannot be fair without arbiters—a free press, an independent judiciary, and a transparent election commission that is objective and neutral. Nor can an election be free if one party has a complete monopoly on financial resources.

We didn’t fight a political party in the 2019 election. Rather, we fought the entire machinery of the Indian state, every institution of which was marshalled against the Opposition. It is now crystal clear that our once cherished institutional neutrality no longer exists in India.

The stated objectives of the RSS, the capture of our country’s institutional structure, is now complete. Our democracy has been fundamentally weakened. There is a real danger that from now on, elections will go from being a determinant of India’s future to a mere ritual.

This capture of power will result in unimaginable levels of violence and pain for India. Farmers, unemployed youngsters, women, tribals, Dalits and minorities are going to suffer the most. The impact on our economy and nation’s reputation will be devastating. The Prime Minister’s win does not negate the breadth of corruption allegations against him; no amount of money and propaganda can ever hide the light of the truth.

The Indian nation must unite to reclaim and resuscitate our institutions. The instrument of this resuscitation will be the Congress party.

To achieve this important task, the Congress Party must radically transform itself. Today, the BJP is systematically crushing the voice of the Indian people. It is the duty of the Congress Party to defend these voices. India has never and will never be one voice. It is and always will be a symphony of voices. That is the true essence of Bharat Mata.

Thank you to the thousands of Indians, both at home and abroad who have sent me letters and messages of support. I will, of course, continue to fight for the ideals of the Congress Party with all my strength. I am available to the party whenever they require my services, input or advice. To those who support the Congress ideology, especially our dedicated and beloved karyakarta, I have absolute faith in our future and the utmost love for you.

It is a habit in India that the powerful cling to power, no one sacrifices power. But we will not defeat your opponents without sacrificing the desire for power and fighting a deeper ideological battle. I was born a Congressman, this party has always been with me and is my life’s blood and forever that way it shall remain.

Jai Hind

Rahul Gandhi

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On Honduras

Sara Kozameh

Ten years ago today, we woke up to the startling news that Honduran president Manuel Zelaya had been removed from his home at gunpoint and still in pajamas, forced into exile across the border in Costa Rica, where I was living at the time. The night before, I had finished a report for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature detailing the political, social, economic and environmental state of Honduras, along with that of the other Central American countries. Zelaya had overseen moderate improvements on the social and economic fronts of small macroeconomic consequence, which had made tangible improvements in the lives of poor working class Hondurans. I thought that maybe if I waited a few days, the coup would be reversed and I could avoid having to rewrite my report.

A decade later, US resolve to greenlight and back the coup d’état in Honduras remains one of the most shameful US foreign policy decisions in recent memory.

Since the coup, Hondurans have seen the destruction of their country, their democracy, their livelihoods, their human rights. In its first years
after, the assassination of lawyers, activists and journalists became a near daily occurrence, shielded by the unscrupulous impunity of corrupt state forces and the constant backing of the US government. In the face of all of this, Hondurans mounted an extraordinary resistance movement that could provide valuable lessons for US progressives. Despite the death threats, police intimidation, censorship, kidnappings, massacres, torture and state terror, Hondurans mounted an intense, furious and savvy opposition.

The military—which has received training from the US—responded with more repression; death squads.

In 2017, the US recognised the results of president Juan Orlando Hernández’s re-election, seen as fraudulent by international organisations and widely considered a sham by Hondurans. The US government has spent a decade sending Hondurans the message that their democracy, their humanity, matters not. With political and economic conditions in continual deterioration—and no sign that things might improve—it’s no wonder that protests have again surged. It is no wonder that Honduran families continue to flee the daily social, structural and political violence that has overtaken their country since Zelaya’s forced removal.

In recent months, the Honduran resistance has stepped up its activities, protesting privatisation policies that threaten to dismantle what little health and education benefits they have. The police have, unsurprisingly, opened fire on the university students demanding president Hernández’s resignation. This week, the police shot and murdered 17-year-old Eblin Noel. News like this comes frequently in Honduras.

As the daughter of political activists from Argentina and Chile forced into exile by the brutal—also US-backed—dictatorships, my own history is marked by the ramifications of the South American coups. But the Honduran example was the first time that I saw a similar process unfold in real time. I also saw, with deep frustration, how indifferent the US was to the Honduran coup, its repression, the daily assassinations and the hurtling social situation. The same indifference—or paralysis—that let tens of thousands of atrocities and disappearances in Argentina, Chile, Guatemala continue over several years.

Two months after the coup, I met Zelaya in Washington, D.C., where he was touring congressional offices and lobbying for political support. It was my first week in D.C. and I sat next to him, amateurishly trying to scribble down every word that was said. In the end, the US government did not back down from its position—it was not "a coup". Zelaya would not return.

Solidarity activists in the US have been incessant and dedicated in their advocacy work, they have made important strides in getting the US government to back off of Honduras, and probably saved many lives. But the statements, letters, and policy proposals haven’t been enough. Silence around the human rights abuses committed by the US-backed government continues, and the lack of denunciation by people in the US who should care is deafening. We look back and wonder how we could have let the human rights atrocities in Argentina, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Chile occur and continue. We say Nunca Más, Never Again, but it’s happening in our faces right now. It’s been happening every day for ten years.

Yesterday, police dressed in riot gear entered a high school full of Honduran teenagers kneeling on the ground in a powerful, brave and peaceful protest. On the eve of this abominable anniversary, the Honduran resistance is again taking centre stage, hoping that you will notice.

My reason for penning all these words is that I want to express my profound awe and respect for the Hondurans who have survived ten years of violent, dirty, corrupt, murderous repression and yet maintained an unwavering, courageous resistance, in the process risking their lives—and so many have lost them.

I suppose that I just hope that because it’s an anniversary, people will pay more attention. And that Hondurans—whether in their country, on the border, or in US concentration camps—will prevail.

(Sara Kozameh is doing her Ph.D. in History of Latin America and the Caribbean at New York University.)

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Bob Dylan once said, “Let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late.” February 23rd, 2019, was the day that Juan Guaidó, the self-proclaimed President of Venezuela, had “authorised” “humanitarian aid” to enter Venezuela, an attempt to force the Maduro government, and thus the Venezuelan people, to their knees. With this began an ever-increasing escalation of violence, including several attacks on Venezuela’s electrical grid over the last few weeks, being perpetuated by those who want to destroy Venezuela. But let me be clear: the Venezuelan poor are resilient, and any change will be on their terms. Most importantly, Venezuelan politics is collective, and there is deep solidarity between communities along with an abiding interest in building a different form of politics. Without understanding this collective politics, one cannot really understand what is happening in Venezuela.

While in Venezuela doing field work in July 2018, I noted in my conversations with many Venezuelans the consistent insistence that Venezuela must be respected. A primary feature of Venezuelan life is that politics is not only discussed but is everywhere, and as such, many Venezuelans could teach graduate courses in political science. This is well exemplified in a recent news item on the Real News Network in which a woman on the street, clutching a well-worn copy of the constitution, says to the interviewer, “If Juan Guaidó needs a constant reminder”, she “will be happy with her fellow citizens to read him the constitution every day”. An abiding factor of everyday life in Venezuela is the importance of the country’s constitution. A realisation of this helps us understand something essential: the gravity of politics for Venezuelans. This can be seen in the ease with which poor Venezuelans viscerally, expressly and collectively are directly involved with politics. It was not always thus.

### Pacted Political System

Early in the twentieth century, oil was found in Venezuela. Soon Venezuela’s elites became rich beyond imagination. As economic polarisation widened, the rural and urban people began to organise, strikes and other political upheavals spread across the country. In 1958, the two dominant political parties in the country, the Democratic Action and Social Christian Party, entered into pact to alternatively share power, and thus together monopolise power. They were later supported by the Catholic Church. For the next four decades, they ran the country for the exclusive benefit of the Venezuelan oligarchy, to the exclusion of the people.

After a decade of pacted democracy, in the 1970s, the Venezuelan state—by now flush with oil money—started a few social welfare programs. While it provided relief to some sections of Venezuelans, poverty persisted. Then in the early 1980s, the State began implementing neoliberal economic policies, and as a part of that, began cutting back on the limited welfare programs, thus shutting off the small flow of oil money to the poor. Consequently, poverty in Venezuela grew to 62 per cent, and extreme poverty to 30 per cent.

In the 1989 presidential elections, the Venezuelans voted Carlos Andres Perez to power. He had come to power promising to implement a populist anti-neoliberal programme. However, just weeks after his inauguration, Venezuelans learned that Perez intended to take a loan from the IMF, integrate the state even closer with global capital, and impose yet more austerity programmes. In response, on February 27, 1989, a series of bus and food riots broke out, that lasted almost a week. This revolt throughout Venezuela by the poor against the state and society is known as the Caracazo (means the explosion of Caracas). Perez called in the military to quell the revolt. It brutally suppressed the protests, killing more than 2000 people in the process. Even though the State succeeded in suppressing the Caracazo, after that, the elites found it difficult to govern Venezuela as before.

The poor, the starving, the informal sector workers, the underemployed and the unemployed, the farmers, the indigenous people, the differently abled, LGBTQ, the students and youth, the seniors, the women – including both those who were housewives and those who were working outside their homes and simultaneously looking after the housework, the marginalised,
all continued to come down from the slums to the city centres and continued their protests, which took place on an almost daily basis. Over the next decade, the number of protests grew to almost 1000 a year, from the pre-1989 average of 200 a year, signifying that there were almost three protests every day during this period. With the State intensifying its repression, in 1992, a colonel in the Venezuelan army, Hugo Chávez Frias, organised a coup to end the repression. His effort failed, following which he openly took responsibility for it.

Cementing the Revolution

Chavez came from a poor, Afro-Indigenous background. He was aware that the marginalised had to the major force in any major project geared towards their emancipation from poverty.

After serving some time in jail, Chávez ran for president in the 1998 elections. He won the elections by a landslide, winning 56% of the vote. With his win, the revolution, that had begun with the Caracazo, entered a new stage. Chavez took steps to restructure the State, and launched several social programs to support the most marginalised sections of the people. Despite enormous resistance from the Venezuelan elites, Chavez managed to advance the revolution. In this, he found great support from the people, who found in him a friend, a teacher, a comrade. After his death, the poor have continued their fight, voicing the slogan, ‘the soul of Chavez is alive in all of us’.

President Maduro is now in his second term as President. He has continued the policies of Chavez. In contrast to most countries around the world where the implementation of neoliberal policies has led to a drastic fall in living standards of the people, in Venezuela, in the 20 years since Chavez first came to power, the poor have seen great increase in access to good quality healthcare, education and housing for all, leading to enormous advances in general well-being for all Venezuelans, especially the poor. The struggle to implement these policies has led to a huge increase in the political consciousness of the people, and the people in Venezuela now are imbued with the sense that the State must provide for its citizens. The people are also aware, despite the intense misinformation campaign being waged by the Venezuelan elites backed by international capital, that the current economic and political crises in the country are not the result of Venezuelan state policies. The people are fully aware of the fact that while monetary inflation to some extent is the indirect result of state policies, the crisis is a direct result of hoarding and speculation being indulged in by the Venezuelan capitalists as well as the sanctions and blockades imposed on Venezuela by countries such as Canada and the USA.

The economic and political crises engineered by global capital has not affected the Venezuelan government’s social programs, which have continued to expand, including free or low-income housing, universal healthcare, public and universal education (including the distribution of free tablets or computers to all children), subsidised gas, and the provision of basic food stuffs to all who need it. When I was there in July 2018, because the cost to print urban public transport tickets in Caracas was more expensive than the value of the ticket, public transport was free. It is another matter that the opposition continues to accuse Maduro of “buying votes” via these programs.

The poor have been the biggest beneficiaries of the Venezuelan government’s policies. Even though in today’s age of neoliberal austerity, the social welfare policies being implemented in Venezuela are in themselves revolutionary, what is more important and what constitutes Venezuela’s real strength is the fact of community control of this revolution, for it is the people who control the implementation of these policies. As a part of the philosophy of Chavismo, many communities have organised themselves into organisations such as community councils, missions, and various other forms of assemblies. The government of course has promoted and aided the formation of these bodies, including framing rules such as that a community council needs to be constituted of at least two hundred families (less in rural and indigenous areas), and that a certain minimum number of members, that is, the quorum, must be present for the meeting to take place, etc. It also provides funds to these community organisations, depending upon the various social services they provide, as well to help community production. While the government provides this support, these organisations are run by the communities themselves, and they have done so for the past two decades. Presently, tens of thousands of such community organisations exist throughout all of Venezuela.

There has also been an exponential growth in communes throughout Venezuela. The communes are a further development of the communal councils; in areas where several community councils
have come to exist, they have taken the initiative to come together to form (constituting of thousands of members in the cities, less in the rural areas). In the cities, the communes have come to constitute of as many as 20,000 members in each. These institutional structures, and the initiative and cooperation of the people in forming them, reveal the depth of the change that has taken place in Venezuela during the last two decades.

This is the essence of Chavismo, the revolutionary practice of the masses as they build up their struggle against all forms of domination and build alternate organisational structures to consolidate their democratic control over economy and society. The changes taking place in Venezuela are very far-reaching, such changes have rarely taken place earlier in human history. For instance, another notable feature of Chavismo is that it is consciously socialist-feminist. It seeks to restore the dignity of all the communities that had been marginalised in the past, including the women and the indigenous people, and bring about a unity of the people based on genuine egalitarianism.

Of course, Venezuela remains a capitalist, colonial, racist and male chauvinist country. It continues to be a embedded in the global capitalist–imperialist world. The Venezuelan state is a state with all its associate dangers. But at the same time, it must also be noted that the Venezuelan state is not supporting counter-revolution. Even though it is a residual capitalist state, against which the masses constantly battle for their gains, it is not a state that wages war against the masses. Although new elites have emerged, and create problems for the revolution, neither they nor the old elites have control over the state. The poor are the fulcrum in any society in which they exist; in Venezuela, they have become the fulcrum of politics too, it is their graviton pull that explains politics in Venezuela, where they have begun the long and slow process of ending this blot upon humanity.

**Elites Try for a Comeback**

Having lost their control over power in Venezuela, following Chávez’s death in 2013 and a subsequent fall of oil prices, the old elites saw an opportunity to reassert themselves. They attempted to create a storm of discontent by launching a fierce economic war against their fellow citizens. But their efforts to have miserably failed, the masses have refused to abandon Chavismo.

World leaders as “diverse” as Trudeau, Harper, Martin, and Chrétien, to Bush, Obama, and Trump, and several other leaders of the European Union and Latin America also hate the revolution in Venezuela and have sided with the imperialists to end the Bolivarian revolution for many reasons, including wanting to suppress the participation and control exercised by the Venezuelan people over themselves. The fact that Venezuela is rich in natural resources such as petroleum, natural gas, gold, bauxite, iron ore and diamonds and they now no longer have control over it adds to their frustration with the revolution. These “leaders” have contributed to the economic war by imposing ever increasing sanctions and blocking imports of medicines, food and other essential goods—a war that has had quite a violent outcome against a sovereign people.

One consequence is the high inflation in Venezuela. This is entirely because of the economic war waged against the people by global capital; they are using their still considerable control over production and distribution in Venezuela and the imperialist blockades to “make the economy scream”. But the Venezuelans have come with up several creative solutions to fight the artificial shortages. One example is the growth over the last decade of urban agriculture.

The people continue to be loyal to the loyal to the revolution. This is evidenced in the outcomes of the last several elections. In both 2014 and in 2016–2017, the opposition held increasingly violent protests. It also succeeded in winning the December 2015 elections to the National Assembly (AN, total 167 seats), winning 109 seats and receiving almost 8 million votes in contrast to the Chavista parties who received almost 6 million votes and won only 55 seats.

After winning control of the National Assembly, the opposition intensified its violent protests. In response, the government called for elections to a new constituent assembly, invoking provisions of the constitution. Despite the opposition’s call for a boycott, more than 8 million people voted in the elections held on July 30 2017, clearly implying that a majority of the people did not agree with the tactics of the opposition. The new constituent assembly (National Constituent Assembly, ANC) has 545 seats, of which nearly two-thirds were elected by municipal citizens and the remaining one-third were elected by members
of various social sectors such as trade unions, indigenous people, communal councils and farmers. With the overwhelming majority of the people refusing to side with the opposition, the latter was in complete disarray, and social peace returned to the country for the next two years, though the brutality of the economic war continued. It is only in 2019 that the opposition has returned to its violent ways. The persistent violence of the opposition to the revolution is clear, and the rejection of such violence by the majority of Venezuelan society is also obvious.

Since the 2017 elections of the ANC, the Chavistas have made three more electoral gains. They have won the majority of governorships (October 2017) and city councillorships (December 2018), in the process seizing control of many opposition strongholds. Maduro also won the May 2018 presidential elections with a landslide. Despite the opposition’s call for a boycott, more than six million people voted for him, which was a huge four million more than his closest rival, and indicating that a majority of the people did not agree with the opposition’s call.

New elections to the National Assembly are scheduled for the next year. The NA is a remnant of the old state, and is a reminder of the contradictions gripping Venezuelan society. The poor are waging a war on both capitalism and the capitalist state in an attempt to replace it by a communal state, and they know that it is only through the current Maduro / Chavista government that they can achieve their victory. And so they support Maduro as President, while demanding a change in policies when they do not agree.

Clearly, ever since Chavez won his first election in 1998, the Venezuelan elites have become increasingly isolated. In 2019, they launched a fresh initiative to bring down the Maduro government and thus overthrow the Bolivarian revolution. However, their gambit of declaring a new ‘President’ in Guaido and his Trojan horse ploy of “humanitarian aid” backed by the USA and Canada has not culminated in the desired end. The opposition had been hoping that it would lead to intense violence on the streets, forcing Maduro to resign his Presidency, but nothing of the sort happened, Guaido’s coup completely failed. This failure is due to the refusal of the masses to support the opposition, and without their support, the opposition cannot hope to bring about any change in Venezuela. Tensions of course remain high, with Guaido and other opposition leaders calling upon the US and other imperialist powers to invade Venezuela and instal them in power, but this only reveals the illegitimacy of the opposition.

The government, having consistently renounced violence, has always declared its willingness to enter into direct talks with the opposition, if it too renounces violence. However, the elites are reluctant to enter into talks, for they know that without violence they are unlikely to prevail. The elites know that for the majority of Venezuelans, the opposition is worthless and the elites themselves are superfluous.

Concluding Thoughts

So, what can we Canadians do? Despite an inhumane blockade enacted over the past four years, the Venezuelan poor continue to receive greater benefits from their government than, for example, the benefits Canadians have ever received from their government. Therefore, if democracy means what exists in Venezuela, where the poor are the government, then what exists in the rest of the world is obviously not democracy. Thus, to support Venezuela is to fight for a better world, a world where the poor are the government. Let us fight against the neoliberal restructuring of Canada, let us resist the manufactured “common-sense” of austerity and all the other accompanying horrors of early twenty-first century capitalist imperialist states—that is how we can support Venezuela.

As stated at the beginning of this article, in Venezuela, it is oft repeated that “Venezuela must be respected”. This underlies the reason why Venezuelans refuse to surrender and continue to resist the aggressions by the opposition and other countries. Venezuelans have taken to heart the lessons of 1973 Chile, and both the military and the Venezuelan people will defend themselves to the last human being if attacked. To conclude, whilst it faces many challenges, Venezuela remains the place where human possibilities have been flourishing. There is much that we can learn from them. Venezuelan resistance to neoliberalism is a stellar example for us all. Their implementation of direct democracy must be protected and respected.

(Jeremiah Gaster is a Canadian political theorist and a comparativist.)
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“We are, what we repeatedly do, Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

Aristotle

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Economic Survey 2018-19: Prescriptions do not follow the Analysis

Arun Kumar

An Economic Survey is a document that surveys the economy in the financial year just past. So, it lists the issues confronting the economy and gives prescriptions for how to tackle these problems. Usually the solutions to the problems are presented in the Budget since resolution of problems requires allocation of resources which can only be done in a Budget. But most of the time the Budget does not follow the prescriptions in the Economic Survey. It is likely that this situation will not change this year as well.

The reason is, as the Economic Survey lists, the economy is confronting a deep slowdown with the rate of growth falling quarter on quarter and the rate of investment is not picking up, especially the private investment. It flags employment, situation of agriculture and MSME sector as major problems. These are the obvious ones and are also not new issues since these have been flagged by this author and subsequently by many other analysts in the last more than two years. What is new is that the government was in denial about many of these issues but the Economic Survey has finally admitted the problems and made those official.

If one is in denial, then one also does not solve the problems and that is what has been happening in the Indian economy. For instance, in the last year’s Budget a high rate of growth was assumed so that the tax revenues were projected to rise strongly. Since the rate of growth turned out to be less, revenue collection was short and that made the Fiscal Deficit to rise. So, to contain it at the level of 3.4 per cent, essential expenditures were cut. This aggravated the demand problem further and slowed down the economy. Similarly, in the Interim Budget, the revenues were projected to grow strongly based on a high rate of growth. Now it is clear that this was an incorrect assumption and revenues will not rise as projected. This would throw the budgetary calculus off the mark. So the extra expenditures on Kisan Scheme, pension for the unorganised workers and the tax concession for the lower middle class will either not be fully funded or other essential expenditures will be cut or the fiscal deficit will rise.

The Economic Survey needed to throw light on the current controversy about data, whether it is growth of the GDP or the level of unemployment. If one does not
base the Budget calculation on the current growth figures then again the budgetary calculus would go off. Credibility of Indian statistics has been severely damaged in the last one year because of the government being in a denial mode. It denied whatever it found to be politically inconvenient.

So, the employment data from PLFS was denied and the government went to the extent of saying there is no good data on employment. It had high hopes from the data on Mudra Loans but it refused to release it in February when the data became available. As this author pointed out, if good data on employment is not available, then the GDP data, which depends on employment data, will also be suspect. So, after the elections the PLFS data was released but the Mudra data has not yet been released. The data on farmers’ suicide collected by the Police Crime Bureau has not been released after 2016.

It was important for the Economic Survey to restore the credibility of the Indian data but this has not happened since a proper analysis is not presented. Further, the oft-repeated target of almost doubling India’s GDP to $5 trillion in the next five years is now again repeated. When it is said in dollar terms it means the real GDP, and not the nominal GDP, is to be doubled. The nominal term does not make sense since one can then achieve the target by creating inflation in the economy. Further, if the GDP is doubled in nominal terms, the rupee would devalue against the dollar and the goal of $5 trillion would not be achieved.

If it is accepted that the economy has to almost double in size in five years, it would imply an average rate of real growth of about 11.5 per cent per annum. Since one is starting on a base of 5.8 per cent this quarter and a likely lower growth rate next quarter, to achieve an average growth rate of 11.5 per cent over the next five years in the last quarters, the rate of growth would have to turn out to be about 17 per cent—an impossible task. Even achieving a 10 per cent real growth is difficult in the present circumstances.

The Economic Survey correctly identifies the key economic problem as a demand problem and therefore it talks of a proper minimum wage for workers. It talks of raising investment in the economy and so on. It also correctly argues that the savings rate has to go up which it will if incomes rise and the rate of growth goes up. But it does not follow through with the argument of demand shortfall and slips into suggesting solutions based on supply side and structural reforms.

It talks of incentivising the corporate sector and land and labour reforms among other things. It also talks of the reform of the financial sector which has faced a big crisis since the NPAs of the banks have been properly identified after 2015. An even bigger crisis erupted last year when the IL&FS failed, and now other NBFCs, like Dewan Housing Finance Company, are also defaulting on their loans.

But it needs to be remembered that these structural policies have little to do with the Budget and could be announced independent of the Budget. Only any direct subsidy to the banks or their increased capitalisation (recapitalisation) need be in the Budget. Labour in the unorganised sector of the economy. As this author has been pointing out, it is not just an implementation issue that confronts the GST. An alternative GST is required to give a boost to the unorganised sector of the economy.

The Survey also talks of stimulating exports and lowering the cost of capital by lowering the interest rates. The RBI has cut rates twice with little stimulus to the economy due to low capacity utilisation. Exports are uncertain given the global uncertainty due to actions of Mr Trump—trade war, sanctions against Venezuela and Iran, etc. Hence this cannot be a solution to the current problems.

The supply side and structural reforms will take a long time to have an effect on demand, if at all. The need at present is to raise demand in the short run. Then investment will go up as capacity utilisation rises in the economy. So, a stimulus is needed. Even if the fiscal deficit rises by half a per cent it is not going to lead to inflation since there is spare capacity and foodstocks.

In brief, while the Survey admits the issues confronting the economy, it does not follow through with the appropriate solutions to these problems.

(The author, an eminent economist, is the Malcolm Adiseshiah Chair Professor, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi.)
Gujarat Probably Shows What ‘Hindu Rashtra’ Will Mean for Dalits

Subhash Gatade

When I was born, I was not a child
I was a dream, a dream of revolt
that my mother, oppressed for
thousands of years,
dreamt.

Still it is untouched in my eyes
Covered with wrinkles of thousand
years, her face
her eyes, two lakes overflowing with
tears
have watered my body.

– Sahil Parmar
(Noted Gujarati Poet)

‘You are Welcome to Enter . . . Village of Hindu Rashtra’!

It was around two decades ago that headlines in a few national newspapers reported the ‘arrival’ of Hindu Rashtra in parts of Gujarat. A few inquisitive journalists had even displayed photographs detailing the nascent phenomenon then.

The shock generated by the news died down in a short while.

Hardly anybody then could have had a premonition that it won’t take much time for the idea of Hindu Rashtra to gain wider acceptability across India with a commonsense gaining ground, rather getting consolidated, where religious minorities were increasingly understood as ‘the other’.

Can it be said that the recent spate of attacks on Dalits—leading to at least three deaths in the past one month in the same state—coupled with growing instances of life of insecurity for many concerning their lives or their continued deprivation by the dominant castes, is an indicator of the fact that the unfolding project of Hindu Rashtra has entered a new phase where Dalits are being construed as the ‘new other’, one who could wreck the project of ‘Hindu Unity’ from within.

Perhaps it is too early to draw any such conclusion, but the portents are there for everyone to see.

We should not forget that time and again, Hindutva ideologues have demonstrated their tremendous fascination towards Manusmriti, which ordains sub-human existence for Dalits. Remember that Golwalkar, the second supremo of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), had opposed the making of the Constitution by espousing the cause of Manusmriti and had demanded that it be made independent India’s constitution. Organiser, the organ of the RSS, had then complained:

But in our constitution there is no mention of the unique constitutional developments in ancient Bharat. Manu’s laws were written long before Lycurgus of Sparta or Solon of Persia. To this day laws as enunciated in the Manusmriti excite the admiration of the world and elicit spontaneous obedience and conformity. But to our constitutional pundits that means nothing. (Organiser, November 30, 1949, p.3.)

One of the most shocking incidents in this targeting of Dalits happens to be the killing of Manji Solanki, deputy sarpanch of village Jalila from Botad district, by suspected dominant caste people from his own village. In fact, Manji, who had faced deadly attacks at least four times in the past few years, had applied to the police for security and his application was pending with them for months together.

A purported video clip of the last moments of Manji is disturbing to say the least. In the clip, he is not only naming the persons who attacked him but also narrating how the perpetrators rammed their four-wheeler on his two-wheeler and beat him with lathis and pipes. Thousands of Dalits from Gujarat and Maharashtra had recently gathered at Manji’s village to demand justice for him.

Less than a month before Manji’s murder, 19-year-old Rajesh Sondharva, a resident of Manekwada village in Rajkot district, who was fighting for justice in a criminal case involving the murder of his father, late Nanjibhai Meghabhai Sondharva, a Dalit activist, was thrashed to death by dominant caste people.

Anyone who looks closely at these killings or instances of dispossession or the life of insecurity faced by Dalits—who number less than 7% of the state’s population—can discern a common thread in them, which relates to their growing assertion for their constitutional rights and the vengeance with which it is opposed by the ‘upper castes’. The killing of Manji Solanki, whose wife was the sarpanch (head) of the village, demonstrates that it does not even matter even if one’s political affiliations lie with the ruling dispensation itself.

It was only last year that Frontline magazine had shared details of
'Cases of Violence against Dalits' in the state during the last few years, which had gone largely unnoticed. The three representative cases from the year 2018 tell us about how a 21-year-old’s hobby of riding a horse led to his killing (Bhavnagar), how another young Dalit’s efforts to unearth corruption by resorting to the Right to Information Act led to his being hacked to death (Rajkot district) and how a former revenue official’s attempts to get fellow Dalits ownership of their land and the unnecessary delays by the revenue department led him to immolate himself as a mark of protest (Patan district).

Less than three years ago, Gujarat was witness to a historic movement of Dalits and other democratic forces in the aftermath of the Una flogging incident, when cow vigilantes had brutally attacked a family of Dalits for skinning dead cows.

Jignesh Mevani, the radical leader of the historic Una movement, had then shared a few details of Dalit lives in the aftermath of the movement:

- there are thousands of cases of atrocities against Dalits every year
- atrocities continued to rise during Narendra Modi’s chiefministership which lasted for 13 years
- there are more than 55,000 Dalits who are still engaged in scavenging
- 1 lakh sanitation workers are still not getting minimum wages
- Dalits in 119 villages in Gujarat are living under police protection
- the rate of conviction in cases of Dalit atrocities is merely 3%.

After remaining silent for long, Prime Minister Modi had then said addressing the perpetrators, “Don’t beat my Dalit brothers, hit me if you want.” It does not need underlining that there has been no change in the situation, rather it has worsened.

It is still a continuation of lives of deprivation and discrimination.

What is the way out for Dalits, so that they can live a life of dignity and freedom?

It was only last month when some marriage processions of Dalits in villages in the northern part of the state came under attack by dominant caste people. It was alleged by activists that the government had turned into a "mute spectator" and miserably failed to "ensure the safety of members of the community". Activists had even underlined that while the "situation is so serious in the state that Dalits are unable to take out marriage processions", the Chief Minister has not uttered a single word on this discrimination.

According to Vijay Rupani, Chief Minister of Gujarat, there is a need to inculcate Samajik Samrasta in society to ameliorate the situation. No doubt, the idea sounds good, but it basically tries to sanitise the essentially hierarchical situation in society which has even got divine sanction.

The question that needs to be asked is whether mere sermonising about Samajik Samrasta (social harmony) would put an end to an age-old discrimination that has received modern sanction?

First, one needs to acknowledge that contradictions exists and what one calls the upper castes or dominant castes have consistently refused to allow a life of dignity to Dalits and other discriminated sections.

There is nothing new in the refusal to see the fissures existing in Indian society. One needs to recall the during the period of Modi’s chiefministership of Gujarat, a government-sponsored report titled, Impact of Caste Discrimination and Distinctions on Equal Opportunities: A Study of Gujarat had even called caste discrimination a matter of “perceptions”.

In his blog 'True Lies', senior journalist Rajiv Shah had then pointed out in a detailed critique that this report was a governmental response to an exhaustive study titled, Understanding Untouchability done by an Ahmedabad-based NGO, Navsarjan Trust (2009), which demonstrated with concrete data the wide prevalence of untouchability both in public and private spheres in interaction between Scheduled Castes (SCs) and non-Scheduled Castes (non-SCs), as well as within SCs, among the several jatis in rural Gujarat. This report covered around 1,600 villages in Gujarat, did a complete survey of these villages based on a few parameters ranging from temple entry to the use of the common well, and similar factors.

What further surprised scholars was that the said government-sponsored report had completely omitted valmikis (Dalits who work as manual scavengers are usually from this sub-caste) from its consideration.

This was not the first time that the powers that be had tried to 'obliterate' the valmikis out of their existence. Leading sociologist Ghanshyam Shah had reminded readers then:

The state government filed an affidavit before the Supreme Court in 2003 claiming there was no
manual scavenging in Gujarat. This was despite the published evidences documented by Praful Trivedi [Gujaratni kashtakatha, Mathe melu Uchkavani Pratha, Ahmedabad: Janpath Prakashan, 1996] as well as by Mari Mareel Thekaekara [Endless Fifth: The Saga of the Bhangis, Bangalore: Books for Change, 1999] and the documentary film Lesser Humans by K. Stalin. The government reiterated its stand in 2007 in response to a study by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, which identified 12,000 manual scavengers in Gujarat. In fact, the study was sponsored by the Gujarat Safai Kamdar Vikas Nigam, a Government of Gujarat Undertaking. (www.counterview.org, Nov 13, 2013)

For a ruling dispensation that refuses to see that discrimination exists and which can even ‘invisibilise’ a section of the community just to present a rosy picture, it would not be difficult to declare that Hindu Rashtra is the only Satya (truth) and everything else is Maya (illusion).

(The writer is an independent journalist based in Delhi.)

Some Disquieting Trends in the Budget

Prabhat Patnaik

It is clear by now that the figures provided in the 2019–20 budget are palpably unfounded. The budget has concealed the actual receipts and expenditures for 2018–19 even though these were available, because they show huge shortfalls compared to the budget estimates for that year. And all its estimates for 2019–20 are projections based on the revised estimates for 2018–19, which are close to the budget estimates for that year, rather than the much lower actuals. Hence the budget figures for the coming year cannot be taken seriously. An air of mendacity pervades the entire budget.

But while its figures mean very little, there are certain disquieting trends in this budget which deserve serious notice. One is the announcement that the government will henceforth approach the international market too for its borrowings. Till now this had scarcely been the case, which is why the ratio of India’s sovereign (i.e. government) external debt to its GDP stands only at 5 percent, one of the lowest among all the countries in the world. This reticence is now going to be jettisoned.

The government’s approaching the external market is not because it is compelled to do so; it is not as if it cannot raise funds domestically. Nor is it the case that foreign borrowings are not counted in the fiscal deficit, so that by taking a foreign loan the government would be able to spend more than what the fiscal deficit limit allows; foreign loans are counted exactly the same way as domestic borrowings as part of the fiscal deficit. One cannot even claim that foreign loans are necessarily cheaper; and anyway interest rate differential has not been adduced as an explanation for the government’s desire to borrow from abroad.

It may be argued that the government expects a situation to arise soon when the inflow of finance into the country would not be sufficient for financing the balance of payments deficit; and it is building up foreign exchange reserves by borrowing in foreign exchange to finance its rupee expenditures. But this too does not make sense. This argument ignores the fact that the government’s own debt-servicing requirements in foreign exchange will become an additional burden on the balance of payments.

There is also a false argument doing the rounds, which states that the government is tapping funds abroad because it has run out of access to domestic savings. This is wrong because government borrowing does not come out of some fixed pool of savings. When the government borrows to spend, it actually puts into private hands the very resources which it borrows, not directly or consciously of course, but through the working of the system itself. As the government keeps spending, additional employment, output and incomes, and hence additional savings, keep getting generated, and this process goes on until the total additional savings exactly equal the additional government expenditure. The government can simply borrow these additional savings to finance the expenditure it has undertaken. So, there is no question of the government running out of savings to borrow.

The government therefore is
tapping the external market not for any of these reasons, but entirely as a matter of choice, only because it has borrowed so little till now. This however is a dangerous course of action because it increases the leverage exercised by international finance capital on the Indian State.

The domestic financial sector, from which the government borrows normally, is within its control area, especially in India where the banking system continues to remain predominantly State-owned, and where the autonomy enjoyed by the Reserve Bank of India does not take it outside the purview of the State.

Borrowing from the domestic financial sector which is within the control area of the State has two implications: first, the domestic financial sector cannot impose “austerity” in an arbitrary manner on the government in the event of the latter’s inability to service its debt; and second, the very question of inability to service rupee debt cannot possibly arise since the government enjoys sovereign powers of taxation.

But if the government takes loans from foreign markets, then those loans would be in foreign exchange, so that in the event of a foreign exchange shortage, no amount of domestic taxation can possibly help in servicing its external debt. And such a situation would allow the foreign creditors to impose such “austerity measures” on the government as they think appropriate, which typically entail cutting down on food subsidy, cutting down on welfare expenditure, deferring salary increases for government employees, curtailing the size of the government payroll (through for instance forcing the substitution of ad hoc teachers for permanent faculty in public educational institutions), and so on. There are numerous examples of such imposed “austerity” on governments unable to service their debt, Greece being an obvious and well-known recent example.

Of course it would be argued that the reason why the government cannot service the debt has to do with foreign exchange shortage, and, in the event of such a shortage, these “austerity” measures will get imposed anyway whether or not the government has borrowed abroad. But when the government itself trips up on debt servicing, it comes directly under the thumb of international creditors. A whole lot of macroeconomic policy options, such as imposing import controls, to alleviate an exchange crisis, which would otherwise be available to it, simply get taken out of reckoning because of creditors’ pressure.

In short, foreign creditors get a direct hold on the government, which they otherwise would not have. And since this happens so matter which government comes to power, it ties the hands of all subsequent governments. True, if a government supported by workers and peasants comes to power which has the guts to take the country out of the neo-liberal orbit altogether, then it will be able to confront foreign creditors; but even for such a government, a large legacy of foreign debt simply makes its task that much more difficult.

In short, the abridgement of democracy and of national sovereignty, which neo-liberalism entails in general, gets further intensified when the government becomes indebted to foreign creditors. And yet this is what the NDA government is planning to do, quite gratuitously.

The second disquieting feature has to do with the centralisation of resources that this budget is unleashing. The shortfall in GST collections that has occurred has affected both the Centre and the states. In this situation the Centre has opted to raise revenue in the current budget through surcharges and cesses, which are not shareable with the states. The increase in the tax on the super-rich who have incomes between Rs 2 crores and Rs 5 crores, or above Rs 5 crores, that has been proposed in this budget, is to be raised for instance through an increase in the surcharge; and this is not shareable with the states. As a result the state governments, precisely when they are facing a fiscal crisis, will not have access to revenues that should have come their way.

The GST itself abridged states’ rights; and its failure in raising adequate revenues is making their position even worse, because unlike the Centre the states have hardly any other means of revenue-raising. If the Centre in this situation decides to raise revenue in a manner which deliberately keeps resources, that should have been shareable with the states, out of the latter’s reach, then they are pushed into a real corner. When this happens and they come to the Centre for help, the Centre will then play favourites, and penalise those states which happen to be politically ‘difficult’ from its point of view.

In the transition to Right-wing authoritarianism which we are seeing in the country at present, the abridgement of the power and resources of the state governments has played no mean a role. This is the very trend that this budget is carrying forward with a vengeance.

(The author is Professor Emeritus, Centre for Economic Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.)
New Starvation-Level Wage Announced

Subodh Varma

In a bizarre turn of events, the labour minister in Modi government, Santosh Kumar Gangwar, announced at a press conference that the new floor level minimum wage for the country will be Rs 178 per day. This translates to Rs 4,628 per month.

This is bizarre on several counts. First, the official declaration of the National Floor Level Minimum Wage (NFLMW) is done only after the statutory Minimum Wage Advisory Board meets and approves it. No such meeting has been held—yet the minister jumped the gun. An announcement is due because this revision is done every two years. The last one was in June 2017. But without any due process?

Second, and more importantly, the new wage rate announced is a mere Rs 2 more than what was declared two years ago. Just a 1% increase in two years? This is less than the inflation rate in the past two years, meaning that in real terms, it would be a decline!

Third, the declaration of Rs 178 per day goes against the government’s own Expert Committee recommendation of Rs 375–447 per day (or Rs 9,750–11,622 per month) as the National Minimum Wage. This Committee, headed by Anoop Satpathy, was set up by the same minister in Modi 1.0 government in January 2018 and gave its recommendations in January 2019. These recommended levels are actually also low as they are based on lowering the minimum calorific intake norm from the accepted norm of 2,700 to 2,400 Kcal, and other sleights of hand. But the Modi government appears to be pushing it even further down.

Fourth, and most importantly, this extempore declaration of the minister fixes the level of minimum wage at about one fourth of the norm recommended by the 7th Pay Commission in 2016. This in turn had emerged by taking into account the well-known and hitherto universally accepted standards set by the 15th Indian Labour Conference, reiterated by successive Labour Conferences (especially 44th, 45th and 46th Sessions), and also accepted and supplemented by the Supreme Court in the famous Reptakos Brett case in 1992. These norms mandate a minimum wage level of Rs 692 per day or Rs 18,000 per month.

In fact, 31 states and Union territories in the country have current minimum wage levels higher than what Gangwar announced.

Pandering to Corporate Greed

The NFLMW is a non-statutory measure—it is meant as a recommended level below which minimum wages should not be allowed by state governments. Since labour is in the Concurrent List of the Constitution, it is primarily states that deal with minimum wage fixation. The central government fixes wage levels for its own employees. According to law, those types of employment (jobs) that are listed in Schedules are open to fixation of wage level by governments. In India, over 1,600 jobs are currently listed in Schedules across states and the Central government. NFLMW is specifically meant to recommend wage levels for non-scheduled jobs which may run into thousands.

By announcing an absurdly low minimum wage level, the labour minister and actually the Modi government itself is sending a signal to corporate houses that the government is not interested in protecting the interests of workers through policy interventions. It is allowing a free hand to employers to push wage levels as far below as possible. In the government’s thinking—borrowed from Western neoliberals—output and growth will be boosted if labour costs are cut to the skin and bones level.

That the government has this approach is confirmed by the fact that the minister made his announcement while addressing a press conference to reveal that the Modi Cabinet had cleared the Code on Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Bill, which seeks to amalgamate 13 labour laws and selectively retain those favourable to employers. Earlier, on July 3, the Cabinet had also cleared the Code on Wages, which is a similar amalgamation, doing away with protective provisions in several labour laws. Thus, dilution of labour laws—a long standing demand of the Indian corporate class—is finally going to take place in this session of the Parliament. And, carried away by his excitement, the minister also declared the new starvation level minimum wage.

(Subodh Varma is a senior Indian journalist.)
Keep America Great (Don’t Count on It!)

Dilip Hiro

Make America Great Again (MAGA)? Don’t count on it.

Donald Trump was partly voted into office by Americans who felt that the self-proclaimed greatest power on Earth was actually in decline—and they weren’t wrong. Trump is capable of tweeting many things, but none of those tweets will stop that process of decline, nor will a trade war with a rising China or fierce oil sanctions on Iran.

You could feel this recently, even in the case of the increasingly pressured Iranians. There, with a single pinprick, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei effectively punctured President Trump’s MAGA balloon and reminded many that, however powerful the US still was, people in other countries were beginning to look at America differently at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Following a meeting in Tehran with visiting Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who brought a message from Trump urging the start of US–Iranian negotiations, Khamenei tweeted, “We have no doubt in [Abe’s] goodwill and seriousness; but regarding what you mentioned from [the] US president, I don’t consider Trump as a person deserving to exchange messages with, and I have no answer for him, nor will I respond to him in the future.” He then added: “We believe that our problems will not be solved by negotiating with the US, and no free nation would ever accept negotiations under pressure.”

A flustered Trump was reduced to briefly tweeting: “I personally feel that it is too soon to even think about making a deal. They are not ready, and neither are we!” And soon after, the president halted at the last minute, in a distinctly humiliating retreat, US air strikes on Iranian missile sites that would undoubtedly have created yet more insoluble problems for Washington across the Greater Middle East.

Keep in mind that, globally, before the ayatollah’s put-down, the Trump administration had already had two abject foreign policy failures: the collapse of the president’s Hanoi summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un (followed by that regime’s provocative firing of several missiles over the Sea of Japan) and a bungled attempt to overthrow the regime of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro.

America’s Global Standing at a Record Low

What’s great or small can be defined in absolute or relative terms. America’s “greatness”—much lauded in Washington before the Trump era—should certainly be judged against the economic progress made by China in those same years and against Russia’s advances in the latest high-tech weaponry. Another way of assessing the nature of that “greatness” and what to make of it would be through polls of how foreigners view the United States.

Take, for instance, a survey released by the Pew Research Group in February 2019. Forty-five percent of respondents in 26 nations with large populations felt that American power and influence posed “a major threat to our country”, while 36% offered the same response on Russia, and 35% on China. To put that in perspective, in 2013, during the presidency of Barack Obama, only 25% of global respondents held such a negative view of the US, while reactions to China remained essentially the same. Or just consider the most powerful country in Europe, Germany. Between 2013 and 2018, Germans who considered American power and influence a greater threat than that of China or Russia leapt from 19% to 49%. (Figures for France were similar.)

As for President Trump, only 27% of global respondents had confidence in him to do the right thing in world affairs, while 70% feared he would not. In Mexico, you undoubtedly won’t be surprised to learn, confidence in his leadership was at a derisory 6%. In 17 of the surveyed countries, people who lacked confidence in him were also significantly more likely to consider the US the world’s top threat, a phenomenon most pronounced among traditional Washington allies like Canada, Great Britain and Australia.

China’s Expanding Global Footprint

While 39% of Pew respondents in that poll still rated the US as the globe’s leading economic power, 34% opted for China. Meanwhile, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched in 2013 to link the infrastructure and trade of much of
Southeast Asia, Eurasia and the Horn of Africa to China (at an estimated cost of four trillion dollars) and to be funded by diverse sources, is going from strength to strength.

One way to measure this: the number of dignitaries attending the biennial BRI Forum in Beijing. The first of those gatherings in May 2017 attracted 28 heads of state and representatives from 100 countries. The most recent, in late April, had 37 heads of state and representatives from nearly 150 countries and international organisations, including International Monetary Fund (IMF) chief Christine Lagarde and United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

Leaders of nine out of ten Association of Southeast Asian Nations attended, as did four of the five Central Asian republics. Strikingly, a third of the leaders participating came from Europe. According to Peter Frankopan, author of The New Silk Roads, more than 80 countries are now involved in some aspect of the BRI project. That translates into more than 63% of the world’s population and 29% of its global economic output.

Still, Chinese President Xi Jinping is intent on expanding the BRI’s global footprint further, a signal of China’s dream of future greatness. During a February two-day state visit to Beijing by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Xi suggested that, when it came to Riyadh’s overly ambitious economic plan, “our two countries should speed up the signing of an implementation plan on connecting the Belt and Road Initiative with the Saudi Vision 2030.”

Flattered by this proposal, the crown prince defended China’s use of “re-education” camps for Uighur Muslims in its western province of Xinjiang, claiming it was Beijing’s “right” to carry out anti-terrorism work to safeguard national security. Under the guise of combating extremism, the Chinese authorities have placed an estimated one million Uighur Muslims in such camps to undergo re-education designed to supplant their Islamic legacy with a Chinese version of socialism. Uighur groups had appealed to Prince bin Salman to take up their cause. No such luck: one more sign of the rise of China in the twenty-first century.

China Enters the High-Tech Race With America

In 2013, the German government launched an Industry 4.0 Plan meant to fuse cyber-physical systems, the Internet of things, cloud computing, and cognitive computing with the aim of increasing manufacturing productivity by up to 50%, while curtailing resources required by half. Two years later, emulating this project, Beijing published its own 10-year Made in China 2025 plan to update the country’s manufacturing base by rapidly developing 10 high-tech industries, including electric cars and other new-energy vehicles, next-generation information technology and telecommunications, as well as advanced robotics and artificial intelligence, aerospace engineering, high-end rail infrastructure and high-tech maritime engineering.

As with BRI, the government and media then publicised and promoted Made in China 2025 vigorously. This alarmed Washington and America’s high-tech corporations. Over the years, American companies had complained about China’s theft of US intellectual property, the counterfeiting of famous brands, and the stealing of trade secrets, not to speak of the pressuring of American firms in joint ventures with local companies to share technology as a price for gaining access to China’s vast market. Their grievances became more vocal when Donald Trump entered the White House determined to cut Washington’s annual trade deficit of $380 billion with Beijing.

As president, Trump ordered his new trade representative, the Sinophobe Robert Lighthizer, to look into the matter. The resulting seven-month investigation pegged the loss US companies experienced because of China’s unfair trade practices at $50 billion a year. That was why, in March 2018, President Trump instructed Lighthizer to levy tariffs on at least $50 billion worth of Chinese imports.

That signaled the start of a Sino-American trade war which has only gained steam since. In this context, Chinese officials started downplaying the significance of Made in China 2025, describing it as nothing more than an inspirational plan. This March, China’s National People’s Congress even passed a foreign direct-investment law meant to address some of the grievances of US companies. Its implementation mechanism was, however, weak. Trump promptly claimed that China had backtracked on its commitments to incorporate into Chinese law significant changes the two countries had negotiated and put into a draft agreement to end the trade war. He then slapped further tariffs on $200 billion in Chinese imports.

The major bone of contention for the Trump administration is a Chinese law specifying that, in a joint venture between a foreign corporation and a Chinese company, the former must pass on technological know-how to its Chinese partner. That’s seen as theft by Washington. According to Senior Fellow at the Carnegie
Endowment for International Peace
Yukon Huang, author of *Cracking the China Conundrum: Why Conventional Economic Wisdom Is Wrong*, however, it’s fully in accord with globally accepted guidelines. Such diffusion of technological know-how has played a significant role in driving growth globally, as the IMF’s 2018 *World Economic Outlook* report made clear. It’s worth noting as well that China now accounts for almost one-third of global annual economic growth.

The size of China’s market is so vast and the rise in its per capita gross domestic product—from $312 in 1980 to $9,769 in 2018—so steep that major US corporations generally accepted its long-established joint-venture law and that should surprise no one. Last year, for instance, General Motors sold 3,645,044 vehicles in China and fewer than three million in the US. Little wonder then that, late last year, following GM plant closures across North America, part of a wide-ranging restructuring plan, the company’s management paid no heed to a threat from President Trump to strip GM of any government subsidies. What angered the president, as he tweeted, caught the reality of the moment: nothing was “being closed in Mexico and China”.

What Trump simply can’t accept is this: after nearly two decades of supply-chain restructuring and global economic integration, China has become the key industrial supplier for the United States and Europe. His attempt to make America great again by restoring the economic status quo ante before 2001—the year China was admitted to the World Trade Organisation—is doomed to fail.

In reality, trade war or peace, China is now beginning to overtake the US in science and technology. A study by Qingnan Xie of Nanjing University of Science and Technology and Richard Freeman of Harvard University noted that, between 2000 and 2016, China’s global share of publications in the physical sciences, engineering, and mathematics quadrupled and, in the process, exceeded that of the US for the first time.

In the field of high technology, for example, China is now well ahead of the United States in mobile payment transactions. In the first 10 months of 2017, those totaled $12.8 trillion, the result of vast numbers of consumers discarding credit cards in favor of cashless systems. In stark contrast, according to eMarketer, America’s mobile payment transactions in 2017 amounted to $49.3 billion. Last year, 583 million Chinese used mobile payment systems, with nearly 68% of China’s Internet users turning to a mobile wallet for their offline payments.

**Russia’s Advanced Weaponry**

In a similar fashion, in his untiring pitch for America’s “beautiful” weaponry, President Trump has failed to grasp the impressive progress Russia has made in that field.

While presenting videos and animated glimpses of new intercontinental ballistic missiles, nuclear-powered cruise missiles and underwater drones in a March 2018 television address, Russian President Vladimir Putin traced the development of his own country’s new weapons to Washington’s decision to pull out of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty with the Soviet Union. In December 2001, encouraged by John Bolton, then under secretary of state for arms control and international security, President George W. Bush had indeed withdrawn from the 1972 ABM treaty on the spurious grounds that the 9/11 attacks had changed the nature of defense for America. His Russian counterpart of the time, the very same Vladimir Putin, described the withdrawal from that cornerstone of world security as a grievous mistake. The head of Russia’s armed forces, General Anatoly Kvashnin, warned then that the pullout would alter the nature of the international strategic balance, freeing up countries to restart arms buildups, both conventional and nuclear.

As it happened, he couldn’t have been more on the mark. The US is now engaged in a 30-year, trillion-dollar-plus remake and update of its nuclear arsenal, while the Russians (whose present inventory of 6,500 nuclear weapons slightly exceeds America’s) have gone down a similar route. In that televised address of his on the eve of the 2018 Russian presidential election, Putin’s list of new nuclear weapons was headed by the Sarmat, a 30-ton intercontinental ballistic missile, reputedly far harder for an enemy to intercept in its most vulnerable phase just after launching. It also carries a larger number of nuclear warheads than its predecessor.

Another new weapon on his list was a nuclear-powered intercontinental underwater drone, Status-6, a submarine-launched autonomous vehicle with a range of 6,800 miles, capable of carrying a 100 megaton nuclear warhead. And then there was his country’s new nuclear-powered cruise missile with a “practically unlimited” range. In addition, because of its stealth capabilities, it will be hard to detect in flight and its high maneuverability will, theoretically at least, enable it to bypass an enemy’s defenses.
Successfully tested in 2018, it does not yet have a name. Unsurprisingly, Putin won the presidency with 77% of the vote, a 13% rise from the previous poll, on record voter turnout of 67.7%.

In conventional weaponry, Russia’s S-400 missile system remains unrivalled. According to the Washington-based Arms Control Association, “The S-400 system is an advanced, mobile, surface-to-air defense system of radars and missiles of different ranges, capable of destroying a variety of targets such as attack aircraft, bombs and tactical ballistic missiles. Each battery normally consists of eight launchers, 112 missiles, and command and support vehicles.” The S-400 missile has a range of 400 kilometers (250 miles), and its integrated system is believed to be capable of shooting down up to 80 targets simultaneously.

Consider it a sign of the times, but in defiance of pressure from the Trump administration not to buy Russian weaponry, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, the only Muslim member of NATO, ordered the purchase of batteries of those Russian systems in Russia. The first battery is expected to arrive in Turkey next month.

Similarly, in April 2015, Russia signed a contract to supply S-400 missiles to China. The first delivery of the system took place in January 2018 and China tested fired it in August.

An Expanding Beijing–Moscow Alliance

This purchase of weaponry by China from Russia was only another step in the growing Russian–Chinese military coordination meant to challenge Washington’s claim to be the planet’s sole superpower. Similarly, last September, 3,500 Chinese troops participated in Russia’s largest-ever military exercises involving 300,000 soldiers, 36,000 military vehicles, 80 ships, and 1,000 aircraft, helicopters and drones. Codenamed Vostok-2018, it took place across a vast region that included the Bering Sea, the Sea of Okhotsk and the Sea of Japan. Little wonder that NATO officials described Vostok-2018 as a demonstration of a growing Russian focus on future large-scale conflict: “It fits into a pattern we have seen over some time—a more assertive Russia, significantly increasing its defense budget and its military presence.” Putin attended the exercises after hosting an economic forum in Vladivostok where Chinese President Xi was his guest. “We have trustworthy ties in political, security and defense spheres,” he declared, while Xi praised the two countries’ friendship, which, he claimed, was “getting stronger all the time.”

Thanks to climate change, Russia and China are now also working in tandem in the fast-melting Arctic. Last year Russia, which controls more than half the Arctic coastline, sent its first ship through the Northern Sea Route without an icebreaker in winter. Putin hailed that moment as a “big event in the opening up of the Arctic.”

Beijing’s Arctic policy, first laid out in January 2018, described China as a “near-Arctic” state and visualised the future shipping routes there as part of a potential new “Polar Silk Road” that would both be useful for resource exploitation and for enhancing Chinese security. Shipping goods to and from Europe by such a passage would shorten the distance to China by 30% compared to present sea routes through the Malacca Straits and the Suez Canal, saving hundreds of thousands of dollars per voyage.

According to the US Geological Survey, the Arctic holds petroleum reserves equal to 412 billion barrels of oil, or about 22% of the world’s undiscovered hydrocarbons. It also has deposits of rare earth metals. China’s second Arctic vessel, Xuelong 2 (Snow Dragon 2), is scheduled to make its maiden voyage later this year. Russia needs Chinese investment to extract the natural resources under its permafrost. In fact, China is already the biggest foreign investor in Russia’s liquefied natural gas (LNG) projects in the region—and the first LNG shipment was dispatched to China’s eastern province last summer via the Northern Sea Route. Its giant oil corporation is now beginning to drill for gas in Russian waters alongside the Russian company Gazprom.

Washington is rattled. In April, in its latest annual report to Congress on China’s military power, the Pentagon for the first time included a section on the Arctic, warning of the risks of a growing Chinese presence in the region, including that country’s possible deployment of nuclear submarines there in the future. In May, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo used a meeting of foreign ministers in Rovaniemi, Finland, to assail China for its “aggressive behavior” in the Arctic.

In an earlier speech, Pompeo noted that, from 2012 to 2017, China invested nearly $90 billion in the Arctic region. “We’re concerned about Russia’s claim over the international waters of the Northern Sea Route, including its newly announced plans to connect it with China’s Maritime Silk Road,” he said. He then pointed out that,
along that route, “Moscow already illegally demands other nations request permission to pass, requires Russian maritime pilots to be aboard foreign ships and threatens to use military force to sink any that fail to comply with their demands.”

**An American Downturn Continues**

Altogether, the tightening military and economic ties between Russia and China have put America on the defensive, contrary to Donald Trump’s MAGA promise to American voters in the 2016 campaign. It’s true that, despite fraying diplomatic and economic ties between Washington and Moscow, Trump’s personal relations with Putin remain cordial. (The two periodically exchange friendly phone calls.) But among Russians more generally, a favorable view of the US fell from 41% in 2017 to 26% in 2018, according to a Pew Research survey.

There’s nothing new about great powers, even the one that proclaimed itself the greatest in history, declining after having risen high. In our acrimonious times, that’s a reality well worth noting. While launching his bid for reelection recently, Trump proposed a bombastic new slogan: “Keep America Great” (or KAG), as if he had indeed raised America’s stature while in office. He would have been far more on target, however, had he suggested the slogan “Depress America More” (or DAM) to reflect the reality of an unpopular president who faces rising great power rivals abroad.

*(Dilip Hiro is an Indian author, journalist, and commentator who specialises on the politics of South Asia and Middle East.)*

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**Press Release**

**India Must Prevent Eviction of Millions of Forest Dwellers, say UN Experts**

UN human rights experts (see below for details) have urged the Government of India to prevent the potential eviction of up to nine million people, most of whom are forest dwellers and members of scheduled tribes with an ancestral link to the land and forest. The threat of evictions follows a 13 February order by the Supreme Court of India in a case brought by wildlife organisations who claim human settlements encroach on protected forest areas.

“The basic premise of this decision, which treats tribal peoples as possibly illegal residents of the forest, is wrong. Indigenous peoples are the owners of their lands and forests,” says the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz. “This is a phenomenon seen around the world. Indigenous peoples and local communities are treated as squatters when in fact the land is theirs, and they have protected and stewarded their holdings for generations and play an important role for conservation.”

The Supreme Court order addressed the rejection of 1.2 million forest rights claims under the Forest Rights Act, a legislation adopted in 2006, which aimed at addressing historical injustice suffered by forest dwelling peoples and scheduled tribes by providing them with an opportunity to recognise their rights to occupy and use the forest.

On 28 February 2019, amid growing tensions over what was seen as a flawed claim process, the Court stayed its eviction order and directed the States to clarify by 12 July the procedure followed by State governments to decide on the validity and merits of claims.

While the Supreme Court’s four-month suspension of its order was a reprieve for those who had already been notified of eviction, the experts said they were gravely concerned about the precarious situation of millions of forest dwellers who may be displaced and lose access to their habitat, livelihoods and spiritual culture.

“In 2016, I recommended a national moratorium on forced evictions be instituted”, said the Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, Leilani Farha. “Evictions are only human rights compliant after all alternatives to eviction have been exhausted.”

“Governments must seek free prior and informed consent from the indigenous people affected, ensure compensation is adequate and that any resettlement plans are determined through a process of meaningful consultation. Any eviction resulting in homelessness is a serious violation of human rights,” the experts warned.

The experts said many indigenous peoples in India have already lost their homes in the name of conservation, often to make way for tiger reserves. Research shows that the presence of indigenous peoples actually improves tiger populations.

“For generations, India’s tribal
peoples have lived in harmony with the country’s wildlife, protecting and managing vital natural resources. It is because of their sustainable stewardship that India still has forests worth conserving. To truly protect wildlife, recognising the rights of forest guardians would be a far more effective strategy than rendering them homeless,” the experts said. “We urge the Government of India to uphold the spirit of the Forest Right Act by safeguarding the inherent rights of scheduled tribes and other traditional forest-dwelling peoples.”

The government must provide the necessary resources to conduct a transparent and independent review of the rejected claims and to ensure no indigenous peoples are aggrieved. Where there is absolutely no alternative to eviction consent of affected people, adequate redress, and compensation are required.

The Ministry of Environment has recently proposed a series of amendments to the 1927 Indian Forest Act, which, if adopted, would result in further violation of rights of tribals and forest-dwellers, the experts said. “The draft law would significantly increase the policing and discretionary powers of Forest officers against local communities.”

The experts have shared their concerns with the government of India but to date have not received a response.

[The experts are: Ms Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples; Ms Leilani Farha, Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context; Mr David R. Boyd, Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment.]

The Special Rapporteurs and Independent Experts are part of the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human Rights system, is the general name of the Council’s independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. Special Procedures’ experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent from any government or organisation and serve in their individual capacity.

[Courtesy: Countercurrents.org.]

Personal Data – The Skyscraper of Data You Knew Nothing About

It’s quite something to think of one simple statistic that sums up how much data is being processed about us—that ninety per cent of the world’s data was created in just the last two years. It has been calculated that each one of us with an internet connection is adding over 160 pieces of data to our personal profiles, being hoovered up by modern-day hunter-gatherers, every single day. That’s about three billion bits of data on UK adults, let alone the rest of the world.

In a social setting, it is the norm that people know some basic information about you. If they don’t know, they will ask polite questions, and you reciprocate by providing what information you are prepared to give away. As you get to know someone better over time, you tend to divulge more information as the trust between you grows.

But what if these same people stood there face to face, at the first meeting and asked a barrage of questions like how much do you earn, how much debt or credit you have, where you spend your money, how much, on what and who with? Or what your current sexual preferences are, who you stayed with last night, where, what time you fell asleep—and so on. These questions are indeed being asked of us. According to the New Economics Foundation, over 160 questions are being asked of us every day. When I say asked—I mean given away by the electronic devices we use. Mobiles, desktops, smartwatches, tablets are constantly updating.

Yes, I know that somehow we’ve given permissions and yes you can turn some of them off to increase privacy—but the truth is—it doesn’t work that way.

You might be surprised to know that Google can collate a file on you with the equivalent of 1.5 million documents.

Stacked upon each other, at 500 pages to a reem—each one at 2 inches thick, your data pile would be 152m high. The Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat in Britain define skyscrapers as those buildings which reach or exceed 150m in height.

Is it not just a little bit worrying that your personal data stack would qualify as a skyscraper of information about just you?
Google collects deleted data even when you try to specifically aim to rid your history. Past diary appointments, events attended, location and search history. If you turn off location data—Google gets around this by collating your coordinates instead.

It’s extraordinary to think that data is even harvested about the movements of how your fingers work a mouse or trackpad as you explore a website, or indeed, where the cursor hovered or for how long. I can’t explain to you why that is somehow important or worthwhile enough to put on a file about you. But knowing just this makes you think how deeply the tech industry has stolen our most private moments, thoughts and actions. And also how wrong their conclusions about you could be. Like for instance when I spend some time looking at Parkinson’s disease for a relative, and not because I’m one of its unfortunate victims.

In one study, it was found that third-party tracking cookies, from companies you’ve never heard of, are collating data on 92 per cent of websites you visit. The average mainstream news website has as many as 40 trackers constantly working, gorging and digesting on your private stuff in the background while you read about the world around you.

All this data being collected on you personally, the industry likes to call ‘finger-printing’.

Your personal data is prepared for selling to buyers that bid for it. Bid requests on UK users are being sent out at a rate of almost 10 billion per day, and are seen by thousands of advertisers without you knowing who they are.

And while you might still think this is OK—don’t forget that 25 per cent of this data is lost to fraud, exposing all of us to non-consensual sharing—amongst the criminal fraternity. Of course, criminals disregard permissions and often then re-sell or use this data legally or otherwise.

GDPR and other so-called privacy protections do not shield you from this onslaught of the data stalkers, much as anti-money laundering legislation doesn’t stop the banks in the City of London from washing dirty money in the billions every day.

To highlight this point, one journalist found that in a week of Web surfing on his desktop, 11,189 requests for tracker “cookies” were made by Google’s Chrome. Each one of these cookies are themselves grabbing hundreds of bits of data each time.

If the government wanted to protect your personal data they could. It would be simple to do. Legislation could change everything by ensuring that devices, software and online interactions are subject to privacy by default. There’s a reason why they don’t legislate to protect us. Simply because the government, especially the British government and its security services want to know all this information as well. Of course, they also have illegally collected millions of images, including those classed as ‘compromising’ of you and your family (operation Optic Nerve)—that were taken when you had no idea your webcam or mobile camera had been switched on by them via special surveillance software you had no idea existed. That is until a famous whistleblower informed us.

The government also has all the data collated by their various departments, dozens of them, such as schools, health departments, local authorities and so on. Soon, the state will have a biometric database that will work alongside a health database—all ready to be infiltrated by criminals just as the health industry is in America.

Recently, eleven million complete health records were stolen in the USA, and in one case alone involving an insurance company, specific data was stolen from 78 million Americans.

Today, we trust technology because we have a false sense of security about it. But we shouldn’t. Last year, ID fraud hit a new record in the UK that rises at a rate of about 12 per cent a year. Telecoms, online shopping and insurance were the favoured targets of the fraudsters—where much of the data emanates from in the first place. This week, Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak said he deleted his Facebook account last year and believes most of us should too—because of the scale of intrusion into our lives.

Surveillance capitalism as it is known today is spycraft, designed to profit from systems to exploit our personal data in every way possible. This modern-day exploitation of information is the volume crime of the 21st century, and the issue is not going to go away soon.

*Courtesy: TruePublica*

(TruePublica is an independent UK-based media source focused on challenging current neoliberal ideology.)
Venezuela: Epicentre of the Anti-Imperialist Left

Arnold August

Who would have thought that, during the attempted coup d’état in Venezuela on January 23 and its immediate aftermath, Caracas would become, only five months later, the epicentre of the Latin American left? The XXV São Paulo Forum is planned for July 25–28 in the very Caracas that was supposed to be in the hands of the US and its allies. On the day of the coup attempt, international hemispheric right-wing reaction—from the north, in Ottawa, through Washington, DC, to Bogotá and southward to Lima and Santiago de Chile—was ready to pop the champagne bottles.

While capturing Venezuela’s oil was and obviously remains the objective, the destruction of Chavismo as an example and inspiration also was and remains a key consideration. It weighed heavily in the balance as the US and its allies launched their daring coup on January 23. It was not the first such direct US intervention in the country, the previous one having been launched against Chávez in his day.

However, this latest version was expected to be a sure winner for US imperialism. Everything was in place, including catapulting a “popular” new leader from the “grassroots,” who happened to be an actual elected member of parliament! This stroke of genius was apparently meant to replace the overtly capitalist Federation of Chambers of Commerce, which looked like a civilian Pinochet police lineup when they posed for a photo opportunity back in 2002.

No, this was to be a new version of a coup. This new face of imperialism had at its disposal a ready-made dream team coalition in the form of the Lima Cartel. The main original feature of this entity was that it did not include the universally detested Trump, who was replaced by his supposed political antithesis from Canada, Justin Trudeau, so as to give credibility to the Trump administration.

The massive use of international corporate media in an unprecedented demonisation campaign against a leader, in this case Maduro, was supported “on the ground” by the foot soldiers of pro-US social media all over the planet. However, the coup attempt failed, because of fierce Bolivarian resistance, and Maduro in particular exhibited nerves of steel and foresight.

The US and its allies in the hemisphere, and beyond from Old Europe, organised two more coup attempts and three electrical power grid failures in March, on top of the successive economic and diplomatic sanctions that had already caused 40,000 deaths by January 23. Despite the hardships and the tense situation, overtures to the armed forces to desert the government fell on deaf ears.

On the contrary, the civic–military alliance not only held its own but further developed its political/ideological and patriotic consciousness even as it spread further into the population. From January 23 to the present, millions of Chavistas have regularly shown support for THEIR revolution, expressing in a more convincing manner than the ballot box that Maduro is their legitimate president.

In the course of this resistance, the Bolivarian Revolution further developed its policy of combining revolutionary struggle (not trusting imperialism one iota, as Che put it), based on the principles thereof, with a search for a negotiated, peaceful political solution with the opposition—a brilliant example of revolutionary diplomacy.

In this context, and with São Paulo in mind, we should also appreciate the work of the Bolivarian Revolution, including Maduro and his entire leadership (e.g. Jorge Arreaza as a bilingual, globetrotting foreign minister), on another front too: they are actively building ties with the left-wing anti-imperialist forces in the heartland of imperialism. Maduro, for example, personally and explicitly extended a hand on behalf of the Bolivarian Revolution to the left-wing forces in Washington who had courageously occupied the Venezuelan Embassy to protect it from pro-US forces.

To take another of many examples, the Venezuelan diplomatic missions in Canada did not hesitate to recognise the statements issued by Canadian unions in January and February, on behalf of their five million members, in support of Venezuela’s right to self-determination in the face of the Canadian government’s pro-Trump policy of interference.

This outreach is reciprocal, as the left in the capitalist countries—the US, Canada and the UK, in
JANATA, July 21, 2019

particular—have been flocking to Caracas since January to witness and report back in response to the massive disinformation campaign against Venezuela. This trend has become, in a manner of speaking, the 2019 digital version of the international brigades that went to support the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War.

When I had the opportunity to listen to Maduro in a small meeting with a foreign delegation on February 4, 2019, one of several significant points he made was that Venezuela is, despite itself, being forced onto the international stage as the international epicentre of anti-imperialism. And, of course, the Bolivarian Revolution is up to the challenge.

I would add that as a result of the international situation and the Bolivarian Revolution, the left has moved more to the left. The principled stand of Venezuela has forced the false friends of the Bolivarian Revolution out of the woodwork. This tendency had been a dead weight on the Bolivarian process in any case, sowing doubts about it from a safe distance.

Since the coup attempt, they have openly fallen into the US narrative in which the elections of May 2018 were “deficient,” marred by “irregularities” and “manipulation,” and, of course, the idea that Maduro is an “authoritarian.” The US presents these people as the “reasonable” voice of the campaign against Venezuela, seeking sorely needed credibility for its manoeuvres in this way.

In return, the false friends continually pronounce the keywords (“fraudulent,” “authoritarian”) so as to retain their academic privileges and their access to the mainstream.

The latent “critical support” evinced before January 23 has converged with the US narrative, retaining some left-wing rhetoric in a desperate attempt to maintain credibility.

As to the statement that, as a result of the Bolivarian Revolution, the left has moved more to the left, it is useful at times to investigate how the enemy regards this movement. After all, the empire is highly sensitive to the reinforcement of Chavismo as an undesired boomerang effect of its interference in Venezuela. Judging by an article in World Politics Review titled “Venezuela’s Crisis Is Drawing New Ideological Lines in Latin America”, the empire’s worst nightmare is coming true:

It is no longer possible for Latin American leaders to issue fuzzy statements now that the Venezuelan opposition has declared Maduro an illegitimate president. When Juan Guaidó, the head of Venezuela’s National Assembly, declared himself interim president last month, it compelled every leader in the region to make their position regarding the government clear.

On the other hand, this move to the left is also reflected in the fact that the courageous, principled left-wing forces in the US and Canada have actually expanded into new areas. In addition, and this is very important, the blatant media campaign against Venezuela has vastly strengthened their political consciousness.

It has likewise resulted in a flurry of new social media as well as a multifold increase in the use of already existing social media and alternative websites dedicated, among other causes, to the Bolivarian Revolution.

For those of us who follow alternative and Venezuelan media, the blatant lies are so frustrating that it results in even stronger resolve, and thus a more left-wing stand on important international issues as well as the domestic situation in the imperialist countries.

Thus, the choice of Caracas for the next São Paulo Forum is not an arbitrary decision. It is a natural and inevitable choice that is well deserved by Maduro and the millions of Chavistas who will welcome the progressive forces to the very city of Caracas that was supposed to have been occupied by the US and its allies.

When one is on the correct side of history, this is what happens. It is important to reflect on the historical importance of the five months subsequent to January 23, not only for Latin America, but also for the entire hemisphere and indeed the world, as the outcome in Latin America impacts all of humankind.

(Arnold August is a Canadian journalist and lecturer, and writes for several websites in Latin America and USA.)

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Study Warns of Extreme Ocean Acidification: Could Trigger Mass Extinction

Julia Conley

The continuous accumulation of carbon dioxide in the planet's oceans—which shows no sign of stopping due to humanity's relentless consumption of fossil fuels—is likely to trigger a chemical reaction in Earth's carbon cycle similar to those which happened just before previous mass extinction events, according to a new study.

MIT geophysics professor Daniel Rothman released new data on Monday showing that carbon levels today could be fast approaching a tipping point threshold that could trigger extreme ocean acidification similar to the kind that contributed to the Permian–Triassic mass extinction that occurred about 250 million years ago.

Rothman's new research comes two years after he predicted that a mass extinction event could take place at the end of this century. Since 2017, he has been working to understand how life on Earth might be wiped out due to increased carbon in the oceans.

Rothman created a model in which he simulated adding carbon dioxide to oceans, finding that when the gas was added to an already-stable marine environment, only temporary acidification occurred. When he continuously pumped carbon into the oceans, however, as humans have been doing at greater and greater levels since the late 18th century, the ocean model eventually reached a threshold which triggered what MIT called "a cascade of chemical feedbacks", or "excitation", causing extreme acidification and worsening the warming effects of the originally-added carbon.

Over the past 540 million years, these chemical feedbacks have occurred at various times, Rothman noted.

But the most significant occurrences took place around the time of four out of the five mass extinction events—and today's oceans are absorbing carbon far more quickly than they did before the Permian–Triassic extinction, in which 90 percent of life on Earth died out.

The planet may now be "at the precipice of excitation", Rothman told MIT News.

On social media, one critic called the study's implications about life on Earth "completely terrifying".

The study, which was completed with support from NASA and the National Science Foundation, also notes that even though humans have only been pumping carbon into the oceans for hundreds of years rather than the thousands of years it took for volcanic eruptions and other events to bring about other extinctions, the result will likely be the same.

"Once we're over the threshold, how we got there may not matter," Rothman told MIT News. "Once you get over it, you're dealing with how the Earth works, and it goes on its own ride."

Other scientists said the study, which will be published this week in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, represents a clear call for immediate action to drastically reduce the amount of carbon that is being pumped into the world's oceans. Climate action groups and grassroots movements have long called on governments to impose a moratorium on fossil fuel drilling, which pumps about a billion metric tons of carbon into the atmosphere every year.

"We already know that our CO2-emitting actions will have consequences for many millennia," says Timothy Lenton, a professor of climate change and earth systems science at the University of Exeter. "This study suggests those consequences could be much more dramatic than previously expected."

"If we push the Earth system too far," Lenton added, "then it takes over and determines its own response—past that point there will be little we can do about it."

(Confy Conley writes for Common Dreams, an independent, non-profit, advertising-free and 100% reader supported news portal.)

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Gandhi, Tagore, Modernity

Aseem Shrivastava

A year in which the country celebrates the Mahatma’s 150th birth anniversary offers us a timely opportunity to consider his criticisms of modernity and juxtapose them with those of the other towering figure of his generation, Rabindranath Tagore, whose 78th death anniversary is on August 7.

Much is made nowadays of the differences between Tagore and Gandhi. It is true that they saw many aspects of the world—especially when it came to the place of politics and certain forms of mass nationalist protest—very differently. Yet, when it came to their view of human life, the fundamentals of their thinking were remarkably coincident. Here are some points on which Gandhi and Tagore thought alike.

Firstly, they both took a civilisational view of the world, and of India’s place in it. This meant that they understood just how different India’s history and culture (primarily rural) were from that of the modern, urbanised West. This informed their trenchant critiques of modernity. While Gandhi (since the days when he wrote *Hind Swaraj*) saw it as a global pandemic, and was altogether dismissive of it, blaming it for the greatest share of the world’s problems, Tagore’s own assessment was more nuanced, even if his scepticism about the claims made on behalf of progress was inexorable. Importantly, they both saw ‘modernity’ as being an important source of the crises facing humanity. Both Gandhi and Tagore were precise in identifying the central fault with modernity—the fact that it unnecessarily complicated even simple things because of its in-built drive towards power and the multiplication of wants, in the process wasting enormous energy and enthroning money and the machine as cardinal values, ultimately responsible both for the plunder of the natural world as well as the intensified exploitation of working humanity. They both preferred the time-honoured Indian ideal of simplicity to the superficial sophistication of modern European life. In consequence, they were unsparing in their criticism of those of their educated countrymen who, in awe of the West, had lost all confidence in their own traditions and their power to renew themselves.

Secondly, this indictment of modernity was, for both Gandhi and Tagore, rooted in the fact that it was remorselessly materialist and
saw humanity only in its physical aspect. Tagore rejected the modern belief which held “the physical body to be the highest truth in man.” For both thinkers (and they were both religious), humanity was fundamentally ‘spiritual’, a notion largely alien to the desacralised modern world. To them, the absence of this realisation is what makes modernity inherently competitive and aggressive, frequently culminating in violence and war.

Thirdly, Gandhi and Tagore shared a very similar perspective when it came to understanding the relationship between the city and the countryside. Gandhi is often accused of idealising villages. We know well that Indian villages—like most other places—are hardly free of structural injustices. Gandhi was quite aware of this. Yet, he felt that true swaraj was not possible unless and until the balance of power between town and country shifts towards the latter. The aggressive urbanisation imposed by modernity would compound problems for people living in both places.

To Tagore, villages constituted the ‘cradle’ of humanity. In his important but widely ignored tract Robbery of the Soil, he wrote about villages that “they are nearer to nature than the towns and are therefore in closer touch with the fountain of life. They have the atmosphere which possesses a natural power of healing . . . The city, in its intense egoism and pride, remains blissfully unconscious of the devastation it is continuously spreading within the village, the source and origin of its own life, health and joy.” These words may well have come from Gandhi.

Fourthly, for both Gandhi and Tagore, society (implying human community), and not the State, is the mainstay of life in India. This is very different from the Western world, where the State constitutes the centre of gravity of human affairs. In Hind Swaraj, Gandhi mocked parliaments as “emblems of slavery”—one reason among many as to why swaraj cannot be crudely translated as ‘democracy’ in English.

Years before Gandhi published his book, Tagore, in a lecture to Congress cadres in Kolkata, spoke of Our Swadeshi Samaj, in which he contrasted India and the West. Unlike in Europe, where society would collapse without the State, in India it is relatively secondary to human welfare, he argued. Both recognised the oppressive features of the modern State, especially in India, where its foundations have always been colonial. The antidote to this was a public life in which the community, rather than the State, would guide human affairs.

Fifth, both put all their faith in the creative renewal of Indian traditions. This was to be achieved significantly through education. Tagore’s vision, as embodied in Shantiniketan, was close enough to Gandhi’s for him to wish to entrust it to his care after his demise. They both had their visions of autonomous self-rule, swaraj. As Ashis Nandy and others have pointed out, they were “critical traditionalists”, who were happy to borrow from the modern world, but only on terms which were uniquely and uncompromisingly Indian. Neither Gandhi nor Tagore (unlike Nehru or Ambedkar), for instance, used the modern language of ‘development’ to frame and understand India’s challenges. For Tagore, the answer to India’s economic challenges lay not in a development imitative of the West, but in “rural reconstruction”, a task which he aimed at (with initial success) in his experiments with village industries and handicrafts in Sriniketan, one of the few practical experiments in swaraj at the grassroots during the last hundred years.

Finally, both Gandhi and Tagore were the earliest harbingers of the planetary ecological crisis, the latter warning of its imminence in multiple literary genres, over 50 years before the Stockholm UN conference in 1972. To Tagore, modernity was characterised by a structural ecological alienation which all but forbade the communion with nature necessary to human freedom. If he were alive today, he would ask for our relationship to the natural world to be resumed, renewed and nourished. Without such a consecration, humanity may not survive long, let alone rediscover its freedom.

(The writer is a faculty member of Ashoka University.)
Fifty Years after Bank Nationalisation

Prabhat Patnaik

Fifty years ago on July 19, 1969, fourteen large private banks had been nationalised. Ironically the Golden Jubilee of that event, which had been a significant step in the process of building up a new financial architecture for the country, is being celebrated today by trade unions in the banking sector but not by the government of the day.

The argument that had been given for bank nationalisation had been simple: since credit represents command over capital, how this command is distributed across sectors, across social groups and across regions, determines the trajectory of social development. If the distribution of bank credit has such powerful social consequences, then this distribution must be socially controlled, for which the banks must be owned by the State on behalf of society. In fact bank nationalisation had been preceded by a brief period when there was an attempt at social control without State ownership; its failure prompted nationalisation as the only feasible means of effecting social control.

To be sure, notwithstanding all the promises, bank nationalisation did not actually mean a democratisation of the access to credit; how could it in an economy pursuing the capitalist path of development? What it did however, apart from bringing about a massive expansion of banking facilities across the country, was to broaden the base of capitalist development, by making loans available to the agricultural sector that had been systematically denied institutional credit till then; and this made possible the so-called Green Revolution. It also made finance subservient to the needs of production, rather than being employed for speculation and corporate takeover strategies as earlier.

From the very beginning, however, bank nationalisation had faced stiff opposition from big capital, since it had taken away control over the financial sector from its hands. This opposition intensified immensely after ‘economic liberalisation’ was introduced. International finance capital, which by now had become a dominant force globally and with which the domestic corporate–financial oligarchy now became integrated, was keen to have the entire world as its arena of unhindered operation; the idea of a major country like India having a financial structure that did not just elude its control but was actually largely State-owned, was anathema for it.

The insulation of the Indian financial system from global finance, which State ownership entailed, was resoundingly demonstrated when the financial crisis of 2008 struck. For the entire Indian banking system, foreign assets accounted for only 7 per cent of total assets, and these too were mainly held by private sector banks like the ICICI bank. The nationalised banks held hardly any foreign assets, let alone toxic assets, because of which the financial crisis left them completely untouched. But this very insulation was what irked international finance capital.

The US administration put enormous pressure on India to privatisate the banking system, and at the very least to privatisate the State Bank of India as a “signal” of its intent. Lawrence Summers and Timothy Geithner, treasury secretaries respectively under presidents Clinton and Obama, would visit India and insist upon the privatisation of the State Bank of India. The Indian government however could not muster enough courage to do so, since bank nationalisation had caught the imagination of the people.

Then a new offensive was launched, namely that nationalised banks were not profitable enough, that they compared poorly in terms of profitability with private sector banks. This was a complete red herring: banks had been nationalised to serve a social purpose, not for making maximum profits. The criterion for judging them was how far they had served this social purpose, not how much profits they made; and yet this argument was put forward, quite shamelessly, by individuals and ‘slot machine’ committees (which give the government the report it wants) to discredit nationalised banks and gradually prepare the public for their eventual privatisation.

Finally there was the argument about nationalised banks being saddled with a larger proportion of ‘non-performing assets’ which, it was claimed, indicated their ‘irresponsible’ lending practices. As a matter of fact, nationalised banks’ NPAs have arisen not because of their ‘irresponsibility’ but because
of changed government policies, in the context of which the role they are called upon to play saddles them with NPAs. There are three obvious changes in government policy that has meant that nationalised banks have been left holding the can.

The first relates to the fiscal squeeze that the government has brought upon itself, by limiting the size of the fiscal deficit through the FRBM Act on the one hand, and by handing out large tax concessions to the private corporate sector on the other. This has meant in effect that large infrastructure projects, which require lumpy investment, which have long gestation periods and therefore involve high risks, are now left to be implemented by the private corporate sector, rather than the public sector as earlier.

The second relates to the end of specialised financial institutions that had earlier provided long-term loans for such projects. Under the earlier regime banks gave largely short-term credit while a whole range of financial institutions like the IDBI, IFCI, SFCs and ICICI were specially set up to provide medium and long-term loans for investment. These specialised financial institutions have now dwindled in significance; some of them like the IDBI and ICICI have even converted themselves into banks. As a result banks now have to provide not just short-term credit but also medium and long-term loans for investment. These specialised financial institutions have now dwindled in significance; some of them like the IDBI and ICICI have even converted themselves into banks. As a result banks now have to provide not just short-term credit but also medium and long-term loans for investment. Since banks depend upon deposits for their resources, which can be withdrawn at any time, they are in effect “borrowing short to lend long”, a sure-shot recipe for financial stress, especially when it is remembered that many of the projects in the infrastructure sector for which they lend are highly risky projects.

Nationalised banks could just walk away from financing such projects, as many private banks do; but being nationalised banks they feel obliged to pay heed to government directives to finance such projects. And of course since these projects are now being undertaken by the private sector, the scope for ‘willful default’, where the capitalists involved simply walk away with the funds instead of putting them into the project, is great, which exposes banks to further stress. Ironically the same government which directs banks to give loans to these private projects, then makes a song and dance about the NPAs, and wants to privatise these banks because of such NPAs.

The third change in policy relates to the great reduction that has taken place in the profitability of the agricultural sector. Even though the definition of ‘priority sector’, within which agriculture falls, has been widened to a ludicrous extent, nationalised banks still give loans for agriculture, while foreign banks and private Indian banks have by and large withdrawn from giving such loans. Many private banks give loans to middlemen who then use these very funds to give loans to peasants, becoming in effect a new class of private moneylenders. In fact the ICICI bank flatly refused to give loans directly to peasants, preferring instead to deal with them through middlemen called “facilitators”.

The fact that loans to agriculture have to be periodically written off, is not because peasants have developed “bad habits”, as many capitalist / mainstream commentators pontificating against loan write-offs allege, but because agriculture has ceased to be a profitable activity. The stressed assets of nationalised banks arising from this source therefore are attributable not to any ‘irresponsibility’ on their part, but precisely to their ‘responsibility’ in giving loans to agriculture in a context where government policy has undermined agricultural profitability.

To say all this is not to paint nationalised banks in rosy colours; it is just to underscore the fact that government policy has moved away from what it had been when banks were nationalised. Indeed, the phenomenon of nationalised banks sits somewhat uncomfortably in a world dominated by international finance capital. The travails of nationalised banks arise for this reason, namely that the ethos of neoliberalism undermines their functioning. But reversing nationalisation would simply carry forward the dominance of international finance capital. It would further undermine national sovereignty, and further accentuate the process of primitive accumulation of capital at the expense of petty production and peasant agriculture.

In all the discussion about the fate of nationalised banks however, one important fact has been totally ignored, namely that these banks are not government-owned but State-owned. The government, as merely the executive wing of the State, cannot decide entirely on its own what should be the fate of these banks. But this is precisely what it has tended to do, for instance in allowing private equity into these banks and then raising the share of such equity. An announcement is simply made in the budget about disinvestment and when the budget gets passed this also gets ipso facto ratified. This must stop.

When banks were nationalised
in 1969, not only did parliament approve the decision, but even the judiciary had to give its assent, since nationalisation was challenged in the Supreme Court. Nationalisation in short had the approval of all the organs of the State. It is necessary to insist that any interference with the ownership structure of the nationalised banks, including reducing equity even in the range above 51 per cent, should have specific parliamentary sanction.

(The author is Professor Emeritus, Centre for Economic Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.)

India Opens its Own Onshore Financial Centre

Neeti Biyani and Sakshi Rai

Income and wealth inequality in India is deepening. The current regime, despite its promises to tackle black money, has chosen a contradictory course of action which has bolstered financial secrecy in the country, further widening already existing structural inequalities.

The extent of income and wealth inequality in India is higher than it has ever been in the last one hundred years. Between 1980 and 2014, the top 0.1% of India’s population saw its wealth grow 550 times the rate of the bottom 50% of the country’s population. In addition, the top 1% of the Indian population acquired 73% of the wealth generated in 2017, while the bottom 50% of the country’s population saw an increase of only 1% in their wealth. This points to the fact that economic growth and development has been uneven and unjust—the big winners of these reforms have been the rich and the influential political class.

The 1991 liberalisation reforms witnessed a rollback of public spending in the social sector, hurting the marginalised, poor and women. The global financial crisis of 2007–8 is a key example of this opaque and highly-skewed international economic system.

This system functions by way of a complex network of tax havens and secrecy jurisdictions set up by countries around the world that offer financial secrecy, provide shelter from tax liabilities, facilitating a complete avoidance of financial regulations and criminal laws. This parallel shadow world, aided by an efficient industry of lawyers, accountants and bankers, help the rich get richer not by way of increased economic activity but by avoiding paying their fair share of taxes. As a result, income and wealth remain concentrated in the hands of a miniscule number of the rich and powerful without any accountability.

Illicit cross-border financial flows, generated through a range of activities including tax dodging by multinational corporations and the elite, misappropriation of state assets and laundered proceeds from crime, lead to developing countries losing as much as $1–$1.6 trillion annually. Countries across the world also lose approximately $500 billion of potential revenue each year to tax avoidance because of multinational corporations shifting their operations to tax havens. Estimates suggest that $21 – $32 trillion of private financial wealth has been shifted by the elites to tax havens.

These are not victimless activities. Illicit financial flows are severely harmful, making their impacts felt on countries and populations across the world. While national budgets witness constraints due to a loss in revenue, secrecy in the global financial system incentivises tax fraud, embezzlement, money laundering, crime, corruption and bribery—along with encouraging wealth accumulation at the cost of eroding public services and societies’ welfare at large.

What are Tax Havens?

The phrase ‘tax haven’ usually conjures up images of faraway nations such as Switzerland, or small island jurisdictions like the British Virgin Islands and the Cayman Islands; it has been interchangeably referred to as ‘offshore’. However, in the last few decades, ‘offshore’ no longer means a destination but rather an array of features typically offered by a tax haven or a secrecy jurisdiction, which includes management of wealth and assets, as well as providing clients with complete security and access to their wealth irrespective of their physical location.

The Financial Secrecy Index 2018 (FSI) ranks Hong Kong, Singapore and Dubai among the top ten secretive jurisdictions across the world. All three of these jurisdictions have marketed themselves as
international financial services centres (IFSCs), and offer private banking reliant on secrecy. These jurisdictions use a territorial principle to taxation such that accrued profits from overseas trade are not taxed. This encourages multinational corporations to artificially shift their profits to these jurisdictions and escape paying their fair share of taxes in countries where they actually generate economic value.

**India Going Down the Same Path**

In a similar vein, India has set up its first, very own International Financial Services Centre (IFSC) in the Gujarat International Finance Tec-City (GIFT City), Gandhinagar. The IFSC, set up as a special economic zone (SEZ), was inaugurated in 2017 and has fast emerged as a global financial hub with investments totalling $1.5 billion (roughly Rs 9,607 crore) in a year’s time. The IFSC aims to target financial services, including banking, insurance and asset management; corporate processes in financial services; micro-finance; capital market and trading; information technology services and BPO services. The IFSC has been ranked tenth in the Global Financial Centres Index—ahead of Luxembourg, Seoul, Abu Dhabi, Toronto and Beijing.

This is anything but good news for a number of reasons. According to an RBI circular, IFSCs in India will be governed by no law of the land other than a law drafted by the RBI specifically for regulating IFSCs in the country. GIFT City is modelled after offshore financial centres such as Hong Kong, Singapore, City of London and Dubai. In an interview with PTI, Bombay Stock Exchange CEO Ashish Chauhan said one should conceptualise GIFT City in India as a Hong Kong in China.

He added, “So, over the last 35 years, China has used Hong Kong strategically to bring trillions of dollars of investments into China and that’s how China has become the centre of manufacturing in the world.”

This claim actually has little basis in facts, as Hong Kong serves as a turntable for Chinese capital that escapes the mainland to avoid taxation and is further round tripped to China as foreign direct investment (FDI). About 40%–60% of China’s FDI inflows were from Hong Kong in the past three decades.

Firms operating in the IFSC also enjoy numerous tax concessions, including exemptions on transaction taxes and stamp duties. This year’s Union Budget announced that capital gains tax will not apply to transfer of derivatives and certain securities by non-residents in a stock exchange established in the IFSC, including transfers received in foreign currency.

Non-corporate taxpayers operating in the IFSC will be charged minimum alternate tax at a concessional rate of 9%. As the IFSC provides for substantive tax exemptions and tax holidays, it opens avenues for tax abuse which adversely impacts public revenue and the ability to deliver public services. These tax concessions are also likely to have a distortionary impact on investment flows, trade and employment growth.

The IFSC incentivises instruments and activities related to speculative investment, which is of great concern for the Indian economy, especially in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007–08. In the post-crisis period, when the country’s economy is recovering, the government’s decision to encourage and incentivise speculative financial instruments can potentially hamper the country’s macroeconomic indicators such as the GDP growth rate and employment rate.

India accounts for over 1% of the global market for offshore financial services. The amendments in the Finance Act, 2018 have not addressed the abusive practice of tax avoidance and offshoring of wealth. The global investigations on Panama Papers and Paradise Papers have revealed the opaque global nexus between the ultra-rich, corporates and secrecy jurisdictions.

The Swiss Leaks revealed that several hundred Indian nationals and entities were using complicated offshore legal and ownership arrangements to dodge their taxes, because of which India lost out between $492 million and $1.2 billion in direct tax revenue to only one branch of HSBC. This amount equalled 44% of expenditure allocated to women’s rights and 6% of the total social sector budget in the financial year 2016–17. There is growing evidence of the devastating impact of tax avoidance by corporates and elites on human rights.

While India is a signatory to crucial tax transparency reforms, as well as a vocal supporter of the need to curb black money, the paradoxical decision to set up onshore IFSCs is strange and worrying. (Neeti Biyani and Sakshi Rai work with Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA), New Delhi.)
A Mountain That Will Not Bow Down to Corporate Loot

Shobha R.

On May 15, Dadi Kadraka, an activist with the Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti (the Niyamgiri Protection Council or NSS) which has put up a relentless fight against the corporate destruction of the Dongria Kondhs’ revered god Niyamraja, was arrested from the Muniguda market in Rayagada.

Human rights groups and local activists have condemned Kadraka’s arrest, saying the charges he was booked under, including the Arms Act and alleged links to Maoists, are baseless, and that Kadraka was an ordinary resident of Dhamanpanga village in Munikhal gram panchayat.

Local activists submitted a memorandum protesting the arrest to Rayagada Superintendent of Police Sarvana Vivek M. on May 27.

Kadraka’s friends and family are worried given the “three days’ brutal torture” the police allegedly perpetrated on him after “abducting” him in October last. The Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti says Kadraka found it difficult to walk for days after, and that the police simply left him somewhere near a station after torturing him.

Kadraka’s rearrest follows the violent death in March of Dani Batra, a 40-year-old Dalit rights activist and contract worker for Vedanta Limited’s aluminium refinery in Lanjigarh, and the arrest of NSS leader Lingaraj Azad the same month.

An Ongoing Struggle

CRPF Camp at Trilochanpur

Since March, the residents of Trilochanpur have been resisting a Central Reserve Police Force camp set up near the local gram panchayat office by forcefully evicting four Adivasi families who had been cultivating that land for generations. This despite the local gram sabhas passing resolutions rejecting the setting up of the CRPF camps.

They report that the Vedanta Alumina Company acquired around 3,000 acres of land in 2004, in Rangopali, Potagada, Bundel, Bandhuguda and other villages, with promises of giving jobs and education to their children. It has yet to fulfil these commitments, they say.

Meanwhile, “elected representatives and activists of the NSS were summoned to the SP’s office and told in no uncertain terms that their opposition to setting up a CRPF camp would not be taken well by the administration.”

Land acquisition in Kenduburudi and Jagannathpur

Residents of Kenduburudi and Jagannathpur are opposing the acquisition of 50 acres of their village land for setting up a rehabilitation colony for families displaced from Rengopalli, Kotduar and Bandhaguda, and for another permanent CRPF camp.

They say this acquisition is in addition to 1,000 acres forcibly acquired from this village in 2005–06. Residents say they have still not been adequately rehabilitated and recompensed for the earlier forcible
land acquisition.

**Construction of red mud pond at Rengopalli**

Several women at Rengopalli talked about the impending forced evictions there, and the health hazards confronting them from a red mud pond under construction.

“We face regular health issues like burning eyes and nose, skin infections, contamination of food and water, etc. due to the dust that flies into our village from the pond built by Vedanta very close to our village. We have not got any health facilities from Vedanta for the health problems we are facing,” say residents of Rengopalli.

They are compelled to rely on Vedanta because in 2009, the state government’s Lanjigarh Area Hospital was reportedly “contracted out” to Vedanta Alumina Limited. Women in Rengopalli say the company’s hospital does not have good doctors or medicines whenever they do manage to go there.

In inspection reports published between 2006 and 2009, the Odisha State Pollution Control Board (OSPCB) highlighted multiple instances of Vedanta’s failure to set in place control measures and the conditions stipulated by the Ministry of Environment and Forests and the OSPCB itself as prerequisites for granting environmental clearance to the bauxite refinery.

**The Business of Government**

Vedanta has faced no punitive action for these violations. Residents say that nearly everyone who was threatened, arrested, detained, kidnapped or murdered was an active member of the Niyamgiri movement.

“The police are going from village to village and scaring people. They are framing false cases on all those people who are fighting against the company for the sake of their people and the country,” says Lado Sikaka, an NSS leader in Lakhpadar.

Women in particular feel unsafe with the CRPF presence in the forests here. Kumodini Vadaka, a woman leader from Patanpadhar, says “We are scared to go to the market or to our forests alone now. The CRPF people constantly come and ask us if we have seen Maoists and whether we are protecting them. They even thrust their rifle butts into the stomachs of my elderly parents.”

On condition of anonymity, lawyers in the town of Bhawanipatna who are familiar with the false cases foisted on the people say that most people charged aren’t aware of the cases filed against them. The lawyers say they are paid by Vedanta to represent such clients and ensure they aren’t acquitted.

Lingaraj Azad, who was arrested in March and later released on bail, says the movement here against land grab and pollution doesn’t have the resources to employ lawyers who can keep track of the many cases being filed against their people.

The big media barely report any of these testimonies of gross human and civil rights violations. A few journalists say they want to maintain their freedom but face immense pressure, and shared on condition of anonymity that even the police have given them strict orders not to report violations from Niyamgiri.

“There are people who have been bought over by the company, to stop asking for their rights. We have lost lives like Drika Kadraka from Ambadhuni village, who was detained and later committed suicide because of police torture. However, all of us will never stop fighting for our Niyamgiri. We will die if we don’t fight,” says Lado Sikaka.

With parent company Vedanta Resources looking set to be pushed out of the Koncola Copper Mines in Zambia, and with its Sterlite Copper Plant in Tuticorin shut down by the Supreme Court after a long popular struggle, hope seems eternally alive in young protest leaders like Siram Naik.

“We are fighting against the Vedanta company which wants to sell our mountains and forests. We will not leave our God, our villages, forests, and mountains. The Vedanta company wants these rocks and what lies underneath to make itself a profit. However, they don’t realise that life giving nature is more important.”

(Courtesy: Indian Cultural Forum)
Everything about the trade war between the United States and China is bewildering. The world’s two largest economies entered a titanic struggle with harsh words and high tariffs, sending shudders through the global economy. Hundreds of billions of dollars of goods on either side stood before tariff walls that seemed unbreachable. Truces would come out of nowhere—as at the 2018 G20 meeting in Buenos Aires—but then they would be set aside by US President Donald Trump in a stream of tweets at odd hours.

In May, Trump went after Huawei, one of the world’s largest technology firms. The attack this time was not on economic grounds. Trump accused Huawei of being an espionage arm of the Chinese government. Firms from the United States that supplied Huawei with software and chips would no longer be permitted to do so. Trump’s diplomats went on the road to strongarm US allies into no longer using Huawei technology in their countries. Pressure on China resulted in the arrest of Meng Wanzhou, Huawei’s chief financial officer, on charges of bank and wire fraud in relation to US sanctions against Iran. Meng Wanzhou is the daughter of Huawei’s founder, Ren Zhengfei.

Huawei
Like many Chinese firms, Huawei began in 1987 with a modest aim—to manufacture phone switches for telecommunications firms. Then, gradually, Huawei emerged as the largest telecommunications equipment manufacturer—overtaking the Swedish multinational Ericsson—and the second largest manufacturer of smartphones—just behind the South Korean multinational Samsung. It is now one of the world’s largest technology firms, with an annual revenue that is in excess of $200 billion.

The sudden loss of 1,200 US suppliers struck Huawei hard. A quarter of the components of Huawei’s systems come from these suppliers. These US firms lost $1 billion per year, but Huawei lost immediate access to key parts. Ren Zhengfei seemed unfazed, saying that Trump’s attack on his company only strengthened their resolve to source its parts from Chinese manufacturers. Failure to get access to Google’s Android operating system led Huawei to adopt a Chinese operating system called Hongmeng. The Kunpeng 920 chip could substitute for imported chips.

In 2015, China’s President Xi Jinping had launched a program called Made in China 2025, which urges Chinese firms to use Chinese materials as much as possible. Trump’s ban on sales to Huawei merely accelerated the firm’s drive to buy from within China. Fears of more such bans and tariff wars have led even the most moderate corporate leaders—such as both Ren Zhengfei and Jack Ma—to adopt a language of technology independence.

Then, as if from nowhere, Trump withdrew his assault on Huawei. At this year’s G20 summit at Osaka, Trump said that US firms can sell to Huawei. Trump had earlier withdrawn his ban on the sale of goods to another Chinese firm, ZTE. That example showed that he would not wait long to give up his fight against Huawei.

Struggle over 5G
The next generation of high-speed wireless technology—5G—is currently being dominated by Huawei, with Sweden’s Ericsson and Finland’s Nokia far behind. No US firm is near these three in the production of 5G technology.

In April, the US government’s Defense Innovation Board released a report that noted: “The leader of 5G stands to gain hundreds of billions of dollars in revenue over the next decade, with widespread job creation across the wireless technology sector. 5G has the potential to revolutionise other industries as well, as technologies like autonomous vehicles will gain huge benefits from the faster, larger data transfer. 5G will also enhance the Internet of Things by increasing the amount and speed of data flowing between multiple devices, and may even replace the fiber-optic backbone relied upon by so many households. The country that owns 5G will own many of these innovations and set the standards for the rest of the world. For the reasons that follow, that country is currently not likely to be the United States.”

Since the US firms are unable to manufacture the equipment currently made by Huawei and others, only 11.6 percent of the US population is covered by 5G. There is no indication that AT&T and Verizon will be able to manufacture fast enough the kind of transmitters needed for the new technological system.

The erosion of US firms in the telecommunications industry
can be directly attributed to the deregulation of industry by the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Many firms fought to gain market share, with different mobile standards and carrier plans with different configurations that made it hard for consumers to switch companies. This fragmented market meant that no firm made the necessary investments toward the next generation. It has meant that US firms are at a grave disadvantage when it comes to the next generation of technology.

The rapid advance of Huawei, and the European firms, threatens both US technology firms in particular and the US economy in general. Over the past few decades, these US technology firms have become the main investors in the US economy and are the engines of its growth. If these firms falter before companies like Huawei, then the US economy will begin to splutter on fumes.

Trump’s war against Huawei is not as irrational as it seems. His administration—like others before it—has used as much political pressure as possible to constrain the growth of technology in China. Accusations of theft of intellectual property and of close ties between the firms and the Chinese military are meant to deter customers for Chinese products. These accusations have certainly dented Huawei’s brand, but they are unlikely to destroy Huawei’s ability to expand around the world.

Huawei claims that two-thirds of 5G networks outside China use its products.

Even the United Kingdom—a firm US ally—decided in secret to allow Huawei to help build the UK’s 5G network. When Defense Secretary Gavin Williamson allegedly leaked news that the UK’s National Security Council made this decision, he was fired from the cabinet. Huawei’s technological advances are greater than the chatter about security threats and intellectual property thefts. All four of the major mobile networks in the UK already use Huawei equipment.

It is likely that Trump’s administration will withdraw its request that China extradite Meng Wanzhou. In December, Trump said that if he thinks it is good for the United States, then he will intervene with the US Justice Department to no longer pursue the extradition. This statement—made to Reuters—suggests that Trump is not committed to using family pressure against Huawei. It suggests that Trump now realises that he can try to twist Ren Zhengfei’s arm as tightly as possible, but that Huawei and China are unlikely to blink. They have the upper hand.

(Vijay Prashad is an Indian historian, editor and journalist.)

India’s College Students, Teachers Must Now Learn the Art of Unlearning

Avijit Pathak

“Most learning happens casually, and even most intentional learning is not the result of programmed instruction,” said Ivan Illich.

It is not easy to remain secure with power. The intoxication of power breeds insecurity. And hence, it is not surprising that each regime of power has its own discourse of education through which it seeks to shape, modulate and control the way people think and perceive the world.

At this moment of Indian history, when the proponents of the ruling ideology are hyper-enthusiastic about their mission, centred on the doctrine of some sort of religious nationalism, it is quite obvious that they too would feel tempted to curb alternative modes of thinking.

As formal or institutionalised education has acquired tremendous significance in the age of modernity, the official curriculum often becomes a subject of contestation.

There seems to be no escape from the ongoing politics of “what is worth teaching”. The eyes of the establishment, therefore, observe the NCERT school texts, delete the “irrelevant” content, and now as the episode of the Delhi University indicates, even the reading material of courses in sociology, history, political science and English literature cannot be spared.

The message is clear. Delete everything that is “objectionable”. Hence, as we are asked to believe, the stories of Gujarat and Muzaffarnagar riots are objectionable as they “hurt” people’s sentiments. Or for that matter, Marxism or Maoism is dangerous and it is not a good idea to show Hindu gods as members of the LGBT community!

It is not difficult to make sense of this phenomenon. Enough has already been said about education as an ideological apparatus. We also know the role of education in consolidating the ruling class’s hegemony. And it is also clear that extremist ideology of any kind (be it Left or Right) is burdened with the dogma of certainty. It is, therefore, inherently against the spirit of plurality, epistemological
anarchy and creative voices. While Stalin hated Trotsky, Adorno could not work in Hitler’s Germany, and given a chance the likes of Pragya Thakur would like to ban the books of Mahatma Gandhi.

Not solely that. The insiders know that even academic priestcraft is no less dogmatic. For instance, even under normal circumstances, those who are extremely powerful as experts in their respective disciplines play their own politics of inclusion and exclusion. For instance, if you teach field work to undergraduate sociology students of Delhi University, is it necessary that you have to keep glorifying M.N. Srinivas and Andre Beteille and their “village studies”?

Or is it easy to include, say, Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* rather than Anthony Giddens’s *The Consequences of Modernity* in a paper on sociological theories? The entire process of making the reading list—what to include, and what to exclude—is never an innocent, value-neutral process. Not merely the political class, even the academic bosses love to condition the mind.

But then, the question I ask is whether it is still possible for a teacher or a student to retain her creative agency, see beyond the official syllabus, and engage in a creative process of unlearning for deconditioning the mind.

**The art of unlearning**

Rabindranath Tagore had said, “The fact that we exist has its truth in the fact that everything else does exist, and the ‘I am’ in me crosses the finitude whenever it deeply realises itself in the ‘Thou art’. The crossing of the limit produces joy, the joy that we have in beauty, in love, in greatness.”

Even though in the life of a student or a teacher, the heavy baggage of the official syllabus puts enormous pressure, I would still insist that there is surplus in human consciousness, and it is not altogether impossible to unlearn the prescribed texts, and trust what one actually sees, experiences and realises. Furthermore, as a teacher, I have realised that even under the most hostile circumstances and structural constraints, our creative agency remains alive, if we are really eager to ignite it.

Imagine a situation. The official syllabus does not want you to learn about Gujarat or Muzaffarnagar riots. But then, two things are still possible. After delivering a lecture on the prescribed text, the teacher can still take the remaining ten minutes, and invite the students to the world of Saadat Hasan Manto. Say, the heart-breaking story of Sakina revealing the wound of partition: what it meant to move from Amritsar to Lahore, and experience the horror of brute masculinity and gendered violence implicit in the discourse of communalism and religious nationalism. It may motivate the young minds to explore further, and eventually discover Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence* in a book shop in Old Delhi, even if it is not part of the syllabus.

This is what I did as a student. I kept reading Franz Kafka’s stories and novels, and understood the discontents of modernity, even though the syllabus wanted me to read *The Structure of Social Action* by Talcott Parsons. Well, Louis Dumont was in the syllabus, but then none could prevent me from reading Premchand, and becoming more sensitive to the caste question.

Or, for that matter, if the students are encouraged to evolve a profound art of seeing and experiencing, they would overcome the ‘otherness’ of the field, see the street children begging in posh Gulmohar Park in New Delhi, construction workers ruthlessly exploited by the politician—contractor mafia and poverty in the ghettoised Muslim colonies. Even if the official syllabus speaks of peace, economic growth and equality, you would never take it seriously. In other words, you would gain the courage to laugh at the syllabus.

I give tremendous importance to this capacity to see the limits to bounded knowledge. It is sad that we have killed the imagination of teachers by reducing them to mere task masters merely completing the syllabus and dictating the notes for the exams; it is pathetic that we love to restrict the vibrancy of the young mind.

At times, it shocks me when even at the stage of doctoral work, a researcher is forced to write the synopsis in a standardised format. As a result, ideas disappear; there is no catharsis, and what remains is only the anxiety whether the section on research questions should come before research objectives; or whether ethnography or ‘snow ball sampling’ would be part of the methodology. The ritualisation of academic life is the enemy of creativity.

Yes, the mind, conditioned by the official syllabus, the ruling ideology and the academic ritualism, needs to be liberated: the way Tagore accomplished it, Illich fought for it, and Krishnamurti reflected on it. This is the art of unlearning. This is the moment of awakening and liberation.

Yes, Delhi University students and teachers—your creative struggle has just begun.

(Avijit Pathak is professor of Sociology at Jawaharlal Nehru University.)
Eminent theatre director from Karnataka S. Raghunandana on July 17 declined the Sangeet Natak Akademi award for 2018, a day after it was announced, in protest against incidents of “mob lynching in the name of God and religion” and the frequent attempts to stifle dissenting views of public intellectuals and activists.

Full Text of S Raghunandana’s statement

The Sangeet Natak Akademi is an autonomous institution and has been, on the whole, upholding its principles of autonomy through the years. I thank the Akademi for giving me, along with others, its award for the year 2018.

However, today there is mob lynching and violence in the name of God and religion, and even in the matter of what one eats. The powers-that-be are directly, or indirectly, responsible for these deadly acts of murder and violence. They are directly, or indirectly, supporting the hate campaign that uses all means, including those offered by internet technology, to fulfil its unholy aims. An attempt is being made to put in place systems that will teach lessons of hate and irrationality to students everywhere, from those in institutions of the highest education to those in schools and colleges.

The very meaning of what it is to be an Indian, and the adage Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, are being distorted, and erased. But, is not hybridity Shivam indeed? Crores of people like me can only lament: Cry, the Beloved Country. Young people such as Kanhaiya Kumar who should shape the future of India and the world at large are facing charges of sedition and criminal conspiracy. Others—intellectuals and social activists—are facing trial under UAPA. Most of them have not even got bail and are spending time in prison. These are people who have always stood up for the cause of the most exploited and downtrodden of our country and everywhere else. They have argued on behalf of the exploited in the courts, have written books and articles about their suffering, have guided them to fight non-violently, have always followed the tenets prescribed by the Constitution of India, and have upheld its spirit and values. They have waged their righteous struggle with not a thought for themselves. Yet they are in prison.

Our rulers have decided that the best way to silence the poor and the powerless is to throttle the voices of these conscientious intellectuals and activists. This has always been so, regardless of the party, or parties, in power. These wonderful men and women, young and old, are our truest patriots. They tread the path of true Dharma and uphold its values. They want, work for, and live for nothing but the good of all beings, sentient and non-sentient.

I cannot, as a theatre artist, poet and playwright, accept this award when such injustice is being done to these dharma margis in my country, in the name of my country. My aima saksi, my antaryami does not permit me to.

This is not a protest. It comes out of despair, a helpless inability to accept the award. I respect the Akademi, and all those who have received this award, now and in the past. I thank the members of the Akademi, and apologise.

May there be Shiva karunya.

***

K Satchidanandan, Keki Daruwalla, Ganesh Devy, Ashok Vajpeyi, Nayantara Sahgal and Githa Hariharan have issued the following statement on behalf of the Indian Writers Forum in support of Radhunandana:

Since 2015, writers and artists have protested against the culture of intolerance and hatred promoted by the present rulers of India. This tide of protest continues. In the most recent act of protest, theatre artist Raghunandana has refused to accept the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award. His open letter to the Akademi describes the acts of violence, abuse and vengeance that he is protesting against: lynchings by gaurakshaks; the abuse of Dalits, Muslims and women; the vicious propaganda against intellectuals and the hounding of activists; and the further erosion of educational and public institutions since the general elections of 2019.

We salute theatre artist Raghunandana and express our solidarity with his decision. We also call on more writers and artists to protest against the hate politics ruining our democratic polity and challenging our constitutional rights.
Forty years ago in 1979, a huge majority of Nicaraguans led by the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) overthrew the cruelest dictatorship in the Americas, a close ally of the United States. Ever since then, the US government has worked to destroy the FSLN. For forty years they have failed miserably, though it has led to enormous suffering for Nicaragua’s people.

When President Daniel Ortega salutes the hundreds of thousands of FSLN supporters on July 19, it will be an unassailable vindication of his own massive political achievement and a truly historic testament to the power of Augusto Sandino’s legacy. All of that would be sufficient to make this national event, in a small country with fewer than seven million people, of tremendous regional significance in Latin America and the Caribbean. But two things make the 40th anniversary of the revolutionary triumph in 1979 even more special and significant.

First, in the current international context, Nicaragua’s unbreakable identification and solidarity with Venezuela and Cuba, who are also supported by Bolivia, has created a regional bloc based on the Bolivarian vision of Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro, correspondingly resilient in every sense. Their socialist policies of economic democratisation expose the neoliberal austerity policies of the US and its allies as a deliberate corporate-driven war on the impoverished majority. Likewise, their defense of sovereignty, non-intervention and peaceful resolution of conflicts contrast sharply with the sadism and hypocrisy of the aggression of the US and its allies.

In that context, the Sandinista government’s undeniable social, economic and cultural advances, like those of Cuba and Venezuela, effectively dismantle the mystifying neocolonial labyrinth of impoverishment and dependence. Their success, despite unending US aggression, demonstrates that the US has no viable policy for the region, only its abhorrent Monroe Doctrine mission of loot and domination.

Second, July 19 of this year is the first anniversary of the Nicaraguan people’s defeat of the failed US backed coup attempt of 2018 against President Daniel Ortega. That victory over the vicious, hateful Nicaraguan right-wing and their US backers was an overwhelming, categorical affirmation of broad and deep popular loyalty to the revolutionary leadership of President Ortega and the Sandinista Front for National Liberation.

For two or three weeks in April and May 2018, a majority of people in the country were bemused and unsure about what to think of the unprecedented murderous unrest and psychological warfare they experienced. But within two months, the reality of the coup attempt became clear and the majority reaction against it was patient, resolute and definitive.

In Nicaragua, Venezuela and Cuba, a strategic grass roots discipline, humanity and determination has developed in response to decades of right-wing opposition abuse, violence, sadism, corruption and deceit. In Nicaragua, the insistence of President Daniel Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo on dialogue and peaceful resolution of conflict was embodied in the conditional amnesty approved on June 8 this year, that led to the release of around 300 opposition activists who had been sentenced or were awaiting trial for very serious crimes, many involving murder, torture and grievous bodily harm. So, July 19 this year will also be a triumphant vindication of the commitment to Peace, Reconciliation and Understanding which gives the leaders of Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela such strong moral prestige and authority both among their own populations and also in the wider region, especially among the Latin American countries.

July 19 also marks further advances in the implementation of the FSLN’s historic program begun 40 years ago in 1979. Development of the Caribbean Coast, equality between women and men, mass participation of people in literacy, education, health care and both civil and military defense. Perhaps most important of all have been the processes of popular consultation promoted by the FSLN, from the Autonomy Law for Indigenous and Afro-descendent people in the Caribbean Coast and the Constituent processes of the 1980s to the processes of social and economic consensus and dialogue of the last 12 years.

Just as there was clearly one Nicaragua before and a very different...
Nicaragua after July 19, 1979, so now too there is a new Nicaragua on July 19, 2019. Of particular importance is how the defeat of 2018’s failed coup attempt has vindicated the popular economy’s fundamental role in deepening Nicaragua’s revolutionary democratisation. Hundreds of thousands of previously excluded women and rural families now participate in making a decisive contribution to Nicaragua’s economic development via micro-businesses, collectives and cooperatives.

Two things bear repeating. First, the attempted coup was an attack not against the mistakes that may have been made by the government, but against all the progress and achievements on behalf of peasants and workers that threatened the interests of the national and regional elites.

Second, the coup attempt was indeed defeated, and the coup plotters are today completely discredited in the eyes of Nicaragua’s people. This means that the Sandinista Revolution’s 40th anniversary marks a new stage in the Nicaraguan people’s march towards independence and justice. It symbolises a class victory guaranteeing political power to all Nicaragua’s people, both as subjects of social rights, and also as direct producers controlling decisive spaces in the economy. This is a categorical defeat for the country’s reactionary and traitorous oligarchy who can see power slipping irrevocably from their hands.

In July 2018, the FSLN defeated the US-backed opposition attempt to destroy it, just as it did during the 17 years when it was in opposition after the historic electoral defeat of 1990, storming back to power in the 2006 elections. Promoted by the US and its allies, the 2018 "soft coup" was a life-or-death trial of the resolution of Nicaragua’s people and of the Sandinista movement.

It failed because it crashed against the reality of a people who had been empowered and who identified with the grassroots social and economic policies of a Sandinista government that are regarded by the majority as fair, efficient and focused on the development of the ordinary people of Nicaragua. It also failed thanks to the sacrifice and restraint of the national police and the army during the months of crisis, from which those forces emerged with more popular legitimacy than ever.

Forty years on from 1979, the challenges for Nicaragua and the Sandinista movement are enormous, but so are their advances. Forty years ago, people at the grass-roots level learned to read and write. Today their children are professionals, lawyers, doctors, engineers, revolutionary teachers, trained in an ethic of serving the people.

The Nicaragua of 40 years ago has urbanised impressively. The generation now ready to assume the leadership of Nicaraguan society are children of the previous generation of Sandinista heroes and martyrs who sacrificed everything in the 1970s and 1980s. While the generations that follow may have lived all their lives in the 21st century, the project of Augusto Sandino and of the Sandinista Front is more valid than ever before. It is the vision of a free and sovereign homeland, with social justice, free from ignorance, one in which people at the grass-roots level learned to read and write. Today their children are professionals, lawyers, doctors, engineers, revolutionary teachers, trained in an ethic of serving the people.

Borge described the process as one of "patient impatience", of strategic vision, alert understanding of the historical moment, a process of political discipline and the highest moral values. As long as the Nicaraguan nation exists as an objective, as a project, as a work-in-progress, there will be Sandino and there will be a Sandinista Front ensuring that this revolutionary project will be of, by and for the people.

And if the world ever reaches a stage that no longer needs nations, when all the Earth’s people live in fraternity and human beings live in the "Spirit of Love", there too will be Sandino, because that is the vision he has bequeathed to us. Forty years after the triumph of 1979 and one year after the defeat of the failed coup attempt, the 40th anniversary celebration signifies absolute revolutionary commitment and unity among Sandinistas of all generations who have gained a new awareness of the historical sense of their identity and are more determined than ever to defend their victories and achievements for Nicaragua, for Latin America and for all of humanity.

(Courtesy: Telesur)
Massive Protests in Puerto Rico Seek an End to Colonisation

Zoe PC

The people of Puerto Rico have had enough. Over the past couple of days, the Boriquen people on the island and across the diaspora have been mobilising en masse to demand the resignation of governor Ricardo Rosselló, and strengthening calls for the decolonisation of the island. Today (July 17), in San Juan, organisations have called for a massive march from the Capitol building to Fortaleza, the official residence of the governor of Puerto Rico, where mobilisations have been taking place for the past several nights in spite of brutal police repression.

The mobilisations came in response to the arrests of 6 people, including two former officials in Rosselló’s administration, by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) on corruption charges, as well as the leak of a group chat with Rosselló and his political confidants by the Puerto Rican-based Center for Investigative Journalism.

In the group chat, Rosselló and his advisors discussed how to manage the political narrative through media and boost the image of the governor and the administration through the manipulation of political polls. The document also revealed that the governor and his “brothers” used extremely sexist, misogynist and homophobic jokes and language while discussing other politicians, journalists, social movements and collectives, and even members of the Fiscal Control Board. There were even jokes made about the more than 4,645 people who died in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria.

The corruption charges against the six individuals involve the misdirection of $15 million worth of Medicaid and federal education funds.

The two incidents were the tip point that sparked a mass uprising on the island which continues to suffer nearly 2 years after Hurricane Maria. Activists have pointed out that the devastation and slow recovery after the hurricane was directly related to Puerto Rico’s position as a colony of the United States.

Jocelyn Velazquez Rodriguez, spokesperson of Jornada Se Acabaron Las Promesas, explained in May last year that “the US government has been an obstacle to our recuperation completely. For weeks, they blocked the arrival of supplies, they took control of the entire health and security apparatus. They have basically served to slow down the process of recovery, denying to citizens the aid which they rightfully should receive.”

Just a year before the Hurricane Maria hit, on August 31, 2016, the US Congress passed the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act. This law authorises the creation of a Fiscal Control Board (FCB) by the US government to tackle the ‘debt crisis’ on the island. The FCB has the power and authority to restructure Puerto Rico’s debt and budget.

Without mentioning the illegitimacy of Puerto Rico’s ‘debt’ in the first place, the measures taken to address it have been devastating and were even worse following Hurricane Maria. Pensions of retirees have been cut, the tuition fee at the State university has been tripled, labour reforms were passed which take away workers’ rights and guarantees, key state enterprises have been put up for privatisation, environmental regulations have been relaxed to promote extractive industry activities and hundreds of schools have been shut down.

Julia Keheler, who was one of the six who was arrested last week, served as secretary of education of Puerto Rico in Rosselló’s administration. Keheler who is neither Puerto Rican nor has a background in education, hails from the US Republican Party and was responsible for closing 442 schools and pushing for the entry of charter schools in the Puerto Rican public education system. While in office, she received an annual salary of $250,000 which was justified by Rosselló. She eventually was forced to step down in April 2019 due to massive opposition to her push for privatisation and allegations of corruption.

Keheler and Rosselló embody in many ways everything that the Boriquen people are resisting. The duo and other government officials, such as Ángela Ávila-Marrero, the head of Puerto Rico Health Insurance Administration who was also arrested last week, were slashing the budgets of key public sector services like education and health care in a country reeling after a devastating hurricane. They were using government funds for personal gain while pushing the people into
Mainstream politics in Europe and North America is increasingly divided into two hostile camps: on one side are conservative reactionaries who glorify imperialism and wish to resurrect it, on the other are avowedly progressive liberals and socialists who express varying degrees of shame about the past but deny that imperialism continues in any meaningful way to define relations between rich and poor countries.

Even the debate on reparations for slavery and colonialism is framed in terms of correcting past wrongs, excluding any notion that imperialist plunder of nature and living labour continues apace in the modern ‘post-colonial’ world.

One reason for this myopia is that imperialism is confused with colonial occupation. Apart from the north of Ireland and occupied Palestine, colonies are a thing of the past, ergo the same is true of imperialism. But colonial rule is just one of several possible forms of imperialism; its unvarying essence is plunder—of human and natural wealth. Capitalism has evolved new and far more effective ways to plunder than by sending armies to ransack poor countries and butcher their people. Just as chattel slavery was replaced with the silent compulsion of wage slavery, in which workers ‘freely’ sell their labour to capitalists, so colonial plunder has been replaced by what is euphemistically known as ‘free trade’.

The costs of coffee

Consider, for example, a £2.50 cup of coffee purchased from one of the chains. Just 1p goes to the farmer who cultivated and harvested the coffee. In recent years the world market price for green coffee beans has plummeted and, at £2.00 per kilogram, is close to its lowest in history in real terms. For many of the 25 million small farmers who grow 94% of the world’s coffee, this is far less than the cost of production. Coffee farmers in Central America, for instance, need between £3.30 and £4.10 per kilogram just to break even, so they currently earn absolutely nothing for their hard labour and that of their children who typically help to bring in the harvest. Instead, they go deeper into debt; they watch their children starve; some turn to cultivating coca, opium or marijuana; many abandon their farms altogether and head towards the US border or to vast slums surrounding swollen cities.

Meanwhile, the capitalist firms that roast the coffee, almost entirely headquartered in Europe and N. America, see their fat profits get fatter still, while the cafe chains and the landlords from whom they rent their premises turn around half of the price of a cup of coffee into profit.

The GDP illusion

Remarkably, all but 2p of the £2.50 cup of coffee counts towards the UK’s GDP. This is a particularly glaring example of The GDP Illusion, the amazing conjuring trick whereby wealth generated by super-exploited farmers and workers in plantations, mines and sweatshops across Africa, Asia and Latin America magically
reappears in the gross ‘domestic’ product of the countries where the products of their labour are consumed. And they are super-exploited because, no matter how hard they work, they cannot feed their families or pay for essential needs like healthcare and education that workers in rich countries rightly regard as their birthright.

What’s true of coffee is, to varying degrees, also true of our clothes, gadgets, kitchen appliances and much else. For example, of the £20 paid to Primark or M&S for a shirt made in Bangladesh, at most £1 will appear in Bangladesh’s GDP, of which perhaps 1p will be paid to the garment worker whose 70-hour week will not earn enough to feed her children. Leaving aside the cost of the cotton raw material, the vast bulk of that £20 will appear GDP of the country where this product is consumed.

Around 40% of the final sale price will end up in the hands of the government—not just 20% VAT, but also taxes on the profits of the department stores, landlords and other service providers, and on the wages of all those who work for them. The government uses this money to pay for the army and police, the NHS, pensions etc. So, when anyone says “why should we let migrants use our NHS?”, they should be answered, “because they’ve helped to pay for it!” Unfortunately, no-one on the ‘left’ is currently saying this!

21st century imperialism

During what is known as the neoliberal era, from around 1980 onwards, capitalists shifted production of garments and many other items to low-wage countries. Their motive: to boost profits by substituting low-waged labour abroad for more expensive labour at home, thereby slashing wage bills while avoiding direct confrontation with their own workers. Much of what used to be called the ‘Third World’ was turned into a giant export processing zone producing cheap inputs and consumer goods for Europe and North America. As a result, profits, prosperity and social peace in rich countries became ever more dependent on super-exploitation of hundreds of millions of workers in poor countries.

This must be called by its true name: imperialism; a new, modern, capitalist form of imperialism, one that doesn’t rely on crude techniques inherited from the feudal era—but which certainly does indulge in state terrorism, covert warfare and direct military intervention whenever necessary.

Not only did the global shift of production permit a restoration of profitability and a resumption of capital accumulation, it dramatically increased competition between workers across borders. In the economic struggle—the struggle to protect and improve one’s position within the capitalist system in contradistinction to the political struggle to overthrow it—seeking protection from increased competition is a natural and normal reflex. But this does not make it progressive! The other side of the coin to emigration of production to low-wage countries is immigration of workers from these countries. Hostility to immigration was the single-most important factor that induced most workers in Britain to vote against EU membership. Workers’ reflex response to increased competition—calls for walls to be built and borders to be closed—is the clearest possible example of what Lenin called “the spontaneous, trade unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie.”

Evidence of the persistence and indeed pervasiveness of imperialism is all around us. Yet liberals, social democrats and even many who consider themselves revolutionary socialists are blind to this, helped by semantic quibbles about what ‘imperialism’ means, and hiding behind statistics that obscure far more than they reveal. Imperialism-glorification is detestable, but imperialism-denial is a much bigger obstacle to building a movement capable of overturning the dictatorship of the rich that lurks behind the increasingly tattered and discredited façade of democracy.

(John Smith teaches international political economy at Kingston University in London.)
Summary of Resolutions Passed at the Conference:

i) The Party urges the citizens to become fearless and not to be lured by petty allurement. It exhorts the people to mobilise to persuade the election commission to use paper ballot instead of EVM. It also demands electoral reforms like mentioning name of the purchaser on electoral bond, adopting system of proportional representation wherein seats are allocated to parties in the Vidhan Sabha and Lok Sabha in proportion to the votes polled by them, and making the Right to Information Act applicable to registered parties.

ii) The Party appeals to the country to give up the Western model of development which is not able to provide jobs to vast number of youths, widens inequality and accelerates global warming, and in place of that, evolve an alternative model aiming at full employment, by investing more in agriculture, forest development and small industries which can be run by renewable energy and located in a decentralized manner.

iii) The following changes be made in the draft National Education Policy:
   - Values like justice, liberty, equality and brotherhood be mentioned as guiding principles of education policy;
   - The State provide quality, common and free primary and secondary education; no privatisation.
   - Only public universities should be given approval to operate.

iv) Increase the allocation for health, and improve conditions of Primary Health Centers.

v) Adequate security be provided to women at public places and educational institutions. Recommendations of Mahila Ayog be implemented faithfully.

Following office bearers were elected for next two years. President: Pannalal Surana. Vice Presidents: Sandip Pandey, Balwant Singh Kheda and Rajshekharan Nair. General Secretaries: Shyam Gambhir, Tarakershwar Singh, Marminder Singh Mansahia, Manju Mohan and Goutam Kumar. Treasurer: Jayanti bhai Panchal.
"We are, what we repeatedly do, Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."

Aristotle

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10 Trade Unions Call for Nationwide Protest Against Labour Codes on August 2

On July 24, 2019, ten central trade unions gave a call for holding nationwide protests on August 2 against the government’s move to introduce two labour codes in parliament, claiming that their objections to the draft laws were ignored totally.

“Central trade unions INTUC, AITUC, HMS, CITU, AIUTUC, TUCC, SEWA, AICCTU, LPF, UTUC and Independent Federations/Associations—take strong objection and condemn bulldozing of codification of labour laws and other laws in spite of strong objections from the trade union movement,” a joint statement issued by the ten central trade unions said.

The unions condemned the anti-worker moves of the government and called upon the workers, their unions and federations, irrespective of affiliations, to observe August 2, 2019, with countrywide united protest and raise the demand to withdraw the proposed anti-worker legislations. The central trade unions also called upon the Members of Parliament to oppose the ruling party’s move.

Statement by Several Peoples’ Organisations

This a statement released by Working People’s Charter Secretariat. The statement is based on contributions from a large collective of organisations, trade unions, academics and activists, namely Aajeevika Bureau, Rashtriya Hamal Panchayat, Delhi Shramik Sangathan, Hawkers Joint Action Committee, Meena Menon, professors Ravi Srivastava, Praveen Jha and Babu Mathew, along with Ashim Roy, Rahul Sapkal, Sister Lissy, Dihari Mazdoor Sangathan and the NCCEBL.

On July 4, the Economic Survey argued that a higher national minimum wage is central to addressing inequality and widespread poverty in the country. A couple of weeks later, the government of India trashed its own analysis by proposing a “starvation wage” of Rs 178 a day—a minimum wage hike of merely Rs 2!

Experts allege that it is a precursor of what is in store for millions of workers as the cabinet passed two of the four proposed labour codes—Code on Wages as well as the Code on Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions.

Working people are a national asset—undermining their well-being is nothing short of a calamity. A need-based minimum wage
should be guided by Supreme Court jurisprudence, as laid down in the Raptakos case, which is based on tests and principles laid down by the judiciary. Any recommendation for a wage level below this should be supported by a robust rationale.

The two codes were tabled for discussion on July 23 by Santosh Gangwar, minister of Labour and Employment. With this, the parliament has struck the proverbial hammer on the fate of millions of workers, robbing them of the possibility of decent work and wages, an equal workplace and avenues for access to justice.

Primarily driven by the interests of the industry, this predatory piece of legislation is all set to alter the labour protection landscape in India beyond repair and reclaim. It shows that there is a clear drive to “informalise the formal” which has been central to the overall architecture of the emerging labour regime.

New minimum wage precursor to darker days to come

The new minimum wage of Rs 178 per day translates to Rs 4,628 per month. It goes against the Labour Ministry’s own expert committee recommendation of Rs 375–447 per day, let alone the 15th Indian Labour Conference’s suggestion of Rs 692 a day, Rs 18,000 a month. The new national minimum wage, half of what was recommended, truly portends a death knell on India’s labour protection framework.

The rhetoric on labour codes make it appear as if it passionately argues for a minimum wage. A closer look at the provisions of the wage code, however, busts this myth.

First and foremost, it violates the Supreme Court and the 15th Indian Labour Conference guidelines for a “needs based” criteria (covering nutrition, healthcare, education and provisions for old age) to fix the minimum wage—something that was adopted for Central government employees, but ignored for the larger mass of unorganised sector workers.

No principles, whatsoever have been laid down with regards to determining minimum wages, and the entire exercise has been left to the discretion of the central advisory board.

Wages are also proposed to be determined by state-level advisory boards, something that Indian industry has long wanted. Experts argue that such an arrangement would lead to a race to the bottom as different states would compete to attract investments by lowering wages—an observation that is borne out by facts on the ground.

Reports suggest that in the period between 2010 and 2015, several industrialists relocated from Okhla Industrial Area in Delhi to Uttar Pradesh and Haryana as the latter offered 25–35% lower minimum wages than Delhi. Flight of capital would become extremely convenient in such a regime, pushing state governments to compromise on worker’s wages and welfare.

One may well question the intention of the government of India in even announcing such a national minimum wage. In our judgment it is primarily a signal to the industry that the jungle has been let loose, only wilder this time, and wages can be pushed down to the lowest levels possible to suit the interests of capital.

Chowkidar not even a worker per law

Despite its claims, both the codes exclude millions of unorganised workers. The Occupational Safety and Health Code does not cover workers employed in small enterprises deploying 10 or fewer workers, or those in the informal sector. As per an estimate, this is over 85% of India’s labour market, especially including those in medium and small enterprises, which often tend to be more risky and vulnerable to occupational hazards and safety violations.

The wage code also does not cover the large mass of informal workers because its definition of “employer” is ambiguous and narrow. For example, the code says, “Employer means a person who employs, whether directly or through any person, or on his behalf or on behalf of any person”. Most workers would struggle to establish their employment relations to benefit from the Code provisions.

Equality not a mandate labour codes support

Disturbingly, the code does not have any provisions to prohibit discrimination against workers from Adivasi and Dalit communities. There is pervasive evidence on the exclusion faced by such workers in the form of low earnings, wage thefts, abuse, harassment, low opportunities and minimal upward mobility. The new law is blind to it all.

Your wages can be stolen

What happens if a worker does not receive due wages or does not receive them in time? As per the new code, in case of a dispute, a worker can now approach only a quasi-judicial, appellate authority, not within the jurisdiction of courts—a violation of the Civil Procedure Code section 9 that requires mandatory judicial review of decisions. What is worse is that a claim can only be filed by an appropriate authority,
employee or trade union. This leaves out all workers in casual, informal, undocumented work, denying them any formal avenues to seek justice.

India’s informal economy is structured through long serpentine chains of contractors. Migrant workers often do not know who their employer is. The new wage code weakens the liability of the principal employer to pay wages to contract labour, if the contractor has failed to do so.

This has grave and far reaching consequences on the access to justice for informal workers, especially in a scenario where the volume of wage thefts from such workers is unacceptably high. Notably, the Occupational Safety and Health Code does talk about Principal Employer liability but it stealthily passes the buck to the manager or the supervisor.

It appears as though the government is trying to legalise contractualisation, instead of abolishing it. It is worth recalling that the contract labour act was legislated in 1979 with a view to abolish the contract system, while it is likely to become the new normal under this code.

‘How to supply cheap, pliable labour’

The entire tenor of both the codes reeks of eagerness to appease industry and create the much-hyped labour market flexibility and ease of doing business. This is exemplified by the flexible provisions for overtime, a move that can potentially legitimise 14-hour workdays as the norm.

Secondly, by permitting recoverable advances, the new wage code leaves marginalised workers vulnerable to coercive labour. This will be especially detrimental to distressed labour migrants employed in the informal sector, who are willing to accept advances to provide for their families while they are away, entrapping themselves in coercive labour relationships and new forms of slavery. This is also in complete violation of the legal presumption declared by the Supreme Court that clearly links advances to forced labour.

Furthermore, the code has almost completely rejected the existing regulatory framework, attempting perhaps to eliminate all forms of inspection mechanisms for the unorganised sector. This means that the majority of the workforce will be outside the ambit of the code, leaving them completely vulnerable to unfettered exploitation.

Labour codes craftily written

Finally, it is most ironical that the parliament is about to debate on what could be the most poorly written piece of legislation in Indian history. Both the codes have no understanding of informal labour and its requirements from the law. There is a lot of ambiguity in the way provisions are phrased. At times the codes get too specific and at times too vague, reflecting either poor groundwork done or a deliberate ambiguity to allow for excessive discretion of the appropriate government.

The Occupational Safety and Health Code most notably subsumes the Building and Other Construction Workers’ Act, 1996 leaving out millions of construction workers in the lurch who were enrolled with the welfare board created under the Act. The code makes shoddy, vague mentions of provisions for construction workers, too visible to miss.

While many of us have been fighting for a change in labour laws ourselves and demanding a protective framework for informal workers in India, the proposed changes are far from what we have strived for. Our collective analysis shows that the new codes are crafty—in the garb of promoting worker welfare and enabling formalisation, it is seeking to repudiate basic human and labour rights to workers.

**Higher minimum wages for workers in Delhi**

In a historic counter to this dismal state of wages in the Indian labour market and policy discourse, the workers’ movement has made a major stride forward in the National Capital Territory of Delhi.

The Working Peoples Charter, along with other trade unions and workers’ organisations of Delhi, successfully pushed for the first upward revision of minimum wages in 22 years in the NCT, based on revised estimates of living costs. Through these efforts, they successfully ensured the adoption of the recommendations of the Raptakos judgment, despite attempts by representatives of the industry to bypass the same.

The Delhi government is currently in the process of implementing the wage hike on the recommendations of the Minimum Wage Advisory Committee. The amendment takes into account the positive impact of inflation on the cost of commodities in the workers’ consumption basket. This effort has created hope for the entire nation to advance the agenda of needs-based minimum wage and implementation of the Supreme Court landmark order in the Raptakos case.
India's Labour Laws Being Amended for Companies, Not Workers

Gautam Mody

The Bharatiya Janata Party government moved two Lok Sabha bills on Tuesday to legislate the Code on Wages 2019 (WC) and the Occupational Health, Safety and Working Conditions Code 2019 (OHSC).

The WC seeks to amalgamate and amend the four laws covering minimum wages, payment of wages, bonus and equal remuneration. The OHSC does the same with 13 laws including the Factories Act, the Contract Labour Act, the Interstate Migrant Workmen Act and specific laws covering beedi workers, cinema workers, construction workers, dock workers, plantation workers and motor transport workers, sales promotion employees and working journalists.

In the name of simplifying laws, the BJP government is trying to attack all workers in the country—from the lowest paid to the highest, from those who live in villages to those in metropolitan cities, from those who work in the smallest of farms, fields and inside households to those who work in the most modern of factories and offices. This is an attack on the entire working class.

The Statement of Objects and Reasons of the two Bills relies on the recommendations submitted by the 2nd National Commission of Labour in 2002. These were rejected by all trade unions and not implemented. The language of government gives the impression that it is statutorily bound by these recommendations and worse so, claims that the Bills have emerged through a tripartite process!

The BJP government’s own description of the Bills is evidence enough that it favours employers. The Bills convey the BJP’s understanding that “facilitation for ease of compliance of labour laws will promote setting up of more enterprises; this catalysing the creation of employment opportunities”. Over the last five years as the country rose on the global index of ‘ease of doing business’, unemployment rose to highest level in 45 years.

The Bills presuppose that the “use of technology in its (the laws’) enforcement” will reduce violations. In reality, the Bills use of technology is only to transform the entire system of labour inspection. No longer to be based on checks and complaints, instead workplaces will be inspected based on ‘random’ computerised selections with some even inspected online or over the phone. Employers can also be informed beforehand.

In addition, employers are no longer bound by law to cooperate with inspectors. The newly designated ‘Inspectors-cum-Facilitators’, under the Bill, are meant to assist employers in ‘complying’ with the law and can even forgive them for violations. Except ‘technology’, there is actually nothing in the law to ensure better compliance and implementation.

The failure to implement labour law over the last 25 years has been the most significant route through which workers’ rights have been undermined. All trade unions have long been demanding that non-payment of minimum wages and such other violations of basic rights be made cognisable offences. Rather than responding to this, the Bills actually remove deterrents including the attachment of property in cases on non-compliance.

The stated effort in advancing the Labour Codes is to ‘simplify and rationalise’ the law with the objective of removing the ‘multiplicity of definitions and authorities’. Both codes fall well short of this claim—in fact now there is a definition of employee and worker that run into each other and the creation of an additional authority—the Appellate Authority—between the conciliation process and the courts. Workers as a result will have to only wait longer for justice.

Both Bills also clearly define the responsibility of the labour contractor as final. This is an important departure which takes away the key responsibility of the principal employer for payment of wages and other benefits including bonus; as also the criminal liability for workplace accidents and deaths. The introduction of combined labour contract licences for all tasks in an establishment removes the possibility of identifying from the contract licence, a perennial task from a non-perennial task. It takes away the core principle of the Contract Labour Act and will provide employers a legal cover to hire contract workers in perennial and core tasks.

These two Bills and all the others the BJP government is seeking to legislate define the BJP
government’s understanding of the rights it (the government) must enjoy over a democratically elected parliament. The BJP government is seeking to arrogate to the executive, the rights and powers that rest with parliament especially when it comes to those that concern workers and the poor.

Our tax and commercial laws clearly define how the profit of an enterprise are of great concern to the BJP government. The same concern does not apply to workers. Hence there is one law for the rich and for big companies and another for ordinary citizens. In a violation of Article 14 of the constitution—the fundamental right to equality under law—the BJP government is seeking to grant the executive the power to define how a company’s profits are to be computed. This will affect every worker in the country not only in terms of bonus payments but also, at the lowest end, in minimum wages as employers will make claims on the ability to pay owing to low profitability.

Less than two weeks ago, the government gave us a fine display of the arbitrariness of the executive when it announced a Rs 2 increase in the National Floor-level Minimum Wage from Rs 176 to Rs 178 per day. Without doubt it was done to assuage employers that the Modi government was seeking to push through laws that were in the interest of employers and no one else. What it also did, for all to see, is convey that the government does not believe it owes anyone an explanation as to how it arrived at a 1.13% increase in the minimum wage from one year to the next. It must be their ‘technology’ that did it.

This effort to legislate the Labour Codes comes at the end of five years during which the BJP government disrupted the tripartite system and virtually disbanded the Indian Labour Conference. Addressing BJP MPs for the first time after the general election, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that the task of government must now be to help ‘ease of living’. A Rs 2 increase in the daily wage of a family of four will certainly ease the living of the few over the many.

Going by tenor of labour minister Santosh Gangwar in the Lok Sabha on Tuesday, it is clear that the government is determined to push this legislation through within the next few days without reference to parliament’s Standing Committee for Labour. This may well happen.

Our task however remains to resist this attack and advance the working class struggle in all ways that are possible. And this we will do.

[Gautam Mody is general secretary of the New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI).]

**IFTU NC Press Release, 31 July, 2019**

**Corporatisation of Indian Railways**

The National Committee of the IFTU totally opposes the Central Govt.’s moves for privatisation and corporatisation of the Indian Railways, which is both on this Govt.’s self proclaimed 100 day agenda, and was reflected in its first Budget and has been on the wish list of the Corporate sector for a long time. Railway workers across the length and breadth of the country are opposing the Govt.’s moves. IFTU supports their struggle and calls on all units to build contacts with the struggling railway workers in various parts of the country and to join these struggles as well as support them to our fullest capacity.

The Govt. is firstly out to undertake massive retrenchment of railway employees in addition to the ongoing process of systematic contractualisation of departments which has been on since the second phase of new economic policies. In this move, permanent workers who will reach the age of 55 years by April 2020 are to be compulsorily retired as also will be workers who have faced disciplinary action in their career. Over 3 lakh jobs are on target. Secondly, the Central Govt. is moving decisively to privatise and corporatise the seven production units at Raibareli, Chittaranjan, Kapurthala and other centres with the Modern Coach Factory at Raibareli being the first target. The Production units are to be separated into an All India Rolling Stock Company with immediate hiving off of permanent workers. Railway workers have protested in thousands at several centres across the country.

The Central Govt. is also moving to allow commercial use of railway land and is already moving to hand over such prime land to a Rail Land Development Corporation which will be the channel for corporatisation of such land. In addition rail tracks are being handed over to private companies and two passenger trains are also to be privatised as the first step towards the gradual commercialisation of
Making Capitalism History

Faramarz Farbod

To perish or to radically transform the way we relate to one another and to nature, that is the question humanity has never had to face until now.

The evidence backing the above assertion is strong and accumulating. Nevertheless, there remains a stubborn problem of awareness as many who understand the perils facing humanity fail to connect them to its source: the capitalist organisation of planetary life. Failure to address this problem will only guarantee that the predictable future characterised by immense suffering associated with a generalised social collapse and ecological ruination on a planetary scale will come to pass.

In this brief essay, I will tackle this problem of awareness by addressing a series of thematically-related questions that are often raised by those who question whether the source of the problems we currently face can reasonably be said to be the capitalist system.

Questions

Why pick on capitalism when people from time immemorial have wrestled with various kinds of environmental degradation? Haven’t humans experienced such matters as soil erosion and depletion, overhunting and widespread logging prior to the advent of the capitalist social order? Isn’t the problem more accurately located in the kind of human interactions with nature that organised human life requires? After all, didn’t the Maya, a sophisticated civilisation made up of 19 million people, experience a rapid collapse in a span of a mere century due to a drought that had been severely exacerbated by rapid deforestation? Why then place the blame on capitalism and not on organised human life itself, especially given that revolutionary advances in technology have made possible a dramatic increase in human populations and vastly increased the impact of human actions on the environment?

A Response

It is true that peoples in the antiquity faced environmental degradation. For example, deforestation was responsible for 60% of the drought that led to the rapid collapse of the Maya during the 8th or 9th centuries. But it is important to realise that the problems then were limited to a locality or a region. Today, by contrast, the ecological reach of the problems we face are global and threaten nearly the entirety of life on the planet. This is the first unique feature of the contemporary era.

Science, in fact, tells us that we are now living in a do-or-die moment in history.

Take the global warming as the Earth is now recording the highest levels of atmospheric carbon in over three million years. The planet has heated up by a degree since the dawn of the industrial age. “Limiting global warming to 1.5°C [compared to a catastrophic 2°C above the preindustrial level] would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society,” says the
Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the UN body for assessing the science related to climate change.

Take the heating of the oceans. Since 1871 the oceans have been heating on average by an equivalent of about 1.5 Hiroshima-size atomic bombs per second. The heating has accelerated as carbon emissions have risen. Today that equivalent is between 3 and 6 atomic bombs per second. The oceans absorb more than 90% of the heat trapped by anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. This added energy raises the sea levels and enables more intense hurricanes and typhoons.

Or take the accelerated rate of extinction of species on Earth. A New UN report projects the extinction of one million animal and plant species within decades, representing one-eighth of total number of species. The report is the most comprehensive ever completed involving 145 experts from 50 countries, with input from another 310 contributors, over a 3 year-long systematic review of 15,000 scientific sources. “The overwhelming evidence,” it concludes, “presents an ominous picture.” “We are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide.” It urges immediate transformative change, by which it means “a fundamental, system-wide reorganisation across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values.”

The second, and related, feature of the contemporary era is that we are no longer witnessing societies whose activities threaten their existence but a globalised economic order whose normal operations threaten life on a planetary scale. That is, we are dealing with a capitalist economic system with a global reach. It is precisely because the system’s reach is global that the damage it inflicts on life-support systems is so widespread as to set it on a tragic collision course with the Earth itself.

It is crucial to realise that this widespread damage originates from the normal functioning of the system and not from its malfunction. The systemic nature of the ecological degradation should compel us to analyse with sober senses the central driving forces of the system as a whole. These are: (a) a cancer-like hunger for endless growth driven by the ‘egotistical calculation’ of commerce seeking maximum profitability; (b) the treatment of human labour as a cost leading capital to oppose labour capturing a fair share of the wealth it creates; and (c) the determination of massive investments by private interests, and increasingly by a transnational capitalist class, a tiny sliver of the total global population.

Let’s take the last point. Peter Phillips shows in his recent book Giants: The Global Power Elite (New York, Seven Stories Press, 2018) that just 199 people manage 17 transnational investment companies that together controlled $41 trillion worth of assets in 2017. They, the governments that accommodate them, and other networks of power they have set up, are primarily motivated by securing capital investments free from any resistance, with maximum return on investment, and with nation-states as “population containment zones” for global capital.

So far, I have concentrated on the global nature of capitalism and its impact on the planet’s ecosystem. Capitalism, however, has intensified its assault not just against this beautiful planet but against the people inhabiting it. Everywhere, the lords of capital use the differences of class, race, gender, sexuality and nationality to divide the people and keep the regime of brutal exploitation, accumulation and domination safe from any serious challenge. It is in the nature of capital to sacrifice the people and the planet at the altar of accumulation for accumulation sake.

How else are we to make sense of the facts that the world’s 2,200 billionaires increased their wealth by $2.5 billion per day in 2018 while nearly half of humanity (3.4 billion people) live with less than $5.50 a day; that the super-rich had stored $7.6 trillion of their wealth in offshore tax havens in 2015 while some 10,000 will die daily of lack of access to health care; and that Ethiopia’s health budget, a country of 105 million people, is nearly equivalent to just a 1% tax on Jeff Bezos’ fortune ($112 billion), the richest man in the world?

Looking Ahead

The ruling class has no good ideas about how to address the existential crises the reproduction of its own class domination generates. Nor could we assume that it even has a serious understanding of the system or ways to ameliorate its socio-ecological consequences. In fact, the ever-increasing concentration of wealth in its hands ensures that no solution, even if it is compelled to accept it by pressures from below, can remain effective for long and not be subject to rollback.

It is left to us, therefore, to free our minds and acquire the ‘we’ consciousness necessary to
mount a serious challenge to global capitalism and its by-products: imperialism, neo-liberalism, war and militarism, racism, sexism, poverty and, especially, the destruction of the ecosystem.

There are some encouraging signs that the young have begun responding to the latter crisis. On May 24, 2019, hundreds of thousands participated in a student strike movement in over 1,664 cities across 125 countries urging action to address the ecological crisis. Earlier on March 15, 2019, over 1.6 million people across 133 countries in over 2,000 places turned out at such demonstrations. Other environmental movements had appeared earlier. In late April of this year, Extinction Rebellion, a British group, occupied major locations in London for ten days that led to the British government declaring a state of “climate emergency”, which received approval from parliament on May 1. In the US, the Sunrise Movement, comprised of young activists, has been pushing politicians to adopt a Green New Deal.

Time, however, is not on our side. We must act more forcefully and in more radical directions before the full range of catastrophes awaiting us materialise. We must not be satisfied with only pushing politicians to align themselves with the goals of the Paris Agreement. The latter is merely a step towards the long ecological revolution needed to create a just, free and sustainable society. A Green New Deal should, for instance, take on the role of militarism and war in destroying the planet’s ecology.

But we can only do so if we try to see through the ideological mystifications the system generates to camouflage its nature and if we engage in serious anti-capitalist politics from below. Only then can we generate a radical hope to transform fundamentally the way we relate to one another and to nature. Such a radical hope rests on the premise that we are capable of collective rationality and can act proactively to avert predictable disasters. To rely only on reactive forms of consciousness and action will not do. We cannot spring to (limited) action in reaction to the already-occurring socio-ecological disasters and expect to overcome the sources of the multiple crises we are facing.

As Dr. King once said, “We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now.” There is, he said, “such a thing as being too late,” especially now and in relation to the rapid unfolding of the ecocidal tendencies of the system. But as the worst is yet to come, we must insist with Marx that humanity be “at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind,” and I would add, with nature, and act to transform the world accordingly.

(Faramarz Farbod teaches Political Science at Moravian College, USA.)

Justice for Women?

Uday Dandavate

As I followed the passing of Triple Talaq bill in the Indian Upper House, I was reminded of my mother, Pramila Dandavate, who was distraught with denial of justice to Shah Bano and raised a revolt against the ambivalence of her own party on matters of bringing justice to Shah Bano.

“Mohd. Ahmed Khan v. Shah Bano Begum” [1985 (1) SCALE 767 = 1985 (3) SCR 844 = 1985 (2) SCC 556 = AIR 1985 SC 945], commonly referred to as the Shah Bano case, was a controversial maintenance lawsuit in India, in which the Supreme Court delivered a judgment favouring maintenance given to an aggrieved divorced Muslim woman. The then Congress government, panicky in an election year, succumbed to the pressure of Muslim orthodoxy and enacted a law with its most controversial aspect being the right to maintenance for the period of iddat after the divorce, and shifting the onus of maintaining her to her relatives or the Waqf Board. It was seen as discriminatory as it denied right to basic maintenance available to non-Muslim women under secular law.

Shah Bano, a 62-year-old Muslim mother of five from Indore, Madhya Pradesh, was divorced by her husband in 1978. She filed a criminal suit in the Supreme Court of India, in which she won the right to alimony from her husband. However, the Muslim politicians mounted a campaign for the verdict’s nullification. The Indian Parliament reversed the judgement under pressure from Islamic orthodoxy. The judgement
in favour of the woman in this case evoked criticisms among Muslims, some of whom cited Qur'an to show that the judgement was in conflict with Islamic law. It triggered controversy about the extent of having different civil codes for different religions in India. This case caused the Congress government, with its absolute majority, to pass the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986 which diluted the judgment of the Supreme Court and restricted the right of Muslim divorcées to alimony from their former husbands for only 90 days after the divorce (the period of Iddah in Islamic Law). However, in the later judgements including Daniel Latifi case and Shamima Farooqui v. Shahid Khan case, the Supreme Court of India interpreted the act in a manner reassuring the validity of the case and consequently upheld the Shah Bano judgement and The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act 1986 was nullified. Many Muslims including All India Shia Personal Law Board supported the Supreme Court's order to make the right to maintenance of a divorced Muslim wife absolute.

The question that arose in my mind was, “What would be the reaction of my mother today?” I found an answer. My mother was committed to social justice. She was particularly vigilant on matters related to women’s rights. On these two issues, she did not let electoral politics get in the way of her activism. My mother was an ardent fan of social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule and Hamid Dalwai. During the period when Shah Bano was fighting for justice and Arif Mohammad Khan revolted against Rajiv Gandhi’s political expediency, my mom not only supported Arif Mohammad Khan, but also accommodated Shah Bano in our home for some time. She confronted her party’s national executive to take a firm position on Muslim Women’s rights. I have witnessed fierce arguments between her and Syed Shahabuddin on this issue. At that time, both of them (my mother and Shahabuddin) were General Secretaries of the Janata Party. She failed to get the party to take a principled stand and that led to several days and weeks of heated arguments in our home.

My mother wanted justice not only for Muslim women but for all women. She organised a nationwide movement for an anti-dowry law and campaigned relentlessly until her own private member bill turned into a law. She organised protests in Deorala where Roopkuvarba Kanwar, a Rajput woman, was immolated in adherence to the tradition of Sati. The original inquiries resulted in 45 people being charged with her murder; these people were later acquitted. A much-publicised later investigation led to the arrest of a large number of people from Deorala, said to have been present in the ceremony, or participants in it. Eventually, 11 people, including state politicians, were charged with glorification of sati. On 31 January 2004, a special court in Jaipur acquitted all the 11 accused in the case.

I remembered her relentless efforts to bring justice to Maya Tyagi, a young woman from Baghpat, who was raped by the police in custody and paraded naked in the market.

Every time she heard of atrocities against women, Pramila Dandavate rushed to protest or protect them. If she were alive today, she would have taken the opportunity to generate a nationwide debate on Triple Talaq. She would’ve partnered with Muslim Satyashodhak Mandal to expand the topic to not just the plight of Muslim women but of all women in India. She would have been on the vanguard of a mass education campaign. She would have supported a comprehensive bill to provide security to women in their marriage, no matter which religion they belonged to. She would have made sure that the bill was not drafted in a manner that appeared against a certain community, but for all women. She would have insisted on referring the Bill to the Select committee and would have organised a series of seminars around the country to elicit ideas for securing the rights of women.

As a socialist committed to social reforms, my mother believed that only a secular state would bring justice to women and to other disadvantaged sections of the society. She also believed that social reforms that are aimed at unjust religious practices should be led from within the community, in order to avoid perception of affront from another religion. That is why she supported Hamid and Mehrunisa Dalwai. She was radical in her beliefs and relentless in seeking legal reforms to bring social justice.

I remember my mother Pramila Dandavate today. She would not have used this occasion to defeat the bill and to restore status quo, but to generate a nationwide debate and a movement against social injustice. She would have also exposed hypocritical politicians who have defied polygamy laws and not faced consequences.

So my take away from the
passing of triple Talaq law is: it is a perfect occasion to generate a discussion on all contentious issues, including interference of religion in politics, injustice to women, Uniform Civil Code, and many other issues that have been sidelined because of vote bank politics. Let this occasion not become a reason for aggravating Hindu-Muslim conflict but an occasion to hold the government responsible for taking steps that ensure social justice and establishment of a secular legal framework for India.

(Uday Dandavate is Co-Founder and CEO, SonicRim Ltd.)

Growing Up With Premchand’s Stories

Amitabh Kumar Das

31st July is Premchand Jayanti. The greatest of Hindi novelists and short story writers was born on this day. As a small boy, I grew up in two small towns of Bihar—Begusarai and Darbhanga, to be precise. And Premchand was an integral part of my growing-up years. I was a bright boy. I loved my textbooks and stood first in class. But some textbooks were more dear to me than others. Mathematics terrorised me. Specially, questions about a monkey climbing up a pole and then slipping again. I wondered why a small kid should worry about monkeys climbing up poles. Let monkeys do their job. But the Bihar State Textbook Corporation thought otherwise. I hated maths and maths teachers. But Hindi textbooks brought smile to my tiny lips. I loved them. And no Hindi book was complete without Dinkar’s poems and Premchand’s stories. And I was mesmerised by Premchand’s stories. They were written in simple Hindi. Even his picture in textbooks was reassuring.

With his salt-and-pepper hair, tiny moustache and dhoti-kurta, he looked like my relatives who lived in villages. Premchand was like a nana or a dada telling stories to tiny tots. And he lived a Spartan life. In a letter to his friend, Premchand said that he never craved for bungalows and cars. All he needed was dal-chapati and a spoonful of ghee. Modern doctors would have frowned upon Premchand’s love affair with ghee. Like Munni, ghee has also become quite badnaam nowadays. But those were good old days. And nobody bothered about clogged arteries. So, Premchand got away with his shuddh desi ghee and penned heart-warming stories. Most of his immortal stories were written on a broken khatiya (string-bed). Unlike modern writers who produce heaps of trash, writing on laptops in air-conditioned cafes!

Coming back to Premchand’s short stories, they are still embedded in my heart. Eidgaah is a story about a poor Muslim kid Hamid who buys a chimta for his old grandma because she burnt her fingers when making rotis. The story is so moving that I shed copious tears every time I read it. Premchand has depicted child psychology brilliantly. The way Hamid defends his humble chimta against fancy toys bought by his friends is heart-rending. And when the story ends, both Hamid’s dadi Ameena and the reader are in tears. Then there is Raksha Me Hatya, a story about two innocent kids who are so obsessed with protecting pigeon eggs that they finally break them! Noble intentions gone haywire.

Panch Parmeshwar is a story about two bosom friends Algoo Chaudhary and Junman Sheikh and the dynamics of village panchayats. Algoo testifies against Junman when Junman’s old khala (aunt) accuses Junman of ill-treatment. The panch (judge) should not let friendship come in the way of justice. In Namak Ka Daroga, an honest salt-inspector Munshi Vanshidhar refuses to succumb to temptation, loses his job but is honoured in the end by the same Pandit Alopideen who tried to bribe him. And who can forget Poos Ki Raat. A poor farmer Halku refuses to leave the warmth of fire even when his field is grazed by cattle.

Shatranj Ke Khiladi shows the decadent feudal culture of Lucknow. Mirza and Meer continue to play chess as the British forces march into Awadh. The legendary Satyajit Ray made a movie on this story. It is Ray’s only movie in Hindi.

Premchand himself was a starry-eyed idealist in his real life. Listening to Mahatma Gandhi’s call, he quit his government job. Premchand married a child-widow Shivrani Devi. His son Amrit Rai called him Kalam Ka Sipahi. Born as Dhanpat Rai, Premchand wrote in Urdu. When the British government seized his book Soz-e-Watan, he switched
over to Hindi and took Premchand as his nom-de-plume.

Premchand taught me many things. His stories shaped my character. He made me a staunch secularist. I learnt that Algoo and Jumman can be bosom friends despite their different religions. If I regularly attend iftar at my Muslim friends’ houses, the Algoo–Jumman friendship inspires me. He sowed in me seeds of empathy with the poor. I always see a Hamid in poor kids. And he taught me to stick to my principles, much like Munshi Vanshidhar, the incorruptible namak ka daroga. And lessons in simplicity.

A writer who ate simple dal–chapati but strode the world like a colossus. I salute you, Munshi Premchand. Koti – koti naman!

(Amitabh Kumar Das is a 1994 Batch IPS Officer.)

Pakistan in IMF Debt Trap

Abdus Sattar Ghazali

After appointing an ex-IMF official as Finance Minister and another ex-IMF official as State Bank of Pakistan Governor, the government of Pakistan has assured the International Monetary Fund (IMF) of increasing electricity and gas prices and to eliminate the subsidy given to the consumers.

At the same time, at the IMF demand, the government would not interfere in the matters of Oil & Gas Regulatory Authority (OGRA) and National Electric Power Regulatory Authority (NEPRA) in fixing gas and electricity prices respectively. At present they have to take government permission to fix gas and electricity prices.

Dr Reza Baqir, who has been appointed as the Governor of the State Bank of Pakistan, has been with the IMF since 2000. He quit his job recently as the IMF senior resident representative to Egypt to take charge of the State Bank.

Dr Abdul Hafeez Shaikh, the new Finance Minister, has represented the IMF in several countries. He also worked with the World Bank, and served as country head for Saudi Arabia. Shaikh was appointed last month after the IMF apparently refused to work with Finance Minister Asad Umar.

According to the finance ministry, Pakistan’s total debt and external liabilities was $20.90 billion in 1990, rising to $38.86 billion in 2007 and $99.1 billion now.

Since coming to power, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf government has been exploring all financing options, including help from friendly countries. It has so far received a total of $9.1 billion in financial aid packages from China, Saudi Arabia and UAE. However, Pakistan still fell short of meeting its dollar requirement for the current financial year, and so it was forced to go to the IMF.

On May 12, 2019, it was announced that IMF and Pakistan have reached an agreement. Dr Shaikh announced that Pakistan would receive $6 billion worth of assistance under the IMF program over a period of three years. Besides the IMF assistance, Pakistan will also receive additional funds worth nearly $2–3 billion from institutions like the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, Dr. Shaikh added.

IMF loans only benefit the corrupt

Pakistan has gone to the IMF repeatedly since the late 1980s. The last time was in 2013, when Islamabad got a $6.6 billion loan to tackle an economic crisis.

Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif’s government obtained a whopping $35 billion in new loans during his four-year (2013–2017) tenure to repay maturing debt and keep official foreign currency reserves at a level which could give a sense of economic stability to investors.

In July 2017, the Supreme Court of Pakistan disqualified Nawaz on concealment of assets charges. In December 2018, the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), Pakistan’s anti-graft court, jailed Nawaz Sharif for seven years on graft charges. The NAB in its ruling said that the three-time prime minister was unable to prove the source of income that led to his ownership of a steel mill in Saudi Arabia.

The former President, Asif Ali Zardari, whose government (2008–2013) is also responsible for huge IMF borrowing is now facing mega money laundering cases.

Pakistan started the process of privatisation in the 1980s. It has sold out more than 160 state-run entities since then, rendering hundreds and thousands of people jobless. Instead of seeing the country free from debt, what we see today is nothing but a phenomenal surge in the external debt and liabilities which is likely to
haunt Pakistan's coming generations for decades.

The new IMF loan is likely to unleash a wave of liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation that will lead to more unemployment, yet further fall in the already low living standards and substantial cuts in public spending.

What is ahead for Pakistanis? This shocking report from Cairo after implementation of the IMF reforms in Egypt may provide some indication to Pakistanis:

"Egypt has seen a recent growth in the so-called 'used food' markets, as citizens bear the brunt of IMF economic reform program, Middle East Monitor reported on April 18, 2019. Markets selling scraps of food have become increasingly common in Greater Cairo, home to more than 20 million people, with the remains of meals from restaurants and hotels offered to families at a discounted price. Defective food products, ranging from processed meats and pasta to cheese and juice, are also on offer, with many of the goods unpackaged, with no information as to where or when they were made.

"A shopper, Asma Mohammed, said she even had to buy chicken bones and necks from the street to make a stock for her family of five after she was unable to afford them at the usual market. 'The poultry bones are now sold for 15 pounds [$0.87], two years ago they were only five pounds [$0.29], I do not know what I will do if I cannot even buy poultry legs and bones,' she said.

"The prices of basic food items, water and fuel have soared in recent years after state subsidies were cut and VAT was introduced in the country for the first time. The new policies come as part of Egypt’s commitment to economic reforms stipulated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in accordance with the country’s loan agreement.

"However, the policies have added to the financial woes of many millions of Egyptians living below the poverty line, who have complained of being unable to afford basic necessities since the price jumps."

Egypt has been praised for its commitment to the measures; during its fourth review of the program by the IMF last month, officials said.

"Tellingly, Dr Reza Baqir, the new Governor of the State Bank of Pakistan, was IMF Representative in Cairo till recently."

Third World countries debt

The International Monetary Fund was established in 1944 as a lender of last resort to countries facing balance of payment difficulties, a lifeline for countries on the verge of insolvency.

By the 1980s, a number of Third World countries, unable to pay back the massive loans they had received from western commercial banks in the 1970s, were forced to turn to this lifeline.

The Third World countries are now in debt trap. External loans to developing country governments more than doubled from $191 billion in 2008 to $424 billion in 2017.

As a condition for financial assistance, the IMF requires governments to make harsh economic adjustments, such as cutting spending on social services and ending price subsidies on such essential items as food and fuel. The IMF and the World Bank provide loans only if the poor countries privatised their economies and allowed western corporations free access to their raw materials and markets.

Confessions of an Economic Hitman

This reminds me of John Perkin’s book Confessions of an Economic Hitman. Perkin was an IMF official. Perkins says he was actually an “Economic Hit Man” and his job was to convince countries that are strategically important to the United States to accept enormous loans for infrastructure development and to make sure that the lucrative projects were contracted to US corporations.

He cooked the books in a gigantic international con game. More specifically, he produced and defended grossly inflated projections of economic growth that were then used to justify super-sized infrastructure projects financed with debts to foreign banks that could never be repaid.

Intentionally making un-payable loans to foreign governments may seem the work of fools, but the money flowed directly into the bottom lines of well-connected US construction and energy companies like Bechtel and Halliburton, and the perpetual debts gave the US government a stranglehold over the economic and political resources of the indebted nations.

At the same time, the leaders of these countries bolstered their political power because they were credited with bringing industrial parks, power plants and airports to their people.

The problem is that these countries simply cannot handle the debt of these loans and their poorest citizens are deprived of health, education and other social services for several decades as these countries struggle economically to overcome their huge debts.

Of particular interest is Perkins’ story of his role in the deal that tied Saudi Arabia to US interests,
created a financial and political alliance between the House of Saud and the House of Bush, and led to a partnership that channeled billions of dollars to Osama bin Laden.

Under this agreement, the Saudis hold their oil earnings in US Treasury bonds. The Treasury Department pays the interest on these bonds directly to favored US corporations, with which it contracts to modernise Saudi Arabia’s physical infrastructure. In return, the US government uses its political and military clout to keep the Saudi royal family in power.

According to Perkins, the Saudi agreement was to be a model for Iraq, but Saddam Hussein refused to play—which explains why George W. Bush was so intent on invading Iraq to remove him from office. The war was simply a different means to the same outcome. Effective control of Iraqi oil reserves was transferred to US hands. Bechtel, Halliburton and other corporate Bush cronies received billions in new contracts.

Doug Bandow, the author of *Perpetuating Poverty: The World Bank, the IMF, and the Developing World*, wrote in 1995: There is a biblical proverb that says: “the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel.” *Perpetuating Poverty* demonstrates this to be true on an international scale. Fifty years and hundreds of billions of dollars of aid from Western governments—tunneled through the IMF, the World Bank, and a number of other multilateral aid agencies—have had a huge impact on world poverty: it has helped keep the Third World poor just that—poor.

(Abdus Sattar Ghazali is a journalist who has written extensively on South Asia and the Middle East.)

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**I Am ‘Miya’ – Reclaiming Identity Through Protest Poetry**

**Karwan-e-Mohabbat**

"Miya" poetry is a reclaiming of one's Muslim identity by the Bengali-origin Muslims of Assam; protest poetry that rebels against subjugation and oppression. "Miya" is an Urdu word that means 'gentleman', but it has become a slur in Assam and is used as a term of abuse. Poets and activists from the Bengali Muslim community have found a way to take the derogatory term "Miya" and subvert it. Miya poetry seeks answers to the questions of belonging and citizenship. It echoes the fears of a community threatened by exclusion from the NRC — the National Register of Citizens.

**Write Down ‘I am a Miyah’**

Hafiz Ahmed

Write
Write Down
I am a Miya
My serial number in the NRC is 200543
I have two children
Another is coming
Next summer.
Will you hate him
As you hate me?

Write
I am a Miya
I turn waste, marshy lands
To green paddy fields
To feed you.
I carry bricks
To build your buildings
Drive your car
For your comfort
Clean your drain

To keep you healthy.
I have always been
In your service
And yet
you are dissatisfied!
Write down
I am a Miya,
A citizen of a democratic, secular,
Republic
Without any rights
My mother a D voter,
Though her parents are Indian.

If you wish kill me, drive me from
my village,
Snatch my green fields
hire bulldozers
To roll over me.
Your bullets
Can shatter my breast
for no crime.

Write
I am a Miya
Of the Brahmputra
Your torture
Has burnt my body black
Reddened my eyes with fire.
Beware!
I have nothing but anger in stock.
Keep away!
Or
Turn to Ashes.

(Translated by Shalim M. Hussain)

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*Janata*

is available at
www.lohiatoday.com
Organisers of upcoming global climate strikes hope their demands for a rapid end to business as usual and a swift start to climate justice will be too loud to ignore.

The strikes, which are set for September 20th and 27th—with additional actions slated for the days in between—are planned in over 150 countries thus far, and over 6,000 people have already pledged to take part.

It has the potential to be the biggest climate mobilisation yet, said organisers.

"Our house is on fire—let's act like it," says the strikes' call-to-action, referencing the words of Swedish activist Greta Thunberg. "We demand climate justice for everyone."

Thunberg echoed that call in a just-released video promoting the upcoming actions. "Everyone should mobilise for the 20th and 27th of September," said Thunberg, "because this is a global issue which actually affects everyone."

It's been the world's youth, though, that have played a driving force in recently calling attention to the climate crisis with protests and school strikes.

"Young people have been leading here," 350.org co-founder Bill McKibben said in the Thunberg video, "but now it's the job of the rest of us to back them up."

The two Fridays of action, according to organisers, can serve to show the size of chorus of those demanding end to the fossil fuel economy, bring out those previous on the sidelines of the climate justice fight, and "kickstart a huge wave of action and renewed ambition all over the world."

To make that happen, massive turnout is necessary, said Evan Cholerton of Earth Strike International. "Multinational corporations aren't going to give up anything unless we fight," he said.

"This is a fight for ourselves, for our future, and for future generations," continued Cholerton. "This is a fight for justice for all: workers, students, parents, teachers, conservatives, liberals, socialists, and everyone else. We can fight against climate breakdown, and we can fight against environmental destruction. We need to all be part of this, or else the establishment won't budge."

"We can do this," he added, "if we do this together."

(Andrea Germanos is senior editor at Common Dreams, a non-profit media centre in the United States.)

Editor’s note: Meanwhile, the climate crisis keeps getting worse, as the following article eloquently brings out:

**Greenland Ice Sheet Faces Possible Record-Breaking Melting**
(by Eoin Higgins)

Last week's European heatwave is moving north toward the Arctic, where temperatures could trigger record melting in Greenland and
affect sea levels worldwide for millennia.

That's according to meteorologist Eric Holthaus, who said on Twitter on July 29, 2019 that the melting event from the heat could result in the loss of 40 billion tons of ice. "This single heat wave will create a permanent change in our oceans that will linger for millennia," said Holthaus. "We are in a climate emergency."

The heat is an indicator of the climate crisis that can't be ignored, US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) tweeted. She said the crisis makes the case that her Green New Deal legislation needs to be passed as soon as possible, no matter the concerns about it being "too much, too soon."

"Setting climate goals for 2030 isn't due to some arbitrary political rationale—it's there due to scientific consensus," said Ocasio-Cortez. "Simply put, we must draw down carbon by 2030 to stave off climate disaster on levels yet unseen."

The current spate of Arctic melting may break the record for the region set in 2012. As BuzzFeed News reported on July 26, Arctic ice is disappearing at a rate higher than ever recorded—and in 2012, the rate was exacerbated by storms that broke up sea ice in the summer leading to more melting.

This time, it's heat.

On Monday, CNN talked to Ruth Mottram, a climate scientist with the Danish Meteorological Institute, who said the 2019 melt is particularly dangerous. This year's melt is different to the one in 2012 as it is happening persistently every day rather than in extreme bursts, Mottram noted. She said that Greenland's ice loss has added an estimated 180 gigatons (billion tons) of water to the oceans since the 1 July. This contributes to a global sea level rise of around half a millimeter.

On Tuesday, Democracy Now! host Amy Goodman laid out the risk to the planet if the Greenland ice sheet melts and noted the connection of climate change to the rapidly disappearing glaciers on the island. "If the ice sheet melts entirely, it would raise global sea levels by almost 23 feet," said Goodman. "Last month was the hottest June ever recorded on Earth, while July is on track to be the hottest month ever."

(Eoin Higgins is senior editor at Common Dreams.)

Now the RTI Act

Barun Das Gupta

The RTI (Amendment) Bill which the ruling party got passed in the Lok Sabha by its sheer brute majority and in the Rajya Sabha by winning over some of the opposition is of a piece with the Modi Government's systematic and sustained efforts at subverting the autonomy of every constitutional and statutory body and making it subservient to the Union Government. The statement of objectives of the Bill clearly states that the government wants to reduce the stature of the Central Information Commissioner.

Earlier, the CIC's status was equivalent to the Election Commissioners and judges of the Supreme Court. Under the 2005 Act, which was passed by the Congress Government, the Information Commissioner had the authority to issue directives to the Cabinet Secretary, Principal Secretary and other senior officials to disclose information under the RTI Act. The Chief Information Commissioner, the Information Commissioners and even State Information Commissioners had a fixed tenure of five years or up to the attainment of the superannuation age. They could not be removed from their office before the expiry of their term. This safeguard is now removed.

Not only that. The amendment enables the government to usurp the power to fix the tenure, term, status and salary. The Act of 2005 did not give this power to the Union Government. Under the amended Act, the Centre now has the power to "prescribe by rules the terms of the offices of and salaries and allowances and terms and conditions of service of" the Chief Election Commissioner, the Information Commissioners and even the State Information Commissioners and other Commissioners.

Once the President gives his assent and the Bill becomes the law, the Union and State Information Commissions will become appendages of the government, like any other government department. The downgrading of the status of the CIC has been done deliberately so that the CIC and SICs cannot ask for information from officers senior to them in rank like the Cabinet Secretary. Congress parliamentary party chairperson Sonia Gandhi rightly termed the amendment to the Act as "disempowering every Indian citizen" and went on to say that the Act now stood on the brink of extinction. Once the new law comes into force, the government will effectively plug any leakage of information embarrassing to the
Denial of information is tantamount to suppression of the freedom of expression guaranteed by the Constitution. All freedoms and democratic rights given by the Constitution are sought to be taken away from the very people who have voted this government to power.

The Minister of State for the PMO, Jitendra Singh, ominously said that the Bill is an “enabling legislation”. How he was repeating Hitler’s language!

One of the first things that Hitler did on coming to power in 1933 was to pass an “Enabling Act” which disabled the very Weimar Constitution under which it was passed. The avowed purpose of the law was to “remedy the distress of the people and the nation”. Article 2 of the law said: “Laws enacted by the Government of the Reich may deviate from the Constitution as long as they do not affect the institutions of the Reichstag and the Reichsrat.” Thus Hitler usurped the power to make laws that were violative of the Weimar Constitution (“may deviate from the Constitution”) to become the greatest and most ruthless dictator of the 20th century. The disturbing question that arises in the mind is: Is the Indian Constitution also heading for the same fate? Will one person’s autocracy be sanctified by an “enabling” legislation that will put an end to democracy and all the democratic institutions of India.

(Barun Das Gupta is a veteran journalist and hails from a Gandhian family.)

Who’s Afraid of the RTI Act

M.G. Devasahayam

Secrecy and flagrant violation

Strangely enough, the government introduced the RTI amendment in the Lok Sabha in complete secrecy, and in flagrant violation of the Pre-Legislative Consultation Policy, which mandates public disclosure and consultation on draft legislations. Owing to the undemocratic way of its introduction, the contents of the draft amendments were not known to MPs, citizens and the media until the Bill was circulated to the Lok Sabha members on the eve of its introduction.

Eminent social activist Aruna Roy, the force behind the RTI Act, has this to say: “The status of information commissioners was extensively discussed during the formulation of the law, including in the Standing Committee. In fact, the Committee opined, ‘IC is an important creation under the Act which will execute the laudable scheme of the legislation… It should, therefore, be ensured that it functions with utmost independence and autonomy.’ It recommended that to achieve this objective, it would be desirable to confer on the central chief information commissioner and information commissioners, status of the chief election commissioner and election commissioners respectively. The committee’s recommendation was accepted and passed by parliament unanimously through an extensive process of public and Parliamentary consultation.”

The present government, within weeks of assuming power, calls this an ‘anomaly’ and seeks to remove it overnight in a stealthy manner. Why this supersonic speed, unseemly haste and determination to amend the law? Obviously, someone is afraid of the RTI Act.

In the mid-60s, there was a popular play titled Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf? The story revolves around two couples trying desperately to suppress certain truths, which to their consternation, manages to come out, leading to thunder and fury. In her writing, Virginia Woolf attempts to expose the truth: all of the things that the couples try to cover up. When the couples sing the song together, they make a mockery of their own fear of the truth and are attempting to project a false image.

Drawing a parallel

Do we see a parallel with the present government and the EC? Indeed, we should. Particularly in the context of mentioning the anomalies between the EC and ICs as the reason for this amendment. If the objective is just to remove any ‘anomaly’, it could have been done in a routine manner in full public view. Why this guilt, tearing hurry and secrecy?

Therein lies the tale of the recent election to parliament, which was devoid of basic elements of integrity. There is deep suspicion about major manipulation of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) aided and abetted by the EC itself. The issue is so

(This is an extract from the article, to leave out the repetitions from the above piece.)
serious as to prompt 64 former civil servants (many of whom have conducted and supervised elections) belonging to the Constitutional Conduct Group to write to the EC. They stated:

“The 2019 General Elections appear to have been one of the least free and fair elections that the country has had in the past decades… In the past, despite the efforts of criminal elements, musclemen, and unscrupulous politicians, the persons who graced the EC did their best to ensure that elections were conducted as freely and fairly as possible. In these General Elections, however, an impression has gathered ground that our democratic process is being subverted and undermined by the very constitutional authority empowered to safeguard its sanctity. It was rare in the past for any serious doubts to be raised about the impartiality, integrity and competence of the EC. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about the present EC and the way it has conducted the General Election-2019.”

And though suppressed in the mainstream media, there has been an avalanche of allegations and charges against the EC and several public campaigns have been launched to take the Commission to task in order to save the dying democracy. In the process, there will be a spate of RTI applications to the EC and appeals before the ICs to ascertain facts and information in order to activate these campaigns as well as to seek remedies through courts of law. The EC has already started to feel the heat and has resorted to bluff and filibuster.

A typical case is the reply received by for their RTI query to the EC seeking information and documents on the VVPAT count data during the Lok Sabha elections-2019: “Polling Station wise data of Lok Sabha Election-2019 is not available with the Commission. It may be available with CEOs of all States/UTs. You may obtain information from the office of CEOs of the States/UTs by submitting application under RTI Act, 2005 separately. Your application cannot be transferred to them as more than one PIOs are involved u/s 6 (3) of RTI Act, 2005.”

Are ICs being compromised to bail the Election Commission out?

This absurd reply is while the circulars issued by the EC themselves say that all Chief Election Officers (CEOs) are to submit their VVPAT data to the commission within seven days of the counting day. So why is the data ‘not available’ with them? The Central Information Commission order says that even if multiple PIOs are needed to share the information, it is the responsibility of the PIO in possession of the RTI query to transfer it to rest of the PIOs. So why did they claim they cannot transfer the request to more than one PIO? Why is the EC attempting to hide the massive mismatch between the EVM-count and VVPAT-slips by refusing to share this crucial data?

The EC also seem to be in panic. How else can one explain the conflicting statements issued by it regarding the mismatch between the EVM vote-count and VVPAT-slips? On May 26, 2019, the ECI said that there was no mismatch. But on July 22, it admitted eight mismatches. To boot, EC has commenced a Goebbelsian mode of publicity blitzkrieg extolling the virtues of the EVM trough paid advertisements. All these indicate that there must be something very rotten and there are many skeletons in the EC’s closet.

It looks as if having committed a grievous assault on democracy, the EC is now caught between a rock and a hard place. Political bosses and beneficiaries of this election have come to its rescue to wipe out the autonomy of the ICs, only to conceal the misdeeds of the EC. The former is being sacrificed at the altar of the latter.

The issue basically is: Should the truth about the arbitrary, autocratic and partisan functioning of the EC brought out into the open and made public? A la Virginia Woolf, IC’s would be for revealing the truth, which the EC is desperately trying to suppress and cover up. When the EC mocks the IC, it is expressing its own fear of the truth and is projecting a false image before the people. So, who is afraid of the RTI Act? Do we need a jury?

(M.G. Devasahayam is a former IAS officer.)

Editor’s note: There could be another possible reason for Modi pushing the RTI (Amendment) Bill through the Parliament. In an article published in thewire.in, Gaurav Vivek Bhatnagar writes that another reason why Modi wanted the RTI Act amended was to prevent orders like the 2016 CIC order by M. Sridhar Acharyulu which allowed inspection of the Bachelor of Arts results of 1978 – the year Modi claims to have graduated from Delhi University. The Delhi University challenged this order in the Delhi High Court, and since then, the case has dragged on in the court for two-and-a-half years. During the debate in Rajya Sabha on July 25, two senior Congress leaders – Abhishek Manu Singhvi and Jairam Ramesh – spoke directly about this link. Jairam Ramesh said, “There are five cases which have propelled the government to bring forward these amendments”, adding that the first was that “the CIC ordered disclosure of the prime minister’s educational qualification.”
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In a single stroke of decisions, the Indian government has revoked Articles 370 and 35A, bifurcated the state of Jammu and Kashmir into J&K and Ladakh, and reduced their status to Union Territories. While there are questions about the legal soundness of these decisions, their moral illegitimacy lies in the fact that none of the stakeholders in J&K have been consulted—native people of J&K (both current residents and those who have migrated out in the past decades), their local community leaders and political leaders belonging to either moderate or non-moderate ends of the ideological spectrum. Absolutely no one belonging to J&K was consulted or taken in confidence about the government’s decision.

Mainstream and moderate political leaders have been put under house arrest, all means of communication cut, curfew imposed and massive army troops deployed in the J&K region, since a few days before the government’s announcement of the decision in the parliament in Delhi. This means that communication among even the normal peace-loving people and their leaders is severely restricted, their mobility constrained, and no news is coming out of the region.

One must ask how would people in any other part of the country have reacted if their statehood was converted into a union territory status? It clearly shows the discriminatory attitude of the Indian state towards the people of J&K, primarily on religious basis. It also at the same time demonstrates the tremendous restraint the people of J&K have shown in the face of adverse situations. Because of a sustained right wing propaganda, most of the Indian people have come to believe the majoritarian mindset that J&K unfairly enjoys some special status. But no one bothers to ask, what privileges can people enjoy under a long term military like rule? A separate constitution for J&K may sound obnoxious, but the fact is, it is the Constitution of J&K which says that J&K is an integral part of India, not the Indian Constitution.

There are several other instances from around the country where people have asserted their autonomy. Nagaland wants a separate constitution and flag. It believes in the idea of co-existence with India without subjecting itself to the Indian Constitution. Siddaramaiah's Karnataka government decided to have its own flag, the second state in the country after J&K to do so.
Rabri Devi and Mamta Banerjee, as Chief Ministers, decided not to subject themselves to the Prime Minister of the day and violated protocols. Tamil Nadu doesn't agree to the three language formula of the national education policy because of its opposition to imposition of Hindi.

The fact of the matter is, the idea of autonomy is at the core of democracy. The Article 243 (G) of the Indian Constitution envisions self-rule at the Village Panchayat level. Rather than opposing the special status of J&K, other states should demand a similar status for deepening of democracy.

All this unilateral curbing of basic political and societal freedom of J&K people and their leaders amounts to plain murder of democracy by the Government of India. The backdrop to this draconian decision of the government is the utter mishandling of Kashmir’s situation in the past five years as well as the mismanagement of India’s economy and the worsening employment situation over the past three years.

On the one hand, the number of terrorist incidents, deaths of Indian military personnel, and overt protests by ordinary Kashmiri people against Indian forces have risen rapidly during 2014–19. It culminated in the imposition of President’s rule in J&K in 2018. This indicates constant mishandling of J&K’s political and social situation by the Modi government, growing resentment among Kashmiri people, and breakdown of communication between the central government and the people of J&K.

A parallel trend has been the growing crisis of India’s economy, the rapid disinvestment of government owned firms, and the worsening industrial and employment situation over the past three years (especially since demonetisation). This grim economic story is reflected in slowing GDP, rising unemployment, rising bank NPAs, flight of foreign investment, rising fiscal deficit, and falling industrial output and consumption. Some industries, notably automobile, are witnessing absolute drops in production by 10–30%. In recent days several respected industry leaders have gathered courage to openly voice concern about the Indian economy despite the prevailing environment of fear of the present government. Experts have raised serious doubts over the economy and employment data released by the government that remains in denial about the economic situation. All this shows gross mismanagement of India’s economy and banks by the Modi government.

From these trends it appears that the Modi government is trying to hide its incompetency in managing India’s economy, employment and security situations by invoking the false spectre of nationalism. Ironically, in the name of politics of nationalism, national assets are up for sale. The government’s propaganda and event management are ably supported by a lot of mainstream media and IT/social media cells of the party and its supporters. These cells specialise in creating and spreading exaggerated as well as blatantly fake news posts that fuel people’s irrational fears and emotions.

This kind of nationalism is xenophobic and parasitic as it aims to pit our own people against each other and divide them. It not only diverts our attention away from the real problems of growing crisis in economy, employment and financial governance and erosion of basic freedoms of citizens, but also degrades us culturally and morally as a society.

It’s likely that many of the ordinary people of J&K, including those who have been largely democratic and peace-loving in the midst of militancy and violence during all these decades, might now adopt hardened views against the Indian government. It’s likely that communication will break down even more and distrust will deepen. If the Indian government responds by increasing the presence of armed forces in the region, many more rounds of vicious cycles might be in store. What will this mean for the future of the people of J&K and the rest of us?

We need to think where we are heading.

(Rahul is academic, entrepreneur and activist, Sandeep is social–political activist.)

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Today, Freedom From Fear is Freedom from Mainstream Media

Ravish Kumar

What was once considered unacceptable and unethical in the public domain has been made entirely acceptable and ethical by the mainstream media in the last five years. Not only is the media celebrating existing immoralities, it is also scaling new heights of impropriety. Crudity is the new definition of refinement—the mainstream media’s vulgarity has destroyed the norms of Indian democracy that once prevailed in the public domain.

To be vulgar and immoderate is no longer wrong—be it on the street or in the studios of news channels. This is not the work of one odd channel or anchor; hundreds of them are at it all the time. Sure, you are free to single one out as the leader of the pack—what I want to say is that they have all been flag-bearers of decline, glorifying falling standards.

This transformation has been made possible by the complete fusion of the mainstream media and politics. In the process, the media has recognised the political supporter as the only kind of viewer there can be. Since the consumers and supporters of this media are adherents of a particular ideology and political party, the dividing line between viewer and party supporter has been erased. It is by ending the sheer diversity of information in news that this section of political supporters as viewers has been created. I think of them as the informationless horde, which has grown quite big. For that reason, I take it seriously, refraining from making fun of its follies. When ignorance takes the place of learning, it is no laughing matter.

Periodically, this horde is tested for its singular lack of information. For instance, following the Pulwama incident, the debate was not on the prime minister’s silence but on why Sachin Tendulkar had not spoken out! We have made the cardinal mistake of presuming that the expansion of communication media implies the expansion of information. But that is not so. The sharp erasure of the diversity of issues is what leads to a deprivation of information—a state of informationlessness. And that is what has happened across a proliferating mainstream media.

The ‘national curriculum’ project that mainstream news channels have been running for five years now has been crystal clear about its intent from day one: to snuff out the engaged viewer within you (who asks questions). Only then would the process of seizing democracy without killing it be complete. It is quite another matter that blood has flowed on the streets in the process—the crowd did not spare anyone, be it Subodh Kumar Singh or Akhlaq. That is the kind of impact the national curriculum launched by the present-day dispensation has had. I believe this project has succeeded, overwhelming our democracy and our consciousness of being citizens, of being the people.

The mainstream media launched its national curriculum as soon as the Modi government came to power in 2014. At its core was the idea of ensuring a continual process of Hindu–Muslim divide. For that, it was necessary to create a growing sense of division among citizens. So, the media has been trying to break the people’s very awareness of the idea of citizenship. Since information and questioning are the basis of citizenship, the possibility of either has been severely curtailed. Our mainstream media does not question the government; on the contrary, it interrogates the people on behalf of the government! The political line emerging from these channels in the wake of the Pulwama blast has shown that clearly.

Enemies are being manufactured from within the ranks of citizens. To that end, a sentiment of ‘Hindu frustration’ and ‘Muslim frustration’—armed with half-baked information—has been generated within all of us. The frustration was there earlier too, but has been magnified several times over and ‘installed’ in the media. For that reason, today’s mainstream media is not the people’s media—it is a media for Hindus. To be more accurate, it speaks for those playing politics in the name of Hindu religion, those professing Hindutva. Five years ago, who would have thought that this Hindutva media would occupy almost 90 % of the mainstream media space! Yet it has happened so.

The mainstream media, in its new Hindutva guise, is certainly not going to confront the dispensation or the establishment. On the contrary, it is their defender, for they too are of the same persuasion.

This is not to say that citizens did...
not perceive themselves as Hindus earlier. But that understanding has been replaced by a new perception of being Hindu—one who is shorn of courage and running scared of the people standing alongside him. One who looks at the person next to him with suspicion, seeing in him a Hindu who is anti-Hindu. And, by extension, anti-national.

It is for the first time that I am seeing a Hindu who is fearful of other Hindus. Put it down to the contribution of the present-day mainstream media. Its conduct goes completely against those Hindu conventions which are claimed to be superior and are constantly lauded. The Gita may say that anger destroys our powers of discrimination, but our news anchor who takes its name continues to rave and rant in the same breath, speaking only in anger.

The mainstream news media and the social media have forged a new kind of bhakt. Or maybe this new kind of bhakt has helped the media become what it is today. I feel that every citizen ought to be a Kabir or Ravidas—that is, be able to challenge the everyday practices of established religion or the government of the day. Without the example of Guru Ravidas, we would not have been able to comprehend what the purity of mind and heart is all about. A dip in the Ganga would have been the only way to prove one’s faith, and Tendulkar would have had to go to some news channel to prove his patriotism. Today’s mainstream media is against all Indian traditions. What it seeks to do, and has done, is fashion a bhakt who is completely bereft of information. One who is informationless is loveless as well.

This is the baseline of our democratic system now. Its very basis has changed; so too its reference point. If you ask a question, you will be accused of being the following in that order—a Congress agent, a Naxal, urban Naxal, an opponent of Hindu unity, a supporter of Muslims, and, finally, an opponent of Modi, which is where the accusations come to rest. In reality, this final point of offensive defence—why do you oppose Modi?—happens to be the starting point for the end of our democratic system.

To forge a feeling of ‘Hindu frustration’, the media played up a fear of Muslims—in fact, the entire project of building Hindu anger has been centred on this idea. It is worth noting that the project ended up having the same impact on Muslims as it did on Hindus. Just as the Hindus stopped asking questions of the government, the Muslims, out of fear, did the same. In fact, the latter have not just stopped asking questions, they have been abandoning their political right of representation as well in a bid to stem further polarisation in society—they are withdrawing from public and political spaces. Political parties other than the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) have also been affected by this build-up of fear—they too have withdrawn from asking questions on these issues for fear of losing out.

I see before me a craven India where everybody is putting their respective fears forward. It is imperative that we regain our consciousness of being citizens or else we stand to lose the India we attained after a century of struggle. Both Hindus and Muslims need to liberate themselves from fear. For that, they will have to free themselves of the mainstream media.

If one studies the speeches of politicians, the angry demeanour of news anchors, the slogans gracing TV screens and the language of WhatsApp messages, a certain mental complex becomes apparent. A Tendulkar whose language does not reflect that complex can be an anti-national; so too lieutenant-general Syed Ata Hasnain. Today’s mainstream media has shown that stupidity, vulgarity and immoderation can provide a revenue model for good business.

It is not that this process is not being challenged. Members of the public are posing questions to the government through YouTube. A new kind of media is emerging, such as The Wire, Scroll, The Caravan. There are newspapers like The Telegraph. We too have been making an effort. The numbers of those who understand what the media ought to be are on the rise. Intrepid female journalists who are fighting the system also provide hope. In terms of the scale of what they are up against, all these efforts are small. But I have faith that these signs of hope will grow with time.

For now, what can be said is that our present-day mainstream media is no longer the fourth estate of democracy, it is the first estate of a political party. Thanks are due to the BJP and Modi ji for bestowing such a spineless mainstream media on India. Really, Modi ji, I am tempted to ask: from where have you got the temperament of a fakir? Only an unworldly fakir can give his blessings to a media such as this.

I often wonder what the prime minister feels when he sees himself on news channels broadcasting their pure devotion to him 24/7. But then he is a fakir. Why should a fakir bother himself with all this? *(Ravish Kumar is an anchor with NDTV India.)*
The Spirit of Quit India Movement: Lohia's Perception

Prem Singh

9 August 2019 is the 77th anniversary of the Quit India Movement, famously known as the August Revolution and an important milestone in the history of India's freedom movement. As per a letter written by Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia to the Viceroy Linlithgow, the British government had killed fifty thousand patriots and injured many times more people during the August Revolution.

The 75th anniversary of this movement, a movement which was fuelled by the intense desire for freedom of the Indian people, was celebrated two years ago on 9 August 2017. On that occasion, Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave a call for the revival of the spirit of the Quit India Movement by coining a new slogan karenge aur karke rahenge in place of Gandhi's slogan karo ya maro (Do or Die). The slogan is a sort of exhortation to achieve the goal of building a “New India” by the year 2022. He said that India will complete 75 years of Independence in 2022 and the memory of the 75th anniversary of the Quit India Movement should be utilised by striving for the creation of a New India so that the vision can be realised by the 75th anniversary of Independence.

The Prime Minister's call is utterly misaligned with the basic spirit which underlay the Quit India movement. Because it is hard to link this spirit with the idea that lies behind Prime Minister's New India. This New India is being built at the cost of the Constitution, the sovereignty and the resources of our country. And yet the Prime Minister is giving the call to harness the spirit of the struggle for Independence, including the Quit India Movement, for building such a New India. This can only be possible when the spirit of freedom is reduced to the spirit of slavery.

In this article, the spirit of freedom which inspired the people of India during the Quit India Movement, has been contemplated with reference to Lohia's analysis of the same. Lohia uses the phrase “will of freedom” instead of spirit of freedom in his analysis.

In the Indian freedom struggle, the will of freedom and the strength, gathered from various sources, to achieve independence finally culminated in the Quit India Movement. The Quit India Movement conveyed the fact that even if the leaders of the country were directed by the will of freedom, the real strength to achieve it decisively resided in the people. In this nationwide movement, a very large number of people participated and the movement witnessed unprecedented courage and endurance. Lohia has written, quoting a figure given Leon Trotsky, “barely one percent of the Russian population took part in the Russian Revolution. In our Revolution no less than 20% of our people took part.” (Collected Works of Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia, Volume 9, p. 129, Anamika Publishers, Delhi, 2011)

The “Quit India” resolution was passed on August 8, 1942; Aruna Asaf Ali hoisted the tricolor on the Gowalia Tank ground; and on the night of 9th August, the senior leaders of the Congress were arrested. Due to the arrest of the leaders, the action plan of the movement could not be formulated. The relatively young leadership of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) was active, but it had to work underground. In such a situation, Jaiprakash Narayan (JP) wrote two long letters from unknown places to provide the guidance and encouragement to the revolutionaries and to explain the character and method of the movement. It can be said that the public itself was its leader during the Quit India Movement.

Lohia wrote on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Quit India Movement, “9th August was and will remain a people's event. 15th August was a state event. . . . 9th August 1942 expressed the will of the people—we want to be free, and we shall be free. For the first timer after a long period in our history, crores of people expressed their desire to be free. . . . Anyhow, this is the 25th anniversary of 9th August 1942. It should be celebrated well. Its 50th anniversary perhaps will be celebrated in such a way that 15th August will be forgotten, and even 26th of January will either be foreshadowed or would equal it.” (Note and Comments, Vol. II, Ram Manohar Lohia, p. 221, Ram Manohar Lohia Samata Vidyalaya Nyas, Sultan Bazar, Hyderabad, 1975)

Lohia did not live to see the fiftieth anniversary of the August Revolution. His belief that people will listen to him after his death has been proven to be a delusion. The fiftieth anniversary of the Quit India Movement came in the wake of
New Economic Policies which had been introduced in the year 1991. These policies had opened the country's doors to the domestic and foreign multinationals for loot; and a five hundred years old mosque was demolished in the name of Lord Rama. Since then, due to the nexus of neo-liberalism and communalism, the ruling class of India has become the bitter enemy of the Indian people, who had paved way for freedom while facing the suppression of imperialist rulers in the Quit India Movement.

The inception of PM's much glorified New India took place in 1991. In the last three decades, the sovereignty and resources have been snatched from the country, and the constitutional rights have been snatched from the people. The spirit of the freedom struggle, including that of the Quit India Movement, is being used by its propagators to try and build this New India, which basically means a new kind of slavery, to foreign corporations and their governments. If we have to stop this future from becoming a reality, a new resolution must be taken by borrowing the words of Lohia—"we want to be free, and we shall be free" from New India. Further taking clue from Lohia's perception about the spirit of the Quit India Movement, it can be said that this revolution to regain India will be brought to life by the people of India as they did on August 9, 1942.

(The writer teaches Hindi at Delhi University.)

Zomato Case Reminds of ‘Hindu Tea and Muslim Tea’ in Colonial India

S.N. Sahu

A citizen of India from Jabalpur who is a Hindu refused to accept food ordered by him through Zomato on the ground that it was delivered to him by a Muslim boy. He tweeted his refusal and conveyed the message that being a Hindu it would be unacceptable for him to receive food from a non-Hindu.

It seems to be a grim indicator of the new normal in New India.

The reply of Zomato that there is no religion in food and food is religion is quite apt and it asserts and affirms the idea of India which is above all religions. Zomato founder Deepinder Goyal took a positive stand by saying, "We are proud of the idea of India—and the diversity of our esteemed customers and partners. We aren't sorry to lose any business that comes in the way of our values."

Proponents of the Idea of India cheered Zomato for its stand in rejecting the attempt to communalise food, and asserting that the faith of the delivery boy is of no consequence for the consumer.

• Isn't this stand of Zomato heartwarming and incompatible with the idea of New India marked by accentuation of distinctions based on religion?
• Are not differences among people based on religion getting converted to prejudices and discriminations in New India?
• Aren't people in New India being made to hate one another because of their faith?

It is indeed tragic that in New India fellow citizens who suffer exclusion because they profess faiths different from the faith of the majority people are treated as the "other" and become vulnerable to hateful crimes. Many of them get lynched in the name of religious slogans, food and their choice to love and marry someone of another faith.

On September 21, 2017 a lady BJP leader in Aligarh was found slapping a young minor girl because she was sipping tea with a Muslim boy.

Such worrisome instances invokes images of India under British rule where vendors at railway stations used to yell Hindu Tea, Muslim Tea, Hindu water and Muslim water as part of the communal drive.

Is the Idea of New India driving us back to the pre-independence and colonial era?

Yes, indeed in pre-independent India there used to be the practice of selling tea by classifying it into Hindu tea and Muslim tea. Same was the case concerning water which was offered to people in public places and railway stations by specifying and differentiating it as Hindu water and Muslim water.

All this was considered by none other than Mahatma Gandhi as a gigantic obstacle for unity among Hindus and Muslims. In the Constructive Programme authored by him in 1941, he incorporated 18 points. The very first point was on Communal Unity and he very thoughtfully wrote therein about a happy state of things in India where Congress members whatever their religion be, “has to feel his identity with every one of the millions of the
inhabitants of Hindustan”.

“\"In order to realise this,\" he said, "every Congressman will cultivate personal friendship with persons representing faiths other than his own\" and "should have the same regard for the other faiths as he has for his own\".

Then he observed with conviction that "In such a happy state of things there would be no disgraceful cry at the stations such as ‘Hindu water’ and ‘Muslim water’ or ‘Hindu tea’ and ‘Muslim tea’. There would be no separate rooms or pots for Hindus and non-Hindus in schools and colleges, no communal schools, colleges and hospitals. The beginning of such a revolution has to be made by Congressmen without any political motive behind the correct conduct. Political unity will be its natural fruit."

Five years later, i.e. on April 11, 1946 Mahatma Gandhi went to interact with Indian National Army (INA) soldiers who were taken as prisoners by British authorities. He was highly impressed to see so many officers and men of the INA representing so many different religions and races of India united together for the common cause of India’s freedom and living like members of one family.

For him “It was like a whiff of fresh invigorating air from the free India that is to be”.

He felt that "The absence of the third party had enabled them to obliterate all communal distinctions and develop a perfect spirit of comaraderie in exile".

However, the INA soldiers informed Gandhi with pain and sadness that in detention, they were made to feel the distinctions based on religion. One INA soldier told him, “We never felt any distinction of creed or religion in the INA. But here we are faced with ‘Hindu tea’ and ‘Mussalman tea’.” He then asked, “What are we to do?”

Mahatma Gandhi put a counter-question by asking, “Why do you suffer it?” The soldier answered by saying, "No, we do not," and revealed, “We mix ‘Hindu tea’ and ‘Musulman tea’ exactly half and half, and then serve. The same with food.”

Gandhi had a hearty laugh saying, “That is very good”.

The practice of selling ‘Hindu tea’ and ‘Muslim tea’ in railway stations continued till the 1950s. It only ended when one lady Member of the Rajya Sabha Seeta Paramananda while participating in the discussion on Railway budget drew the attention of the then Railway Minister to this abominable practice and fervently appealed for an end to it. Eventually it was stopped.

Now in twenty-first century India, the food and beverages are again being seen from the perspective of religion and the divisive spirit is invoked with a view to polarise society and narrow down multiple identities of people to the narrow factor of religion.

Thankfully, the police authorities in Jabalpur have been compelled by public outrage to take a serious view of the divisive tweet of the man and issue a warning by saying that “If in the next six months, he again makes any such tweets or commits any such act which is against basic tenets of the constitution or worthy of disturbing public peace or communal amity, then he will automatically be sent to jail.”

We require vigilant public administration and the robust vision of the father of our nation to defend our Republic and Constitution from such assault.

(S.N. Sahu served as Press Secretary to President of India late Shri K.R. Narayanan.)

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Letters to Editor

Whither, Rule of Law?

Rosamma Thomas

On August 5, with no discussion in Parliament and no consent from the people of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, the Central government declared the abrogation of Article 370 that granted special status to the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Provision was also made for the division of the state into Union Territories.

The comfort that we in India have long derived from living under the rule of law, we no longer have. The Constitution need not be altered—with the brute majority that the BJP has in Parliament, it can just get bills passed even though they have no sound legal basis. Rising to speak in Parliament after Article 370 was abrogated, former Union minister P Chidambaram pointed out that Art 370 could scarcely be used to amend itself. It only provides for introducing amendments in other Acts.

When a nation lives under the rule of law, there are predictable rhythms to the lives of its citizens. We know then that certain basic assumptions on which we build our lives as a community will not collapse under our feet one fine day, without discussion, debate or deliberation.

We know, when we live under rule of law, that if our rights are taken from us, we have a procedure in place to appeal and seek redress. We know that we can approach the courts, and expect a ruling based on the provisions of the Constitution of India.

With the flattening of all government institutions under PM Modi, these assumptions no longer hold true. The woman who worked as a clerk in the Supreme Court and complained of sexual harassment by the Chief Justice of India got short shrift; those seeking an impartial probe into the controversial death of Justice Loya, who was hearing a matter in which Home Minister Amit Shah was an accused, were disappointed by the SC even though more and more evidence was dug out about the suspicious circumstances under which the 48-year-old judge died.

But what can conscientious citizens do? We can take to the streets, protest, and, when our conscience does not permit us to follow the rules laid down by our government, actively defy the law. As Gandhi would remind us, we can disobey, and we can be civil about it.

We can also, taking Gandhi’s example, boycott. I, for one, now boycott the Times of India, where I was once an employee. I have observed at close quarters how stories that are unfavourable to the government are often mysteriously dropped. And so, I no longer read the TOI. My pumy protest will mean little to a Rs 10,000 crore group, I know. Yet, I will do what I can to strengthen news sources that offer the truth and refrain from patronising those the government can easily manipulate.

(Rosamma Thomas is a senior journalist.)

The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore

Harasankar Adhikari

Just a century ago, in 1919, The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore was published. It was one of the scholastic fellowships of Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. Before this publication, Indian intellectuals did not consider that a poet could be a philosopher, and so Tagore was not recognised as a philosopher. Only after publication of this work of Dr. Radhakrishnan did Tagore come to be recognised as a philosopher also. In the preface of this book, Radhakrishnan said, “interpreting the philosophy and message of Sir Rabindranath Tagore, we are interpreting the Indian ideal of philosophy, religion, and art of which his work is the outcome and expression.”

Dr Radhakrishnan writes, ‘Rabindranath’s teaching, with its vital faith in the redeeming power of the spiritual forces and their up-building energy, has a particular value at the present moment, when the civilised world is passing through the crucible of a ghastly war which, whether or not it purges the nations of their pride and hate, lust for gold and greed of land, at least proclaims, in no uncertain tones, the utter bankruptcy of materialism.”

Analysing Tagore’s philosophy, he stated, “There are two views regarding his philosophy of life. If
we believe one side, he is a vedantin, a thinker who draws his inspiration from the Upanishads. If we believe the other, he is an advocate of a theism more or less like, if not identical with, Christianity.” Tagore’s philosophy is “the ancient wisdom of India restated to meet the needs of modern times. The soul of ancient India is mirrored in.” Radhakrishnan also opined, “his philosophy is thoroughly Indian both in origin and development.”

Tagore believed that it is in human action that God and religion are realised. Dr. Radhakrishnan viewed, “He gives us a ‘human’ God, dismisses with contempt the concept of world-illusion, praises action overmuch and promises fullness of life to the religious soul.”

Dr. Radhakrishnan also said, “Rabindranath advocates the ideal of unity and harmony, and not uniformity and identity. He puts forward a plea for mankind by advocating the ideal of a family of nations for which every member will bring his unique gift.”

In these difficult times, Tagore’s philosophical musings still show us the light. In this 150th birth anniversary of Tagore, learning from his would be the greatest homage to him.

* * *

If a society is ever infected with utter silence, there shall be no life left in the civic and ethnic consciousness of the individual. In the past regimes of dictatorial and absolute monarchical authority, the consequences of silence have choked the birds, plucked the flowers, and executed the human flesh. History is proof of this. Today, this is unfortunately being repeated in India.

With the passing of the amendments of the Anti-Terror Law (UAPA, 1967) in the Lok Sabha, the government has burnt the torch to fire the pyre of intellectualism, freedom of thought and expression, and freedom of disagreement. The amendment empowers the government to label not only organisations (as in the past) but individuals as “terrorists” without being convicted, plainly on the hypothesis of suspicion and accusation. How is this possible in a democracy with public judicial institutions? How can an accused be labelled without being convicted? Imagine the consequences a person might face if his/her name is labelled as terrorist. Will he/she ever be able to live a life with dignity after that?

Will the society ever accept him/her? Will the vulture media houses leave any brick unturned to falsely defame his/her loyalty to the nation? Is it so simple to call a citizen a terrorist?

The government, as per the Bill, will notify the person labelled in the official gazette, and the person in question must give proof of his innocence to the government. It will be upon the person labelled to send an application to the Central government. If the application is rejected, the individual can ask for a review by a special committee which will also be set up by the government. The same government who in the first place labelled you as terrorist will set up a committee to examine you! Can you imagine the ultra-credibility of the report? And, there is a high probability of the committee being never formed. To make matters worse, the time limit of the process is not mentioned.

If you’re thinking that there will be a criteria of labelling, the fact is, regrettably, there is no such specification. Your criminal record, whether crystalline or malicious, doesn’t have any importance. So, it is entirely up to the whim of the government to label someone a terrorist. What about the freedom of expression of intellectuals, artistes, politicians and citizens? How sure are we that the bill won’t be used to extinguish the opinion of the opposition? Is it unlikely for a country like India which ranks so low in press freedom to not cut the tongue of the press? Considering the misuse of sedition charges against the opposition (be it intellectuals, students or artists), can we believe that the same won’t be repeated with the imposition of this new law?

In a healthy democracy, the people must be critical of the government. Electing a leader doesn’t mean he/she should be trusted for all his deeds. At the end of the day, it is their professional career. Their service isn’t free either. They are employed by us, the taxpayers, to look after the fundamental structure and institution of our nation. And like every good boss, we from time to time must go through their plans, listen with seriousness to the opposition’s version of it and analyse the pros and cons of its execution. For, it is not at all uncommon to lie in order to protect the post.

(The writer is a poet and writer.)
Here’s a sentence for you: The Arctic is burning. Yes, that Arctic—the traditionally cold and wet one, large swaths of which are being consumed by an astonishing number of wildfires, from Russia to Greenland to Alaska.

“Arctic fires—the combination of these two words is still an unusual term in my field of fire science,” says Guillermo Rein of Imperial College, London. “Arctic fires are rare, but they’re not unprecedented. What is unprecedented is the number of fires that are happening. Never before have satellites around the planet seen this level of activity.”

Unprecedented, yes, but not unexplained. The Arctic is warming twice as fast as the rest of the planet, leading to the desiccation of vegetation, which fuels huge blazes. Fortunately for us, these wildfires typically threaten remote, sparsely populated areas. But unfortunately for the whole of humanity, so far this year Arctic fires have released some 121 megatonnes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, more than what Belgium emits annually. That beats the previous Arctic record of 110 megatonnes of carbon dioxide, set in 2004—and we’re only in July.

Why such a huge burp of emissions? Because these are no ordinary wildfires. Many of them are burning through peat. You may know peat as the magical substance that gives Scotch its smoky flavor, but it also forms the squishy foundation of whole ecosystems, known as peatlands. It’s made from slowly decomposing organic matter, like moss, that gradually builds up into a layer perhaps several meters thick. Given enough time and enough pressure, it will eventually harden into the undisputed heavyweight champion of carbon emissions: coal.

Peatlands are the largest natural terrestrial carbon store on Earth. From this muck the rest of the ecosystem sprouts, though trees typically don’t grow very tall because of the peat’s low oxygen content. The leaf canopy is thin, which means more light reaches the ground, fueling the growth of wet, fluffy sphagnum mosses. In a healthy system, these mosses keep the peatland from burning. Indeed, thriving peatland can actually act as a fire break, stopping neighbouring wildfires from spreading.

But then we humans came along and did human things, like draining the peatlands for agriculture or warming the Arctic with our emissions. When peat is wet, it’s up to 95 percent water, but as it dries it condenses, turning into one of the most flammable substances in nature. “Drier and denser are the double whammy,” says McMaster University ecohydrologist Mike Waddington. “If those types of peatlands were to ignite, you can burn well over 1,000 years of carbon accumulation in one single fire.” For every hectare, you might lose 200 tons of carbon into the atmosphere. The typical car emits 5 tons in a year.

And when dried peat burns, it burns in a super weird way. In California, fierce autumn winds fan blazes like last year’s Camp Fire, which consumed dry grasses and shrubs and trees before overwhelming a town of 30,000 in a matter of minutes. But when peat catches fire, say after a lightning strike at the surface, it smoulders like a lit cigarette, gradually burning deeper and deeper into the ground and moving laterally across the ecosystem, carving enormous holes in the soil.

This three-dimensional fire continues for perhaps months at a time, gnawing both downward and sideways through carbon-rich material. “It’s the combination of these two phenomena that leads to massive carbon emissions, massive damage to the ecosystem, massive damage to the soil and the root systems,” Rein says. “You have to go to a different planet to find a more persistent type of fire.”

This persistence is particularly dangerous if a peat fire runs into an unhealthy forest. Here, the soil carries more oxygen, helping trees grow taller. “As those trees get bigger, the shading is essentially the kryptonite of the super mosses,” says Waddington. “They stop growing and they stop storing carbon. So not only do you have more fuel in the trees, but you lose that resistant moss at the surface.” It’s a recipe for a runaway wildfire.

And if mosses aren’t storing carbon, they aren’t helping us get out of this mess we’ve created. So the solution here is an odd one. “It seems counterintuitive that you could cut down trees and store more carbon, but that’s exactly what can happen,” says Waddington. “You get the mosses to grow, and you not only store carbon but you reduce the risk of future fires.” (In other words, planting trees can sometimes do more harm than good.) That, though,

Arctic Fires

Matt Simon
would require forest management across swaths of the Arctic, a kind of management we in the US can’t even do right on a small scale.

What we’re looking at, then, is yet another complicating factor in the massive complexity that is climate change: When peat burns, it emits lots of carbon dioxide, and when peatlands aren’t healthy, they don’t capture any. The extent to which this is affecting climate change, though, is not yet clear. Nor is how bad exactly the situation will get in the Arctic. But the problem is supremely urgent: peatlands cover 1.3 million square miles around the world, storing the same amount of carbon you’d get from burning fossil fuels for 60 years.

The underlying and inevitable problem is uncertainty. Even one component of climate change—peatlands—demands far more research, to say nothing of the dizzying number of other components that interact with each other to form the whole Earth system. Models are getting better and better, and incorporating more sources of natural emissions, in addition to the carbon dioxide we humans are pumping into the atmosphere.

Meanwhile, the Arctic is burning. Which is not the last time you’ll read that sentence.

(Matt Simon is a staff science writer at Wired.)

From Article 370 to Article 3, Modi-Shah Upend the Constitution

In a surgical strike on two key elements of the Constitution that define the powers of states of the Indian Union in general, and the state of Jammu and Kashmir in particular, the Narendra Modi government has undone seven decades of official policy and taken the country into uncharted legal and political territory.

What's the news?

Against the backdrop of massive troop deployments in J&K, the house arrest of mainstream politicians and the ouster of all tourists and Amarnath yatris from the state, Union home minister Amit Shah announced in the Rajya Sabha at 11 am on Monday that the government had decided to do away with J&K’s special constitutional status. This has been a longstanding promise of the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Also surprising, as the BJP has never spoken of it before, Shah introduced a Bill to essentially abolish Jammu and Kashmir as a state of the Indian Union and replace it with two separate Union Territories—the UT of Jammu and Kashmir and the UT of Ladakh.

“The Union Territory of Ladakh will be without legislature,” Amit Shah said. “Further, keeping in view the prevailing internal security situation fueled by cross-border terrorism in the existing state of Jammu and Kashmir, a separate Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir is being created. The Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir will be with legislature.”

Amid protests in the house, Shah said President Ram Nath Kovind had issued a presidential order, exercising his power under Clause 1 of Article 370, to make all provisions of the Constitution effectively applicable to J&K. Earlier, only those provisions with which the J&K government concurred were applicable.

Rather than abrogating or repealing Article 370, the government has essentially read down its provisions and used the legal fiction of the governor—who is a Central appointee—being the ‘state government’ to justify the president’s order.

Is this legal?

It appears, on the face of things, that both the reading down of Article 370 and the bifurcation of the state and the demotion of both parts to Union Territory status cannot be done in the manner Shah and the government hope to do it.

Article 3 of the Constitution says that before parliament can consider a Bill that diminishes the area of a state or changes its name, the Bill must be “referred by the President to the Legislature of that State for expressing its views thereon”.

This is an essential safeguard of India’s federal system and has clearly not been followed in this case. In parliament, Shah invoked the legal fiction that since the J&K assembly was dissolved and the state is under Central rule, it is parliament which gets to exercise the prerogatives of the assembly. If the Modi government gets away with this logic, then any state of the Indian Union can be done away with in similar fashion. It is
shocking that parties like the Aam Aadmi Party, Biju Janata Dal, Telangana Rashtra Samithi and YSR Congress have backed this move despite being strong supporters of federalism.

As for Article 370, before analysing its significance for Jammu and Kashmir, let us consider the stated provisions for its abrogation or dilution: Article 370 (3) clearly says:

“the President may, by public notification, declare that this article shall cease to be operative or shall be operative only with such exceptions and modifications and from such date as he may specify: Provided that the recommendation of the Constituent Assembly of the State . . . shall be necessary before the President issues such a notification.”

The presidential order purports to amend an unrelated article of the Constitution (Article 367) by adding a new clause which, inter alia, redefines the constituent assembly of the state as its legislative assembly. While the legality of this move is also questionable—there are Supreme Court judgments which have ruled that the dissolution of the constituent assembly effectively means Article 370 cannot be touched—at the very least the state’s assembly would have to back the move, which it hasn’t.

**What does this mean politically?**

Prime Minister Modi is turning the Valley of Kashmir into a Union Territory which will be ruled directly from Delhi. But in case you weren’t paying attention, the Valley of Kashmir has already been directly ruled from Delhi for more than a year—a de facto UT. And by Modi, indirectly, since 2015, when the BJP entered into an alliance with the Peoples Democratic Party that year. (The PDP is run by one of the three families that Amit Shah told parliament are responsible for all the corruption in Kashmir.)

In the time that Modi has been prime minister, he has presided over a deteriorating political and security situation in the state. More soldiers and paramilitary jawans are getting killed today in militant attacks than before. Here’s what the government told parliament earlier this year:

- In 2014, the total number of terrorist incidents in the state was 222. In 2018, the number was 614.
- In 2014, the total number of security personnel killed was 47. Last year, it was 91.
- In 2014, 28 civilians were killed in terrorist incidents. In 2018, it was 38.

Remember, when it comes to security, the Centre calls all the shots, whether there is an elected state government or not. Any improvement or deterioration in the security situation is a function of New Delhi’s handling.

It is against the backdrop of these unflattering numbers in Kashmir that Modi is gambling over something as fundamental as Article 370 and Jammu and Kashmir’s very status as a state.

**Why is Article 370 crucial?**

Article 370 has its origins in the Instrument of Accession which Maharaja Hari Singh signed to join the Indian Union in 1947. The Article gives J&K a unique status because these were the terms on which it acceded to India. The details need not detain us but two aspects are noteworthy: India agreed to J&K’s demand that the national parliament would have primary responsibility for defence, external affairs and communications, but that any other laws would need the concurrence of the state to be applicable.

Second, under Article 7, the instrument of accession made clear that this did not amount to accepting any future constitution of India nor did it “fetter” the state’s right to enter into “arrangements” over any future constitution.

Although Amit Shah was right to say Kashmir joined India not thanks to Article 370 but because of the Instrument of Accession, what he did not mention was these sections of the accession document to which India remains formally committed.

**Is Article 370 a temporary provision?**

Despite several challenges to the provision on account of it allegedly being a temporary provision, courts have upheld that Article 370 is a permanent provision of the constitution. In a 2018 judgment, the Supreme Court said that although the article’s title noted it as ‘temporary’, it was very much of a permanent nature.

**What are other political parties saying?**

Responding to the morning’s proceedings, former J&K chief minister and PDP leader Mehbooba Mufti said this was the “darkest day in Indian democracy”. National Conference leader Omar Abdullah also said that the decision was a “total betrayal of the trust of people of J&K” and will have “dire consequences”. Congress leader Ghulam Nabi Azad said that the BJP has “murdered” the Constitution and India’s democracy. The Janata Dal
of the Centre’s Failed Strategies in J&K published in The Wire notes that 2018’s recruitment numbers are the highest in over a decade—despite the massive crackdown on insurgent networks. Separatists have already been protesting any electoral participation with India, with much of the Valley abstaining from the vote in this year’s General Election.

In another article The Army Has Bared Its Iron Fist in Kashmir — and Wants Everyone to Know It published in The Wire, Ghazala Wahab says,

The truth is, in the last 20 years, the situation in Kashmir has never been as bad as it is today. Forget about talking to Pakistan, the government has no opening with the local people either.

Mainstream politicians have been discredited; and the separatists branded as criminals. Reaching out to the people of Kashmir is an empty slogan, because you don’t talk or negotiate with people, you do so with the representatives of the people. And who represents the people of Kashmir today?

The brutal answer is, nobody has a clue.

Courtesy: The Wire Staff

The Western Alliance is Falling Apart

Peter Koenig

Ever since Imran Khan became the 22nd Prime Minister of Pakistan in August 2018, the winds have changed. While his predecessors, though generally leaning eastwards, have often wavered between the US and the China orbit, Khan is in the process of clearly defining his alliances with the east, in particular China.

A few days ago, RT reported that China, in addition to the expansion of the new port in Gwadar, Balochistan, has entered into agreements with Pakistan to build a military / air base in Pakistan, a new city to house some half a million Chinese nationals, as well as several road and railway improvement projects, including a highway connecting the cities of Karachi and Lahore, reconstruction of the Karakoram Highway linking Hasan Abdal to the Chinese border, as well as upgrading the Karachi–Peshawar railway track for trains to travel up to 160 km / hour.

This rehabilitation of dilapidated Pakistani transportation infrastructure is not only expected to contribute between 2% and 3% of Pakistan’s future GDP, but it offers also another outlet for Iranian gas / hydrocarbons, other than through the Strait of Hormuz—for example, by rail to the new port of Gwadar which, by the way, is also a new Chinese naval base. From Gwadar, Iranian hydrocarbon cargos can be shipped everywhere, including to China, Africa and India. With the new China-built transportation infrastructure, Iranian gas can also be shipped overland to China.

These infrastructure developments, plus several electric power production projects, still mostly fed by fossil fuel, to resolve Pakistan’s chronic energy shortage, are part of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also, called the New Silk Road. They are a central part of the new so-called

(United), a BJP ally, also said it did not want Article 370 revoked and did not support the government. JD(U) MPs walked out of the house to express their dissent.

The Bahujan Samaj Party will support all of the government’s resolutions, party MP Satish Chandra Mishra said. The Biju Janata Dal, which claims to follow an equidistant policy with respect to both the national parties, also supports the government resolutions. Prasanna Acharya, BJD MP, said that since “Bharat Mata is supreme for us, we support the resolution”. He also said that no one bothered about the plight of Kashmiri Pandits all this while, and his party is happy that all Kashmiris will get their due following the resolution.

The YSR Congress Party also supported the resolution, as did the Aam Aadmi Party.

What does this mean for Kashmir?

The Centre’s fresh deployment of nearly 40,000 troops on the ground ahead of this announcement indicates that widespread protest is expected in the Valley. The Jammu and Kashmir People’s Movement party leader Shah Faesal told The Wire in an interview, “If Article 370 is repealed, India’s relationship with Kashmir will also end.”

Jammu and Kashmir is among one of the most militarised regions in the world at this moment. For the first time since 2008, the number of people who died due to conflict breached the 500 ceiling. The number of listed militants with government agencies crossed 300—the highest in a decade. In 2013, the year before Narendra Modi was elected to power, the number was just 78. Azaan Javaid, in an article Militant Recruitment Data in 2018 Is Telling
China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which was first designed in 2015 during a visit by China’s President Xi Jinping, when some 51 Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) worth then some $46 billion were signed.

**Today, in the CPEC implementation phase, the projects planned or under construction are estimated at over $60 billion. An estimated 80% are direct investments with considerable Pakistani participation and 20% Chinese concessionary debt. Clearly, Pakistan out of the US orbit and has become a staunch ally of China—to the detriment of the US role in the Middle East.**

Washington’s wannabe hegemony over the Middle East is fading rapidly.

A few days ago, Germany refused Washington’s request to take part in a US-led maritime mission in the Strait of Hormuz. While this mission is ostensibly to secure hydrocarbon shipments through this Iran-controlled narrow waterway, in actuality, it is a naked attempt to weaponise waterways, and control who ships what and to whom—and applying “sanctions” by blocking or outright pirating of tankers destined for western ‘enemy’ territories. Germany’s Foreign Minister Heiko Maas announced in Warsaw, Poland, on July 31 that there “cannot be a military solution” to the current crisis in the Persian Gulf and that Berlin will turn down Washington’s request to join the US, British and French operation “aimed at protecting sea traffic in the Strait of Hormuz, and combating so-called “Iranian aggression.”

This idea of the Washington war hawks was conceived after Iran’s totally legal seizure of the British-flagged Stena Impero oil tanker, after it rammed an Iranian fishing boat a couple of weeks ago. However, nothing is said about the totally illegal and US-ordered British piracy of the Iranian super tanker Grace I off the coast of Gibraltar in Spanish waters (another infraction of international law), weeks earlier. While Grace I’s crew has since been released, the tanker is still under British capture, but western media remain silent about it, while lambasting Iran for seizing a British tanker in the Strait of Hormuz.

Germany remains committed to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—JCPOA (the Iran nuclear deal), from which the United States unilaterally withdrew a year ago, and Germany will therefore not intervene on behalf of the US.

Add to this Turkey—a key NATO member both for her strategic location and NATO’s actual military might established in Turkey—moving ever closer to the east, and becoming a solid ally of Russia, after having ignored Washington’s warnings against Turkey’s purchasing of Russian S-400 cutting-edge air defense systems. For “sleeping with the enemy”—i.e. moving ever closer to Russia, the US has already punished Turkey’s economy by manipulating her currency to fall by about 40% since the beginning of 2018. Turkey is also a candidate to become a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and so is Iran.

Turkey has become a de facto lame duck as a NATO member and may soon officially exit NATO which would be a tremendous blow to the North Atlantic Alliance—and may tempt other European NATO nations to do likewise. Probably not overnight, but the idea of an ever more defunct NATO will be planted.

All indications are that the future, economically and security wise—is in the East.

Even Europe may eventually ‘dare’ making the jump towards better relations with Russia and Central Asia and eventually with China.

Will the UK, another staunch US ally, jump ship? Unlikely. Dancing on two weddings simultaneously is a customary Anglo-Saxon game plan. The Brits must have learned it from their masters in Washington, who in turn took the lessons from the Brits as colonial power for centuries, across the Atlantic. There are indications that the UK is preparing for bilateral trade relations with China just in case Brexit happens.

Western, US-led war on Iran is therefore unlikely. There is too much at stake, and especially, there are no longer any reliable allies in the region. Remember, allies—shall we call them puppets or peons—normally do the dirty work for Washington.

So, threatening, warning and annoying provocations by the US with some of its last remaining allies may continue for a while. It makes for good propaganda. After all, packing up and going home is not exactly Uncle Sam’s forte. But what is for sure is that the western alliance is no longer what it used to be. In fact, it is in shambles. And Iran knows it.

(Peter Koenig is an economist and geopolitical analyst.)
There are stories that are unrelated to the news, but can explain much better than many combat reports, why people like me are fighting against the Empire and imperialism, with such determination and vehemence. Not all stories are ‘big’ or ‘heroic’; not all include famous people or iconic struggles. Not all take place on battlefields. But they ‘humanise’ the struggle.

Here is one such story, that I would like to share with you. Because without such stories, frankly, nothing really makes sense.

* * *

It was a hot, humid night in Jakarta; a megapolis with the worst pollution on earth, and with some of the most monstrous contrasts on our planet. A literally sinking city, constructed against the people; fragmented, serving only the few hundred thousand extremely rich (most of them accumulating wealth through corruption and theft), while condemning millions of struggling individuals to a slow death.

For the ruthless Indonesian elites and their Western handlers, the poor of Jakarta (the great majority of city dwellers) simply do not exist. They live in cramped slums, called kampungs—literally translated as villages. Kampungs fill huge spaces between the skyscrapers, malls, and mostly empty five-star hotels. Individuals living there consume very little, and therefore matter close to nothing. Even their number is underplayed in the official statistics.

One night, my small film crew and I were driving though the Klender neighborhood in East Jakarta; a poor, religious and monotonous part of the city. I was re-editing my big film about Indonesia after the US-sponsored military coup of 1965, an event which I often describe as an “Intellectual Hiroshima”, for which I had to again spend a few days in Jakarta, collecting latest footage, filming contrasts between the people and feudal elites.

We were all tired. Traffic jams have brought the city to an almost permanent gridlock. The pollution is unbearable. Life has come to a standstill. As planned by the regime, no one seemed to be thinking. Nothing seemed to be working.

We were driving past Klender train station a few minutes after midnight.

There were two young women standing by the side of the road. One of them caught my eye. She was clearly a prostitute, or a ‘sex-worker’, as they would call her in the West. But in reality, no, she was not a ‘worker’; not her. Just an abused, tired woman.

I liked her face. Hers was an honest, good face. And after all that nonsense I heard during the day, after all that ‘feel good’ crap, I needed to hear something real, honest.

“Stop!” I shouted at my driver. He stepped on the brakes, then backed up a few meters.

“I want to talk to her,” I explained. Then to her: “I want to talk to you.”

She did not find my request strange. She nodded. After years of moving all around the world, while documenting the state of our humanity, I have developed certain instincts. I can tell from the faces of people, whether they have a story to tell; and whether they have the desire to speak. She did, both.

We emptied the front seat for her, next to the driver. She got in. Jakarta is a dangerous city, especially for women. But she did not seem to be frightened. She trusted me, as I trusted her.

“My name is Andre,” I said. “I am a filmmaker, and this is my team”.

“My name is Risna,” she answered and smiled.

“I want to hear your story,” I said.

“OK,” she said. “Do you mind if I film?”

“Go ahead. I don’t mind.”

I put my GH5 over my knee, turned on the little light on the ceiling of the car, and pressed the “Record” button.

Just like that. No coaching, no preparation. And then it happened.


* * *

“It was four of us,” she began, softly:

“Four children. Little ones. Two boys and two girls. Our father, a pious religious man, used to use all of us. He had sex with us, with males and females. By then our mother was gone. He wanted to get married for the second time. To a young woman. But he had no money. And so, he began pimping all of us, for cash, so he could save enough, to start his new family. All four of us...
I looked at the monitor of my camera. 8 minutes and few seconds had passed since I began recording. One human life, in a summary. One complex, broken human life. I bowed to her. Shook her hand. Thanked her.

“When do you have hope?”

She looked at me, deep into my eyes. Then she nodded.

“Yes!”

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At night, I couldn’t sleep.
I knew all about what she was talking about. My friend who works for the UNDP once explained to me that Indonesia has one of the highest child abandonment rates in the world. And also, one of the highest number of sexual child abuse cases, particularly inside families; committed by family members. All these topics are taboo, and no ‘official’ study can be produced, as most women are only willing to speak ‘off the record’.

In Indonesia, after 1965, everything collapsed; was destroyed. But this downfall, and almost nothing related to it, can be discussed openly. Here, the fear of truth is omnipresent.

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In 1979, when the pro-US Somoza’s regime collapsed and the Sandinistas took over the devastated Nicaragua, my friend, an American poet and translator, happened to be in Managua.

He was very young and confused. He understood, theoretically, the greatness of the revolution. But he was still lacking examples.

Then, one afternoon, he saw a bus. A beat-up public bus, slowly moving towards the center of the city, while sun was setting down, behind the hills.

He told me the story, a long time ago, in New York, as I was ready to depart for Peru, to cover the so-called Dirty War:

“It was the end of the week. The bus was full of girls; young women from slums. Some were barefoot. But they were dressed in their best. They were travelling to the center of the capital, to dance!”

The voice of my friend broke. He was overwhelmed by his memories.

“Do you understand? Before, they only went to the rich parts of the city in order to serve, to be humiliated, used; to labour for the rich. Now, they were going to those clubs that only a week ago were frequented exclusively by ‘gringos’ and local elites. They were going to dance. It was their country, suddenly. It was their city. They were free. The country belonged to them.”

“This is when I understood,” he concluded, “that the revolution was right. Not because I studied socialism, not because of some theory. But because these girls from the poor neighborhoods of Managua had suddenly gained the right to dance. They gained their right to exist; to be alive!”

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In Cuba, they say: “Everyone dances, or no one dances!”

Covering the world, documenting wars, conflicts, but also revolutions, I often encounter women like Risna.

Whenever countries collapse, whenever they are destroyed by savage capitalism, by religious extremism, or by subservience to imperialist powers, women suffer the most. It is almost the rule.

Most of them suffer in silence,
as even their voices are being muted.

The more oppressive, regressive society gets, the more subjugated are its women.

Their humiliation, repression, suffering gets glorified as virtue. While rape, molestation, and submission are hushed up, never discussed. In countries such as Indonesia, if a woman protests and speaks about her fate, she gets ridiculed, discredited, or even thrown into prison, as has happened recently, on several well-publicised occasions.

Western hypocrisy is obvious: while everyone there is obsessed with ‘political correctness’, London, Washington and Paris are glorifying, supporting and even producing regimes which treat women worse than animals.

* * *

Risna deserves to be in one of those proverbial busses which are taking women to the once exclusive clubs, so they can dance. In a rough translation of the metaphor: ‘so they could become the owners of their own fate, of their cities, and their country’.

Women like her are the women we are fighting for.

Their stories are our stories. Be they in Managua, Jakarta, Kampala or Mumbai.

They are as significant as those stories from the war zones near Syrian Idlib, or Afghanistan, or Libya.

Not to tell such stories would convert us, revolutionary writers, into liars.

(Marge Piercy is an American poet, novelist, and social activist.)

I Am Wrestling With Despair

Marge Piercy

Every day is worse than the one before a killing of all that was legislated to be kind, helpful, healthy for all living creatures, prisoners of this earth.

The meanness of it gets me, the hatred of who have less money and things and thus count less and should be punished or simply pushed into some locked closet of poverty and forgotten except for occasional rhetoric blaming them for the state of that closet. How do these men stand being so cold and full of malice? They have plenty left to flog women for having bodies. How dare women desire, how dare we choose, say no, resist, insist.

I can’t give up, no matter how cozy that looks by contrast with all this jabbering, this attempt to organize our anger into some kind of weapon.

(Marge Piercy is an American poet, novelist, and social activist.)

Twenty-Sixth January

Sahir Ludhianvi

Come, let us ponder over this question Those beautiful dreams of ours, what became of them?

The helpless and naked cannot even afford a shroud What happened to those promises of silk and satin?

Democrat, humanist, pacifist What happened to all those self-conferred titles?

(Sahir Ludhianvi (1921–1980) is one of India’s best known poets and film lyricists.)
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**Apna Bazar - Means** Adorable, Pleasant, Noble and Affectionate services

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“We are, what we repeatedly do, Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

Aristotle

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                   Narendra Bhurke, Umesh Phatak, Manisha Duble, Nitin Anerao, Jagdish Nalawade

S. T. Kajale
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**From the Editor’s desk...**

**Let us Not Lose Hope in Bad Times**

G.G. Parikh, Neeraj Jain

The Modi juggernaut is marching ahead, wantonly riding roughshod over the Constitution. It is even crushing under it the fundamental pillars of our Constitution—democracy, equality, secularism and fraternity. The federal structure of our country is being demolished. The independence of our most important institutions that can act to protect the Constitution stands compromised. The opposition parties who profess by democracy and secularism are in utter disarray, with many of their senior leaders even willing to jump on the BJP ship. The media has become a servile lapdog.

The Modi Government is summarily trashing the Constitutional directives to our policy makers regarding the orientation of our country’s economic and social policies. The country is being run solely and wholly for the naked profiteering of the big corporate houses, both foreign and domestic. Inequality has reached such extreme levels that we have become one of the most unequal countries of the world. The richest 1% of the country’s population has more than half the country’s private wealth. The number of billionaires in the country doubled in just four years, from 56 in 2014 to 119 in 2018, and their total wealth is more than the country’s budget for this year. On the other hand, the bottom 50% of the country’s population owns just 2.4% of the country’s wealth.

Due to deliberate government neglect, our education and health systems are in shambles. More than half our children are functionally illiterate. Because of the terrible state of our public health system, crores of people in the country are being pushed down into poverty due to fleecing by private doctors.

In a country with the most fertile lands in the world, nearly 40% children suffer from stunting—an indicator of chronic malnourishment. Malnourishment suffered at a very young age impairs mental development of the
child for life.

Just the increase in the wealth of the country’s billionaires in one year, 2017–18, of Rs 8 lakh crore, is enough money to provide free and good quality education to all our children and universal food subsidy to all people in the country.

Unemployment is at unheard-of levels. Probably more than half the population in the country is unemployed or underemployed.

These are domestic issues. Together with the world, we are actually facing a far more terrifying crisis, that human civilisation itself is threatened with extinction because of global warming. This crisis has its roots in our entire capitalist developmental model.

And yet, the very same people who built the greatest mass movement in the world to win freedom for the country are silent as never before. Their sensibilities have become warped by the propaganda dished out by the media and the trash being circulated by trolls on the social media. They are so busy playing violence-filled video games and watching grisly internet serials on their smart phones that they no longer feel the pain when our fellow citizens are lynched by mobs. The zoom of the high speed motor cycles shown on television has drowned their sensitivities, and so they no longer feel outraged by their own poverty and unemployment.

Worse, large numbers of them have fallen prey to the false nationalist and fundamentalist propaganda of the BJP and its parent organisation, the RSS. Forgetting their worsening economic conditions, they are not only voting for it in elections, they ardently believe that Modi is transforming India into a developed and powerful nation.

Even more worse, the socialists—the only political force that can fight the fascist and neoliberal onslaught of the BJP–RSS—are weak and pulverised.

We are indeed living in very difficult times.

But let us not despair. The present situation, we are very sure, is not permanent. However bad the times are, ultimately, history will march ahead. Our country has seen far more difficult times. During the independence struggle, despite the repression being far more brutal, lakhs of people mobilised and smilingly suffered immense hardships and ultimately won freedom for the country. Let us have faith in the people of our country, that sooner or later, they will rise above the fascist propaganda and mobilise to build a new world.

Let us draw inspiration from the people all over the world—in various parts of the world, after a long period of darkness, socialist forces are on the upswing once again, from Venezuela to Bolivia to Mexico and Argentina, and even in the USA and Britain, challenging the might of the most powerful empire in world history.

So, let us not lose hope. Let us stand up for our socialist principles. Let us not manoeuvre and build unprincipled alliances to somehow come to power. Socialism is an honest enterprise. Its ends cannot be obtained by intrigue, cunning, double-dealing.

Let us not water down our socialist programme, thinking that if we compromise our principles, we will become a force again.

We should not at all do that. For, what do we gain if our voice is heard once again, because our message will no longer be worth hearing? We will have permanently lost our way.

Let us do what we can do: live our socialist ideals. As we go about organising people, let us within our unions and groups genuinely implement our socialist ideals—break caste, stand up for gender equality, genuinely create fraternity among all religions, genuinely stand up in defense of minorities, motivate everyone to live a life of simplicity, honesty and self-sacrifice, genuinely implement democratic principles in our organising. Let us speak out honestly and boldly and clearly for what we stand for. Let us proclaim our socialist faith, anywhere and everywhere, to the few or to the many. Let us stop worrying about the size of our movement and think more of its quality. Let us study, let us work hard, let us carry on the struggle to spread our gospel among the people. Let us teach people how capitalism penetrates into every pore of not just the world around us but our personal lives too, and that we will need to fight it everywhere if we are to build a new world. Let us teach socialism to the next generation, let us teach them to dream of a new world, let us teach them that building such a new, alternative, socialist world is possible.

This we can definitely do. So let’s do it.

With greetings on Independence Day,

Janata

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The Futility of Common Sense: An Essay on Ahimsa

Dilip Simeon

Upon hearing that I was to be the advisor for a documentary film on non-violence, one of my respected erstwhile teachers remarked that it was “the richest irony”. He had good cause to say so. In my student days I was convinced that the only way any real social and political change could be brought about was by means of revolutionary violence. I became an activist in this cause in 1970, and after the first phase of “extremism” as it was then called, came to an end, I set aside this question as of tangential importance, not deserving of philosophical or theoretical consideration. Years later, when I was severely physically assaulted in the context of a struggle against corruption in the college where I worked, I became aware of the intense significance of this question—for this realisation at least, I am beholden to my assailants.

The Ubiquity of Violence

The most striking feature of the murder of Rajiv Gandhi was not the suicide of a young woman, but the fact that a man calmly watched the entire event, in the knowledge that it was being recorded on camera. There are now young people all over the world, for whom the sight of human flesh and blood is an ordinary experience. As a teacher, I was horrified to learn that many students had witnessed people being burnt alive in the Delhi carnage of 1984 and some had even participated in the violence. Should I have been surprised? Some members of the child murder-gangs of Colombia are not yet in their teens, and child-Mujahids were sent into battle by Iran in its war with Iraq. For Palestinian refugee children, destruction wrought by Israeli jets or warring militia are still part of everyday life, while the schoolchildren of Israel live in a perpetual climate of tension to which their government contributes as much as embittered Palestinians. Generations of black children in South Africa have known violence all their lives. Visual media have helped reduce to nil the distance that separates us from manifestations of human brutality. Violence has become part of everyday life.

Systemic violence is the lubricant of all oppressive social relations. Part of its baggage is the negation of reason, equality and respect for humanity. Violence directed at labourers and at women and children is the substratum of patriarchy and exploitation. In the months of April and May 1997, two cases of young women being murdered by their caste-panchayats have been reported from north India. Both were in their teens. They committed the ‘crime’ of falling in love and making their own decisions about a life partner. The fact that both belonged to backward castes and that there is no hue and cry over the atrocities by the political representatives of the backward classes shows that those who portray themselves as politically progressive have scant commitment to individual liberty or the human rights of women. It would seem that instances of ‘domestic’ violence are accepted as normal, when the victims are women. The social conscience of the articulate middle-classes is far more exercised over financial matters than the loss of human life or the humiliation of weak and helpless citizens.

Social relations upheld by violence are the basis of all state structures. The ubiquity of domestic violence and social degradation accustoms people to physical intimidation. This kind of ‘training’ psychologically prepares people for violent experiences later in life, whether these arise out of paramilitary service or work in the informal sector. All over the world, armed bodies of men have trained themselves to kill for the sake of power and the subordination of others. It might seem ironic, but progressive developments such as the industrial revolution and the growth of democratic politics exacerbated this trend, with entire societies being mobilised for war. The first World War cost 20 million lives and the second 55 million. (Over 20 million in the latter figure were Russian). Today the advanced capitalist countries spend 500 billion dollars annually on the military of which a third is spent on arms purchases and development. Vast resources are expended on war preparations—comparative estimates tell us that even a 20% reduction in military budgets would bring 189 million children into school, the cost of one Seawolf nuclear submarine ($2.5 billion) would pay for an immunisation program for all the world’s children, and the cost of one Stealth bomber, for family planning services for 120 million women in the developing world.
Social priorities in today’s world can only be described as deranged.

Violence signals the end of conversation, blurs our sense of time, cause and effect and feeds upon itself. As an instrument of liberation, it has a tendency to become illusory, as the oppressed begin to speak the language of oppression. It produces a spiral of justifications for brutality, enabling its perpetrators to take on the guise of victims. In the minds of those who killed Sikh citizens in 1984, their targets were not ‘innocent’, rather, they shared the blame for the murder of Indira Gandhi and the violence indulged in by Bhindranwale. For their part the Punjab terrorists had convinced themselves that they were only responding to the victimisation of their community by the Indian state. Violence also has the unique quality of legitimising itself retro-actively. Terror in the Punjab in the early 1980s seemed to justify terror in the nation’s capital in 1984. (Till this day the Lok Sabha has not seen fit to pass a resolution of condolence for the thousands of persons killed in those bloodstained 72 hours.) Similarly the hatred directed at Indian Muslims by a certain political tendency has tended to produce a post-facto justification for the two-nation theory of Jinnah upon which the Partition was based. In turn, that hatred appeared to those possessed by it as a consequence of the ‘separatism’ of Muslims in general and retribution for the pain and trauma suffered by Hindu and Sikh refugees in 1947. Who is to blame? This a question fraught with ambivalence. But for those who have succumbed to communal ideology, it is a very simple question indeed, and the easy answer is always—They.

Let us consider the prevalence of the idea of victimhood. An examination of instances of mass animosity will reveal that the sense of being victimised is central to an explanation of violence. The Nazis invented the Final Solution (i.e. mass extermination) in order to deal with a so-called Jewish conspiracy which they claimed had victimised the German people. Of course, the question of social oppression is a highly charged political issue. Thus, although it is generally accepted that the so-called low castes were the victims of the Brahmanical social order, upper-caste Indian society feels itself victimised by them for having obtained affirmative action in state policy. ‘These SC–ST’s are the most privileged people in India’, is a sentiment often heard in private conversations—it becomes public on occasions like the anti-Mandal agitation of 1990. Relations between Hindus and Muslims are even more complex, because of the deep-rooted conviction in Hindu society that the advent of Islam in India was accompanied by widespread manifestations of intolerance towards non-Muslims. Such perceptions are based partly on facts, but they also involve simplifications and tend to leave out memories and instances of their opposite. Howsoever we choose to look at it, the fact remains that this is a common perception. For their part, elite Muslims experienced the growth of a popular national movement as the gradual development not of democracy but of a Hindu majoritarian polity which would swamp them in due course. Each community felt itself victimised by the other and leaders marshalled arguments to prove their point. Here then, is a case of the circular logic that overtakes the dialogue of antagonistic communities.

Those of us concerned with social change must think seriously about the patriarchal and reactionary nature of violence. Why, for instance, did the militant patriot Bhagat Singh in his last days write that non-violence was a must for mass movements? Perhaps he understood instinctively that the politics of terror could only be practised (in the main) by organisations of young men, whereas democratic movements required the participation of millions of people, including women, children and the elderly, most of whom would not want to die for high ideals but live in the hope of a better future. However, non-violence is not merely a matter of tactics. Rather, it is connected to fundamental issues of the nature of power and the kind of liberation we may seek.

With God on Our Side...

Even more than the matter of physical harm, violence manifests the desire to humiliate the opponent and subjugate his or her dignity. This emotion has deadly and debilitating effects. Society will always pay a price for the humiliation of any of its constituents—even if these effects take centuries to work themselves out. The relations between Armenians and Turks, African-Americans and White Americans, Black and White in South Africa, the Irish and the English, carry with them a legacy of bitterness rooted in a centuries-long history. However, no society can be held together solely by means of force, if only because of the complete social disruption that would entail. Even the powerful require some peace in order to enjoy their power. Because of this, the products of the intellect, such as Reason, Philosophy, Religion and Art, have had a tendency to be harnessed to the needs of the State. Moreover, acts
of violence always seem to need ethical justification, as if in implicit acceptance of their status as wrong-doing. Hence the persistent relation of violence to ethical issues and the development of structures of organised violence into ideological systems specialising in the alteration of moral sensibilities to produce versions of the ‘just war’, or Dharmayuddha.

To take one example from history of the spiralling effects of violence, I will draw the reader’s attention to events that took place nine centuries ago. I refer to the Crusades undertaken by medieval Christianity to ‘liberate’ Jerusalem from the suzerainty of the Seljuks, a Turkish dynasty which conquered Palestine in the middle of the eleventh century. Historical evidence suggests that the project was part of a Papal scheme to subjugate Byzantium (Byzantine was the ancient name for Constantinople, which later became Istanbul and was the centre of the flourishing Eastern Orthodox Church). Pope Urban II launched the First Crusade (1096–99 AD). His slogan “God Wills It”, was a means of uniting western princes and overcoming any priestly aversion to violence. Armed with ethical authority, the crusaders convinced themselves of the need to exterminate the Turks. Their blood-lust was displayed in the five-week long siege and capture of Jerusalem, when, maddened by victory after years of travail they rushed into houses and mosques, killing men, women and children alike on July 15, 1099. The Jews were held to have assisted the Muslims and were burnt alive in their synagogue. Western sources put the number of Arabs killed at 10,000, Arab ones at 100,000. After this, Arabs began referring to the westerners (Franks) as “Christian dogs”. Here is what a historian has to say:

The massacre at Jerusalem profoundly impressed all the world... (and) emptied Jerusalem of its Moslem and Jewish inhabitants. Many even of the Christians were horrified by what had been done; and amongst the Moslems, who had been ready hitherto to accept the Franks... there was henceforward a clear determination that (they) must be driven out. It was this bloodthirsty proof of Christian fanaticism that re-created the fanaticism of Islam. When, later, wiser Latins in the East sought to find some basis on which Christian and Moslem could work together, the memory of the massacre stood always in their way.

During the Third Crusade (1191), King Richard the Lion-Hearted ordered thousands of prisoners slaughtered and their corpses burnt to search for hidden gold. Horrified at this atrocity, the Islamic world became ineradicably suspicious of the West. The contemporary Arab poet Mosaffer Allah Werdis composed these pain-stricken lines:

We have mingled our blood and our tears,
None of us remain who have strength enough to beat off these oppressors,
The sight of our weapons only brings sorrow to us,
Who must weep while the swords of war spark off the all-consuming flames...
Oh, that so much blood had to flow,
That women were left with nothing save their bare hands to protect their modesty!
Amid the fearful clashing swords and lances, the faces of the children grow white with horror.

Incidentally, the Persian word firingi, meaning ‘French, Italian or European’, originated in the colloquial Arabic word franj, which carried a connotation of barbarism from the time of the crusades. Given the experiences described above, this is not surprising. Thus, our own Hindustani term firangi was coloured from the start by a hateful usage steeped in the violence of the massacres of Jerusalem.

I leave it to the reader to consider whether mythic memories of these events might have any bearing on contemporary relations between Palestinians and Israelis, Arabs and the West, and Muslims and Christians in a part of the world that still transmits its violent tension all over the Middle East and beyond.

**Gandhi’s Truth**

It is impossible to address the theme of non-violence without taking into account the attitude of its greatest practitioner. As a young man I treated Gandhi’s pacifism with contempt—young men in particular are prone to associating violence with masculinity and non-violence with weakness. The thought that ahimsa could actually represent courage was alien to me. Our movement treated the Gandhian tradition as an obstacle to revolution and his leadership of the national movement as a gigantic failure. Apart from the personal experience of violence that I mentioned at the start of this essay, it was the failures of the revolutionary movement and the growth of communal hatred that gradually brought home to me the continuing relevance of Gandhi’s life and the manner in which he left it. I remember being upset by an
essay on Gandhi by a leftist Hindi literateur who ended his diatribe with fulsome praise for Gandhi’s assassin Nathuram Godse. This awakened me to the disconcerting potential similarities which attend doctrines of violent political change. The main currents of leftism in India have still not come to terms with Gandhi (a lacuna which is parallel to their failure to theorise the question of violence), but the rapid growth of communalism in the past fifteen years has alerted them to his commitment and sacrifices for the cause of communal harmony. This realisation culminated in a demonstration in Delhi on Gandhi’s death anniversary in January 1993.

Gandhi’s ideas are sometimes misconstrued because of his refusal to countenance the separation of religion from politics. It is easier to understand this matter if we simply substitute the word ‘ethics’ for ‘religion’, and ‘power’ for ‘politics’. Does any of us seriously believe that the exercise of power ought to be devoid of moral considerations? Gandhi saw himself as a karmayogi, and regarded selfless worldly action directed towards the attainment of self-knowledge and collective salvation as his spiritual duty. He saw political activity as the supreme sphere of social action, but he insisted on imbuing this action with ethical imperatives such as ahimsa and the abolition of untouchability. In search not of personal power but sovereignty for the Indian people, he exercised tremendous moral influence emanating from his renunciation of selfish goals—the hallmark of the traditional Hindu tyagi. Truth for him was the catch-all for the supreme goals of spirituality, including moksha and self-knowledge, as well as values such as justice and integrity. Non-violence was implicit in his Truth: “Truth is its own proof, and non-violence is its supreme fruit”. His motives were at once spiritual and political—he did away with the separateness of their definitions, as he overcame the distinction between means and ends. Religion was not an instrument to be used tactically for the pursuit of political power, rather, political activity had to be virtuous and transparent in order to attain sound goals.

For all of Gandhi’s apparent conservatism, it is clear that he subjected both tradition and contemporary spiritual authority to the test of his own conscience. Even if it were true that Tulsidas used to beat his wife, he remarks, “the Ramayan was not composed in order to justify men beating their wives”. And despite the scenes of carnage described in the Bhagwad Gita, Gandhi insists that Vyasa wrote his epic “to depict the futility of war”, that the struggle described in it was a metaphor for the inner struggle between good and evil encountered by all human beings. If the purest form of action was devoid of desire for reward, then violence and untruthfulness were taboo, for selfishness was implied in them. Language and meaning changed and expanded over the centuries, argued Gandhi, and “it is the very beauty of a good poem that it is greater than its author”. Despite the warlike metaphors of the Gita, he insisted that “after forty years of unremitting endeavour to enforce the teaching of the Gita in my own life, I have in all humility felt that perfect renunciation is impossible without perfect observance of ahimsa in every shape and form.” Gandhi’s conscience impelled him towards human equality and the peaceful resolution of political and social conflict. He rejected the violence inherent in caste-oppression and the potential justifications for violence contained in various religious texts and traditions. It is a mark of his theological creativity that he managed to speak in a conservative voice whilst advocating a radical break from existent traditional practices.

It is even more remarkable that among the people most affected by Gandhi’s message were two of the most militant communities in India—the Sikhs and the Pathans. Few might remember today that the Akali party originated in a successful non-violent movement for the liberation of gurudwaras from corrupt pro-British mahants. The Guru-ka-Bagh agitation in 1922 involved the peaceful violation of a ban on woodcutting for religious purposes by Akali jathas, whose members (many of whom were ex-soldiers who had fought for the British Empire in the first World War) were mercilessly beaten with metal-capped lathis by English police officers and their Indian underlings. Some 1,500 were injured and 5,000 imprisoned in a campaign which shook the country. Gandhi’s associate C.F. Andrews witnessed this “ultimate moral contest”. The sight of the brutalities, he reported, was “incredible to an Englishman”. “Each blow (was) turned into a triumph by the spirit with which it was endured.” Similarly the activity of the red-shirted Khudai Khidmadgar (Servants of God) movement in the North West Frontier Province manifested one of the most staunchly Gandhian campaigns for national independence and social upliftment in pre-1947 India. Their leader Abdul Ghaffar Khan came to be known as the Frontier Gandhi, and preached a version of Islam which emphasised peace, forbearance and self-restraint. The Khidmadgars were in the forefront of the civil
disobedience campaign in 1931 when they seized control of Peshawar and even ran a parallel administration for a few days after a regiment of the Garhwal Rifles (all Hindus) refused to open fire on Pathan satyagrahis. A Turkish scholar who visited the Frontier in the 1930s suggested that the Pathans had developed a new interpretation of force. In her words, “non-violence is the only form of force which can have a lasting effect on the life of society... And this, coming from strong and fearless men, is worthy of study.”

Gandhi’s understanding of violence sprang from his spiritual convictions. The fact that in the Mahabharata the wrong-doers had good men like Bhishma and Drona on their side was for him a sign that “evil cannot by itself flourish in this world. It can do so only if it is allied with some good.” He wrote this in 1926 and remained consistent in his belief. In 1940, he said, “Goondas do not drop from the sky, nor do they spring from the earth like evil spirits. They are the product of social disorganisation, and society is therefore responsible for their existence. ... they should be looked upon as a symbol of corruption in our body-politic.” Confronted by riots in 1946 he said, “I deprecate the habit of procuring a moral alibi for ourselves by blaming it all on the goondas. We always put the blame on goondas. But it is we who are responsible for their creation as well as encouragement.”

And at the height of the violence of 1947, he said, “it is time for peace-loving citizens to assert themselves and isolate goondaism. Non-violent non-cooperation is the universal remedy. Good is self-existent, evil is not. It is like a parasite living in and around good. It will die of itself when the support that good gives it is withdrawn.”

These insights were the products of his interventions in places which had witnessed some of the worst instances of communal violence in pre-independence India—the villages of Noakhali and the city of Calcutta. For contemporary observers, it was nothing short of a miracle that Hindus and Muslims in their thousands attended Gandhi’s prayer meetings and even celebrated Eid together in August 1947. Viceroy Mountbatten sent him this telegram: “My dear Gandhiji, In the Punjab we have 55 thousand soldiers and large-scale rioting on our hands. In Bengal our forces consist of one man, and there is no rioting. ... . As a serving officer may I be allowed to pay my tribute to the One Man Boundary Force.” The Muslim League party in the Constituent Assembly in Delhi passed a resolution expressing its “deep sense of appreciation of the services rendered by Mr Gandhi to the cause of restoration of peace and goodwill between the communities in Calcutta.” Less than a month later, Gandhi went on fast against a renewed outbreak of violence and the city witnessed the unprecedented scene of the European-commanded police force observing a 24 hour fast in sympathy with Gandhi and blood-crazed goondas surrendering their weapons to him. The staunchly anti-Congress English editor of The Statesman made a point of announcing that henceforth “Mr Gandhi” would be referred to in his columns as Mahatma. If we were to use Gandhi’s logic to describe the situation he confronted in 1947, we could say that the struggle between violence and ahimsa was going on in every soul, and was not merely demarcated by the social distance between goondas and polite society.

Gandhi was not the hopeless idealist that many consider him to be. He made a distinction between the violence of the oppressors and that of the oppressed—defensive violence, in his view, was morally superior to the offensive variety. Violence, in Gandhi’s definition, lay in causing “suffering to others out of selfishness, or just for the sake of doing so”. He distinguished between self-interest and selfishness—the former meant securing those conditions necessary for leading a human and dignified life, the latter, putting oneself above others and pursuing one’s interests at their expense. Violent ideas were dangerous, since they created conditions for their realisation. Humiliating others was also a form of violence. Gandhi recognised that the state was an institutionalised and concentrated form of violence, and was convinced that this was due in great part to the need for maintaining an unjust and exploitative social system. In extreme situations he argued, violence was preferable to cowardice—he was against using ahimsa as a means of rationalising passivity in the face of grave injustice and wrongdoing. He favoured physical resistance by victims of rape if there was no possibility of resisting non-violently.

Ultimately however, as the scholar Bhikhu Parekh puts it, Gandhi was convinced that “the reign of violence could not be overthrown by adding to it.” Great danger lay in deriving common-place justifications for violence, such as the violation of nature in the name of human self-interest, the need to maintain the coercive apparatus of the state, revolutionary violence practised in the name of resistance to oppression. He was (again in Parekh’s words), “deeply worried about the way in which the limited legitimacy of violence in human life was so easily
turned into its general justification”, making it the rule rather than the exception. Once this happened, “men kept taking advantage of the exceptions and made no effort to find alternatives.” This for him was the main reason for stressing the need for social and political activists to train themselves in the ideal of ahimsa, which in his definition was not merely the absence of violence but included the positive value of karuna, or compassion. By elevating ahimsa to the level of a moral ideal, he hoped to minimise the violence which was inevitable in the process of social and political transformation. Even if it could never be fully realised, ahimsa functioned as a kind of utopia, without which human society would have no standards of perfection towards which to strive and against which we might judge our actions.

As You Sow...

What is the truth of the matter? In an age whose common sense has it that everything is exchangeable with money, where images are valued more than the things they represent, religious and cultural values appropriated and used as instruments for the pursuit of power, the concept of truth seems to have become redundant. For example, cigarette advertisements portray smokers having a good time, in the pink of health, whereas the truth of the matter is that smoking tobacco causes cancer and heart disease. To take another example, in May 1992, national television telecast an adulatory portrayal of V.D. Savarkar, the militant Hindu nationalist, without mentioning that he was an accused and main conspirator in the murder of Mahatma Gandhi. We may also note the linguistic transformation of Babri Masjid from a mosque into a ‘disputed structure’. At the best of times, advertisements (and propaganda) convey a mixture of fact and fiction, communication and misinformation. Where is the concern for truth in all this? What matters is whether the image is credible or incredible, not whether it is true.

Truth is a term which admits of many meanings. At the very least, it can mean Reality as well as Ideality. In any case, it implies a search, an ideal and a standard. It may never be attained as a whole, but can still be worth striving for. However for a certain cast of mind, truth does not imply a search, but a revelation. If one Revealed Truth does not set itself against others like itself, no conflict arises. But if in real life, its followers cannot bear to co-exist with followers of other beliefs, they are already in process of arming themselves, converting their belief into the Absolute Truth. And it is in the very nature of absolutism that it reacts violently to difference. Those possessed of infallible knowledge will sooner or later take recourse to irreversible deeds. If we think about this carefully, we might understand why political tendencies (whether of Right or Left-wing persuasion) with an overt or covert belief in the efficacy of violent methods are generally constructed around authoritarian principles. This is why Gandhi always spoke of experiments with truth, and insisted that the search be conducted upon the basis of an explicit commitment to non-violence. Appearing before the Disorders Inquiry Committee at Ahmedabad in the wake of the agitations of 1919, Gandhi was asked by Lord Hunter to consider the position of the Governors, who were obliged to uphold the law and punish those whose stated object was to violate it. Gandhi replied that non-violent satyagrahis protesting unjust laws were “the best constitutionalists”. Hunter told him that opinions might differ as to the justice or injustice of laws, to which Gandhi replied that this was the reason he insisted on non-violence—a satyagrahi, he said, gives the right of independent judgement to his opponent. Sir Chimanlal Setalvad, another member of the committee, sought to trap Gandhi on his stated objective of the pursuit of truth: “However honestly a man may strive in his search for truth, his notions of truth may be different from the notions of others. Who then is to determine the truth?”. Once more Gandhi made his point by insisting that it was precisely because there were differing versions of the truth that “the non-violence part was a necessary corollary” to his struggle.

Here, in my opinion, is a profound yet simple contribution to one of the most turbulent philosophical debates of our age—fascinated as it is by plural identities, the many-sidedness of meaning and the rejection of universals. Gandhi’s position offers a way out of the conundrum created by contemporary (post-modern) relativism, viz, the fate of standards of judgment once we accept the many-sidedness of meaning. Gandhi accepts this multiplicity, but insists that there is an ethical standard by which all relative ‘truths’ may be judged—their contribution to the attainment of ahimsa. In this sense he was a profound egalitarian humanist—he refused to use cultural, religious and political differences among people to stereotype them as less than human, as worthy of discrimination, injustice and violence. This did not mean that he suspended his rational intellect or refrained from making his own assessment of religious
practices, cultures and systems of thought. He kept his own counsel, made his own judgements, and remained a practising Hindu till the moment of his death. But it is difficult to fault him for demeaning or ridiculing the beliefs of others. All he asked was that a way be found for resolving disputes, pursuing arguments, overcoming (or indeed, living with) difference in a manner consistent with human dignity.

When we stop to consider the scale of destruction that society has unleashed upon itself and still prepares for, the need for a non-violent culture stares us in the face. According to one estimate, our century has seen some 250 wars and nearly 110 million deaths related to war and ethnic conflict. Over the decades an increasing proportion of these losses have taken place among civilians. The explosive energy yield of the current (reduced) global nuclear weapons stockpile is 8,000 megatons (the equivalent of 8,000 million tons of TNT). This is 727 times the total yield of all the explosives used in World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War put together. Between 1960–94, the developing countries spent 775 billion dollars on arms purchases, which made up 69% of the total world arms trade. In 1995 there were 22.4 million men and women in uniform—65% of whom belonged to the developing world, whose populations are paying the price for the distorted social perspectives of their rulers. By any sane standard, it would appear that the human race is hypnotised by the death wish.

Ultimately ahimsa is another name for restraint. Gandhi’s devotion to it has had a significant effect on our society, even though it remains true that democracy in India still has a long way to go. It is fashionable these days to bewail the fate of the Indian republic and to ascribe all its ills to its founders. It is worth considering that factors such as the pressure of Great Power interests, the consequences of rampaging global capitalism and the selfishness of our ruling elite may well be the factors more responsible for our problems. We should remember that India has not yet succumbed to the authoritarian vision of communal politics, nor to the jackboots of military rule. One reason for this lies in the impact of a mass democratic movement for national liberation which despite all its weaknesses, did achieve sovereignty on the basis of a non-violent political programme. Of the several thousand daily visitors to Gandhi Smriti in Delhi (the place of his assassination), a large number are village folk who treat the memory of the Mahatma with great reverence. The elite may have reduced him to an icon and the urban middle-class might treat him with ignorance and disdain, but it would seem that humbler Indians have not yet forgotten the man. He touched a chord which I believe has acquired a permanent place in the conversation of humanity. Restraint and compassion are qualities which will always be necessary for human society to survive. If we aspire to a more humane, less brutal and more civilised state of existence, the spirit and optimism required to attain it will in no small part have been generated by the life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and his message of ahimsa.

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Was Gandhi a ‘Champion of the Caste System’?
Reflections on His Practices

Nishikant Kolge

There is no dearth of work on Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and the caste system—a vast literature is already available on this subject but, with some variations, most of these works can be roughly divided into two groups. The first group includes the works of those scholars who believe that Gandhi accepted the caste system in toto as the “natural order of society”—as a system that promotes control and discipline and is sanctioned by religion. The second group includes the works of those scholars who believe that Gandhi’s attitude towards caste evolved over time. However, the common limitation of both these views is that they are largely derived from some of Gandhi’s writings or speeches, and in the process of reaching these conclusions, Gandhi’s practices are neglected. But as Raghavan N. Iyer (2000: 4) suggests, political thinkers cannot be properly studied without paying attention to their personalities and practice. It is of course true that when we turn to Gandhi, we find it peculiarly difficult to study his nature and activities. Gandhi also very categorically says, “What you do not get from my conduct, you will never get from my words” (1958: Vol 73, p 145). He goes one step further and suggests, “As a matter of fact my writings should be cremated with my body.” This does not mean, however, that Gandhi’s writings are not to be carefully examined; he wanted his writings to be taken seriously, but what he meant was that he can be best judged or understood by his conduct rather than his writings; and if some contradictions or inconsistencies appear in his writings, then they should be resolved in the light of his practices. Gandhi himself says, “To understand what I say one needs to understand my conduct...” (1958: Vol 51, p 352). Hence, in this paper, his conduct towards caste restrictions and ritual obligations will be examined to better understand his views on caste.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part explores Gandhi’s personal practices with regard to caste restrictions and religious obligations; the second part explores how community life in Gandhi’s different ashrams was organised, since it reflected the basic principles of Gandhi’s philosophy of life and can be seen as an extension of his own practices; the third part reflects on some explanations that are generally put forward to clarify some of Gandhi’s writings in which he explicitly defends and validates caste, varna, and some of its restrictions. This paper argues that there are inconsistencies between Gandhi’s writings and practices, and writings that fail to do justice to his general philosophical outlook must be rejected.

Gandhi’s Personal Practices

Lavanam Gora and Mark Lindley (2007: 105) write that in Gandhi’s days, traditional Hindu caste distinctions involved four basic rules: (i) Untouchability: to avoid touching or, in Malabar, avoid even looking at “untouchables” if you were not one yourself. (ii) Restriction on commensality: to avoid eating with anyone of a lower caste than oneself. (iii) Endogamy: to marry within one’s own caste. (iv) Hereditary occupation: to marry oneself. (v) Hereditary occupation: to marry one’s own caste.

Untouchability: The Hindu masses practised untouchability as part of their caste obligations. In general, the practice revolved around avoiding physical contact with particular groups to save oneself from being “polluted.” Gandhi, at a conference in Ahmedabad on 13 April 1921, narrated an incident from his childhood when he was hardly 12 years old. The story was of Uka—a scavenger—who used to visit Gandhi’s house to clean the latrines. Gandhi recounted that although he (Gandhi) had been a very dutiful and obedient child when it came to respecting his parents, he had often had tussles with them when they asked him to perform ablutions after accidentally touching Uka (1958: Vol 19, pp 569–75). Referring to this story, Pyarelal Nayyar, Gandhi’s personal secretary and biographer, writes that this event planted in Gandhi’s soul a seed of rebellion against the institution of untouchability (1965: 217). Another story which brings to light Gandhi’s attitude towards the practice of untouchability is contained in his autobiography. When his wife refused to clean the chamber-pot of his Christian clerk, a man born to
untouchable parents, he declared that he would not stand this nonsense in his house and caught her by the hand and dragged her to the gate with the intention of pushing her out (Gandhi 2001: 225). In his autobiography, he also writes that “In South Africa untouchable friends used to come to my place and live and feed with me” (Gandhi 2001: 360).

A different kind of untouchability related to menses is generally practised among many Hindu orthodox communities. Here, women are treated as untouchable during their periods. During this time, they are not allowed to enter places of worship or even the kitchen. Also, their touch is considered to be polluting. In one of his letters to Mirabehn, Gandhi described his views on these practices: “I think I told you that so far as I am concerned, I never respected the rule even with reference to Ba herself. And when I began to see things clearer, I never felt the call to have the rule observed” (1958: Vol 34, p 401). Several of his letters to different persons show that he did not practise this kind of menstruation-related untouchability with other women either.

Apart from all this, it is important to know that when he returned to India from South Africa, he brought with him an “untouchable” boy name Naiker. He also adopted an “untouchable” girl, Lakshmi, as his daughter. She used to live in his ashram and often travelled with him. Therefore, it can be argued that Gandhi showed a remarkable irreverence towards the practice of untouchability based on notions of purity and pollution from a very young age.

**Inter-dining and inter-caste marriage:** Hindus also observed several rules pertaining to endogamy and commensality. Endogamy forbids marriages among persons of different castes. One could only marry within one’s own caste. Commensality restrictions stipulated that neither should the members of one caste eat in the company of any other caste, nor should they eat food cooked by any person of a lower caste. Gandhi’s family belonged to the Vaishnava sect of Gujarat, which followed strict restrictions with regard to meat-eating. However, in his autobiography, Gandhi writes that in his childhood days he had had “not more than half a dozen meat-feasts” in the company of a friend, a Muslim boy identified as Sheikh Mehtab by many of his biographers (Tendulkar 1960: 26–27; Nayyar 1965: 209–10). Also, he admitted that during his stay in England, he had eaten at restaurants as well as at the home of an Englishman. He declared that he had no objections to eating food prepared at European hotels or by a Christian or a Mohammedan, as long as it consisted of ingredients eatable by him (Gandhi 1964: 92–100). In his autobiography, Gandhi says that he used to invite English friends and Indian co-workers to eat at his home. He would also regularly visit a Christian family for dinner and eat his vegetarian food in their company while they ate their non-vegetarian food. When Gandhi started living in Segaon near Wardha, Govind, a man who was an untouchable by caste, generally prepared food for him (Sinha 1962: 93). All these examples reveal that from the very early years of his life, Gandhi disregarded caste restrictions that dictated that one should dine only within one’s own caste. They also reveal that throughout his life, he ate with people of different faiths and castes, including untouchables. In his autobiography, Gandhi states: “I had no scruples about inter-dining” (Gandhi 2001: 96).

It is worth noting that Gandhi not only allowed his son Ramadas to marry someone from a different sub-caste, but also allowed his son Devadas to marry a girl who was from another varna altogether. He also, by design, married off his adopted daughter Lakshmi, who was untouchable by birth, to a Brahmin boy in 1933. On many occasions, Gandhi expressed his support for inter-caste marriages.

**Hereditary occupations:** Hereditary occupations are understood to be one of the most important characteristics of the caste system. Each caste is assigned a particular type of work, and every Hindu is expected to follow his hereditary occupation. In the first paragraph of his autobiography, Gandhi writes that over the last three generations, his family has not been pursuing their hereditary or traditional duties. He himself never earned his bread and butter by following his ancestors’ calling. He also let his children choose their own professions and never pressed them to follow any pursuits prescribed by their caste. Moreover, he tried to learn skills associated with activities prohibited to his caste, such as the work of a scavenger, barber, washerman, cobbler, tailor and tailor. He also taught many of these skills to his children, wife and co-workers. It is also interesting to note that at two occasions when Gandhi was arrested (first on 10 March 1922 and second on 1 August 1933) and asked about his occupation, he replied saying, “I am by occupation a spinner, a weaver and a farmer.”

In 1908, Gandhi opened a school for the children in the Phoenix settlement as well as for Indian children from outside the settlement. In the school curriculum, there was
no emphasis on teaching children their ancestors’ calling. On the other hand, every student had to learn to perform and respect manual labour. After returning to India from South Africa in 1917, Gandhi started a national school at his Indian ashram where every student was taught agriculture, hand-weaving, carpentry and metalcraft. In this school too, there was no emphasis on preserving one’s hereditary occupation. Around 1937, Gandhi introduced a plan for basic education that Congress was expected to implement if it came to power after the general elections held under the Indian Act, 1935. Though Gandhi’s basic education scheme was craft-centred, there was no insistence that one follows one’s hereditary craft. On the other hand, every individual, irrespective of their caste and religion, was expected to learn more than one craft depending on the individual’s circumstances and environment. In short, Gandhi’s educational scheme promoted respect for manual labour without promoting the idea of hereditary professions.

Sacred books or the question of religious authority:
In Hinduism, the shastras—especially the vedas—are considered to be the word of god, and thus, are thought to be sanatani (eternal) and are accepted as the highest authority to determine truth. However, Gandhi, who proclaims himself a sanatani Hindu says, “No one can convince me, with the help of quotations from Shastras” (1958: Vol 27, p 21). He also says, “Early in my childhood I had felt the need of a scripture that would serve me as an unfailing guide through the trials and temptations of life. The vedas could not supply that need” (1958: 271). Though Gandhi has said on several occasions that he believed in the shastras, it is true that he did not accept them as the ultimate authority or the word of god. When he was asked, “Where do you find the seat of authority?” Gandhi, pointing to his breast, said, “It lies here.” He also explains:

> I exercise my judgment about every scripture, including the Gita. I cannot let a scriptural text supersede my reason. Whilst I believe that the principal books are inspired, they suffer from a process of double distillation. Firstly, they come through a human prophet, and then through the commentaries of interpreters. Nothing in them comes from God directly. (1958: Vol 64, p 75)

It appears that although Gandhi speaks very highly of different religious scriptures and had great faith in the Hindu shastras, he never accepted them as the ultimate authority on life and never let them override his rationality and morality.

Some other caste restrictions and Gandhi’s practices:
Gandhi, who at the age of 12 years opposed the doctrine of untouchability, also opposed other codes of the caste system at a very early age. His autobiography tells us that during his time, his caste was prohibited from travelling abroad. Although his fellow caste members were agitated and the caste head—Sheth—declared that if he went to England for studies he would be treated as an outcaste, he still sailed for England to study law. In Hinduism, every man of the upper three varnas is expected to wear the sacred thread—upavita—after going through a religious ceremony. Gandhi, as a boy belonging to one of the three upper varnas, had had such a religious ceremony in his childhood and had worn this sacred thread. But in his autobiography, he writes, “Later, when the thread gave way, I do not remember whether I missed it very much. But I know that I did not go for a fresh one” (Gandhi 2001: 335). Gandhi’s family belonged to the Vaishnava sect of Hinduism, and in his childhood, he had worn the shikha and the tulasi-kanthi (necklace of tulasi beads) that were considered obligatory. He writes, “On the eve of my going to England, however, I got rid of the shikha.” He also says, “I got my cousin Chhaganlal Gandhi, who was religiously wearing the shikha, to do away with it” (Gandhi 2001: 335). While in South Africa, he also gave up his tulasi-kanthi.

Temple visits, idol worship, and public prayer:
Regular temple visits and idol or image worship are a part of the religious activities of a regular Hindu. Joseph Lelyveld (2011: 194), in his recent biography of Gandhi, notes that “Gandhi hardly ever prayed in temples.” Gandhi explains his thoughts on temple worship in his autobiography:

> Being born in the Vaishnav faith, I had often to go the haveli (temple). But it never appealed to me. I did not like its glitter and pomp. Also I heard rumours of immorality being practised there, and lost all interest in it. Hence I could gain nothing from the haveli. (2001: 45)

This does not mean that he never visited temples later in life, but that his attitude towards them remained the same. Later, in 1933, he also very explicitly said, “I do not visit temples. I feel no need to go to temples; hence I do not visit them” (Gandhi 1958: Vol 54, p 129). His approach to idol worship was similar. He never used
idols or images during his prayers. He once said, “An idol does not excite any feeling of veneration in me” (Gandhi 1958: Vol 21, p 249).

It appears that the only traditional ritual he performed regularly was prayer. He was no doubt a man of prayer, and he was very particular and sincere about his prayers which followed a very strict timetable. However, his way of praying was his own creation and does not match anything in the Hindu tradition. No images or idols were used in Gandhi’s prayer meetings, which were held not in a temple or any special place, but more often than not under the open sky. Devotional songs from different religions and readings from a variety of religious holy books made up the core of his public prayers. Gandhi would make a “prayer address” instead of a sermon which would usually dwell on the political events of the day or the social challenges that needed to be met (Chatterjee 1983: 111–13). It should be remembered that his numerous public prayers were part of his political struggle; and for him, political struggle was part of his search for god. As far as religious practice is concerned, Gandhi was neither a temple-goer nor an idol-worshipper. And though he used to pray every day, his style of prayer was very different from the traditional manner of prayer.

Gandhi did not practise vegetarianism because of religious or caste-based obligations. Although a vegetarian, Gandhi comfortably ate in the company of meat-eaters. In his autobiography, he confesses that he had gone to London as a convinced meat-eater, but had all along abstained from actually eating meat in the interest of truth and keeping in mind the vow he had made to his mother. However, he wished at the same time that every Indian were a meat-eater, and he declared that he would look forward to being one openly some day and to enlisting others in the cause. He tells the reader that after reading Salt’s book, *Plea for Vegetarianism*, he became a vegetarian by choice (Gandhi 2001: 59). At another point in his autobiography, he writes that his views on vegetarianism were not influenced by any religious texts (Gandhi 2001: 297). Hence, though he practised very strict vegetarianism, it was a personal commitment for him rather than a matter of religion or caste.

In this section, we have presented an analysis of Gandhi’s personal practices and his attitude towards several caste restrictions and other important Hindu religious observations and beliefs. It can also be seen that Gandhi’s practices cannot be considered signs of orthodoxy in any way. He seems to be a reformer if not a revolutionary in breaking caste restrictions and other Hindu religious traditions and beliefs. To emphasise the same point further, a brief account of how life was organised in Gandhi’s ashrams is presented in the next section.

**Life in Gandhi’s Ashrams**

Another way to examine if Gandhi was a reformer or an orthodox Hindu is to look at the way of life practised in Gandhi’s different ashrams. Here, life was organised along the basic principles of Gandhi’s philosophy, and the ashrams can be seen as an extension of Gandhi’s personal practices. Once Gandhi himself said, “The Ashram is the measuring rod by which people can judge me” (1958: Vol 53, p 291). In his lifetime, Gandhi founded four ashrams at different times and at different places and with different objectives. The first was the Phoenix settlement founded in 1904 near Phoenix station, South Africa; the second was Tolstoy Farm established in 1910 near Johannesburg, South Africa; the third, Satyagraha Ashram (also known as Sabarmati Asram), was set up in 1915 near Ahmedabad, India; and the fourth, Sevagram Ashram was founded in 1936 near Wardha, India. Gandhi’s own writings as well as other biographies reveal that the first ashram, Phoenix, was set up to save money to ensure the success of *India Opinion*, a weekly journal published by Gandhi. The second—Tolstoy Farm—was meant to be a home for imprisoned satyagrahis and their families. The third—Satyagraha Ashram—aimed at training young men, women and children to serve the motherland. It appears that initially there had been no plans for a fourth ashram, but Wardha came up spontaneously and can be considered an extension of Satyagraha Ashram, its objective being similar. While each ashram had its own objectives, they shared a common aim of experimenting with living a simple life to realise the dignity of human labour, as explained in John Ruskin’s *Unto This Last*. These ashrams were clearly not established with the aim of building an ideal community along the principles of the Hindu caste system or *varnashrama dharma*.

Not only were the settlers at each of Gandhi’s ashrams a heterogeneous group consisting of individuals from different castes and religions, but there was also no strict division of labour amongst them. Every settler, irrespective of caste, religion or gender had to do daily manual labour. Everyone had to perform every kind of work including cooking, gardening, cleaning, scavenging, shaving and cutting hair on a rotational
Untouchability was not practised in any form in the ashrams; even the common practice of treating women as untouchable during their menses was not practised in the ashram (Gandhi 1958). Though every inmate had to observe the vow of celibacy, many inter-caste marriages were organised in the ashrams. At Sabarmati Ashram, on the occasion of his son Ramadas’s marriage, Gandhi said,

*The wedding just celebrated would perhaps be for the Ashram the last as between parties belonging to the same caste. It behoved people in the Ashram to take the lead in this respect, because people outside might find it difficult to initiate the reform. The rule should be on the part of the Ashram to discountenance marriages between parties of the same caste and to encourage those between parties belonging to different sub-castes. (1958: Vol 35, p 500)*

Gandhi also allowed the solemnising of the wedding of a Brahmin, A.G. Tendulkar, and an untouchable woman, Indumati, at Sevagram Ashram on 19 August 1945.

In all of Gandhi’s ashrams, there was a single kitchen, and all dined in a single row. The food was simple and strictly vegetarian. But at Tolstoy Farm, Gandhi was determined that “If the Christians and Musalmans asked even for beef, that too must be provided for them.” However, Gandhi was happy because “neither the women nor the men ever asked for meat” (Gandhi 2003: 216). Just as there was a common kitchen at every ashram, there were also common prayers. All the ashram inmates were expected to participate in the common prayer, which was held in the morning from 5:00 am to 5:30 am and in the evening from 6:30 pm to 7:00 pm. Devotional songs and readings from the holy books of different religions constituted the core of the prayer sessions. No idols or images were used during these prayers. Therefore, it is clear that Gandhi’s experiments with simple living and community life cannot be seen as a sign of religious orthodoxy. In no way can they be interpreted as an effort to organise human life along the basic principles of the caste system or *varanashrama* dharma. On the contrary, the experiments are to be seen as an effort to break caste, community and religious arrogance and discrimination.

The above exploration of Gandhi’s personal practices and of cooperative life in his ashrams shows that from a very young age, Gandhi revolted against the practice of caste restrictions. He himself violated every restriction assigned to his own caste. In no way can his actions be seen as a sign of orthodoxy or conservativeness. However, some of his writings, where he explicitly defends and validates some aspects of caste and the restrictions that come with it, reveal an entirely different picture of Gandhi’s attitude towards caste. However, no proper and final conclusion about this can be drawn without providing an appropriate explanation for it.

**Overview of Literature / Mystery of Gandhi’s Writings**

There are many scholars who have contemplated and wondered about some of Gandhi’s writings where he defends and validates caste and some of the practices associated with it. Some of them have seen it as evidence of Gandhi’s faith in the caste system; they have also tried to provide possible justifications for why Gandhi finds caste, varna, and some of its restrictions useful. Some other scholars believe that the inconsistencies in his writings reveal that there were gradual changes or a slow development in his ideas on such subjects. There are also some scholars who have argued that Gandhi’s defence of the caste system in some of his writings is part of a larger strategy. Here, in this section, an effort is made to examine some of such explanations of Gandhi’s writings in which he defends and validates the caste system. This paper argues that explanations that fail to not only explain the inconsistencies between Gandhi’s practices and some of his writings, but which also fail to do justice to his general philosophical outlook, must be rejected. This section presents a reflection on the following explanations.

**Gandhi’s belief in the caste system in toto:** There are a good number of scholars who sincerely hold that Gandhi believed in the caste system in toto. These scholars can be further divided into two groups for our analysis—the first are Dalit scholars and the second are Gandhian scholars. Most Dalit scholars argue that Gandhi believed in the caste system because of his personal belief in the Brahmanical world view which he inherited by virtue of being born in an upper caste Hindu family. For instance, a scholar, Braj Ranjan Mani, writes,

*He [Gandhi] was a bania more brahmanised than Brahmans; his world-view and life philosophy were moulded and shaped by the age-old brahmanic values and way of life... he never gave up his basic belief in the brahmanic fundamentalism which is evident from his constant evocation of varnashrama, Ram-rajya and trusteeship. (2008: 348)*
Kancha Ilaiah writes, “The fundamental difference between these two thinkers lies in positioning themselves from their own communities.” He adds further that “Ambedkar was not only born in an untouchable Mahar family but all through his life stood for the suppressed, oppressed and exploited masses. Gandhi on the other hand, was born in a Baniya family and stood for the oppressor and exploiting upper castes” (Ilaiah 2001: 126).

However, these views appear problematic when we consider Gandhi’s personal practices which show that he openly violated most of the important restrictions of the caste system, and that he built ashrams which were founded on principles that rejected all the basic rules of varnashrama dharma. It is also important to note that the purpose of the present study is not to engage with the Dalit scholars’ critique of Gandhi’s approach to caste. This section aims to identify the different justifications given by different scholars to vindicate their claims regarding Gandhi views on the caste system.

This paper argues that in the light of Gandhi’s actual practice, the Dalit scholars’ view that Gandhi believed in the caste system because he personally believed in the Brahmanical world view seems to be problematic.

In contrast to Dalit scholars, Gandhian scholars focus on Gandhi’s life and provide different reasons for holding the view that Gandhi believed in the caste system. The following sub-section analyses some of the justifications offered by Gandhian scholars to argue that Gandhi believed in the caste system in toto.

**Caste as outcome of belief in rebirth and karma:** Bhikhu Parekh attempts to explain Gandhi’s views on caste and offers possible reasons for why Gandhi may have defended caste in his writings. He writes,

> Since Gandhi believed in rebirth and the law of karma, he thought that the characteristic occupation of an individual’s caste corresponded to his natural abilities and dispositions and represented a necessary moment of his spiritual evolution. (Parekh 1989: 226)

If it is true that Gandhi in his writings expresses his faith in the doctrine of karma, it is also true that it is difficult to demonstrate that his interpretation matched the orthodox version where the occupation practised by people of a caste is thought to necessarily correspond to their natural abilities and dispositions due to their past karma. A close look at his writings where he evokes the doctrine of karma reveals that he does it often for pragmatic reasons and that, most of the time, it goes against the orthodox interpretation. The following quote from Gandhi, defending temple entry for untouchables, is one of the best examples of his pragmatic interpretation of the doctrine of karma. He writes,

> If you believe that Harijans are in their present plight today as a result of their past sins, you must concede that they have the first right of worship in temples. God has been described by all the scriptures of the world as a Protector and Saviour of the sinner. (Gandhi 1958: Vol 55, p 304)

On other occasions, Gandhi simply rejects the orthodox understanding of the doctrine of karma—that one’s destiny is the fruit of one’s past karma. He writes,

> The law of karma is no respector of persons, but I would ask you to leave the orthodoxy to itself. Man is the maker of his own destiny, and I therefore ask you to become makers of your own destiny. (Gandhi 1958: Vol 26, p 294)

It is evident that although Gandhi for some reason did not reject the doctrine of karma, he did not believe in its orthodox interpretation either. And even if Gandhi believed in rebirth, Parekh’s argument that Gandhi defended caste because he believed that one’s past karma is linked to one’s natural abilities and dispositions which represent a necessary moment of one’s spiritual evolution, seems to be problematic.

**Arrangement for self-realisation:** Ramashray Roy is another scholar who has examined Gandhi’s views on caste and has proffered possible reasons why Gandhi may have advocated for the retention of the varnas or hereditary occupations. Roy argued that “Gandhi’s rejection of modern civilisation is total”, and this was because he believed that the goal of modern civilisation, especially in its most utilitarian forms, is simply the satisfaction of one human desire after another. Self-gratification is not only accepted but encouraged, and the higher purpose of life, which for Gandhi was self-realisation, gradually becomes obsolete. Roy argues that Gandhi finds this possibility to exist only in a social order that is based on varna vyavastha, which is why he laid so much emphasis on varna vyavastha, in general, and the caste system grounded in it, in particular (2006: 140).

Though it is true that Gandhi criticises modern civilisation because it encourages the proliferation of human wants and desires and makes the acquisition of
more and more goods and material comforts the core of human life and renders obsolete the idea of self-realisation, it does not mean that Gandhi completely rejected modern civilisation and uncritically advocated for the retention of varna vyavastha.

Indeed, Gandhi attacked all kinds of violence and domination, irrespective of whether he discovered it in the traditional (varna vyavastha) or the modern (modern civilisation) way of life. However, his criticism of modern civilisation was more explicit than his censure of traditional practices due to the historical context—Indian’s struggle against colonialism—in which he found himself. He also chose to idealise the traditional way of life for the same reason, and argued that it is the path to individual dignity and social harmony. But this does not mean that he rejected modern civilisation entirely and advocated a return to varna vyavastha. Gandhi was a practical man; he accepted that modern civilisation is going to stay here, and hence needs to be improved. Gandhi’s criticism of modern civilisation shows that he believed that individual dignity, social harmony, and the ultimate end of life—self-realisation—can be achieved within the boundaries of modern civilisation. Parekh writes:

*If we were to pick out the one dominant passion, the central organising principle of his [Gandhi’s] life, it would have to be his search for and his struggle to establish dharma appropriate to India in the modern age.* (1989: 11)

Hence, to hold that Gandhi rejected modern civilisation in total and was in favour of retaining a social order that is based on varna vyavastha, because he found that it afforded greater opportunities for self-realisation, may not be appropriate.

Moreover, it is also not correct to say that Gandhi emphasised varna vyavastha in general, and the caste system grounded in it, in particular. Replying to a question, Gandhi himself said, “If varnashrama goes to the dogs in the removal of untouchability, I shall not shed a tear” (1958: Vol 35, p 522). Responding to another question at a different point, he explains that his adherence to the idea of varnashrama should not be taken very seriously:

*I have gone nowhere to defend varnadharma, though for the removal of untouchability I went to Vikom. I am the author of a Congress resolution for propagation of Khadi, establishment of Hindu—

Muslim unity, and removal of untouchability, the three pillars of swaraj. But I have never placed establishment of varnashrama dharma as the fourth pillar. You cannot, therefore, accuse me of placing a wrong emphasis on varnashrama dharma. (1958: Vol 35, p 523)

Likewise, Gandhi can be neither be accused of—nor appreciated for—an emphasis on varnashrama dharma, as his practices speak otherwise. It is known that Gandhi was a man of action, and if he really believed that a society based on varna would be conducive to self-realisation, he would have lived a life in alignment with the basic principles of varna and would have organised his ashrams too along those lines. But as explained above, Gandhi neither lived his life, nor organised the way of life in any of his ashrams, on the principles of varna. One can thus conclude that Gandhi did not place undue emphasis on varna vyavastha nor on the caste system grounded in it.

**Changes in Gandhi’s opinions on caste:** Bipan Chandra, in his paper “Gandhiji, Secularism and Communalism,” makes some passing remarks on Gandhi’s views on caste. He writes,

*Many quote his [Gandhi’s] statements on the caste system, inter-caste and inter-religious dining and marriages . . . and so on, from his early writings. But the fact is that, while his basic commitment to human values, truth and non-violence remained constant, his opinions on all these and other issues underwent changes—sometimes drastic—and, invariably, in more radical directions.* (2004: 3–4)

To justify his point, Chandra quotes from two of Gandhi’s writings, one from 1933 and the other from 1938. In the first, Gandhi says:

*In my search after Truth I have discarded many ideas and learnt many new things . . . and, therefore, when anybody finds any inconsistency between any two writings of mine, if he has still faith in my sanity, he would do well to choose the later of the two on the same subject.* (Quoted in Chandra 2004: 4)

It is a fact that on more than one occasion Gandhi has mentioned that he is not at all concerned about appearing to be consistent and suggests that his last opinion be taken as final. Therefore, many scholars like Chandra have argued that there was a gradual evolution or radical changes in Gandhi’s opinion on caste and other related
issues. But surprisingly enough, Gandhi never accepted that there were inconsistencies or changes in his opinions, not to speak of radical changes in his position. Before he made the above-mentioned comment, “In my search after Truth I have discarded many ideas and learnt many new things,” in the same piece of writing Gandhi also says, “As I read them [own writings] with a detached mind, I find no contradiction between the two statements, especially if they are read in their full context” (1958: Vol 55, p 60). Indeed, whenever Gandhi was charged with inconsistency in his writings—although he said that he was not at all concerned about appearing consistent and suggested that his readers take his last opinion as final—he made it very clear that he personally did not find any inconsistencies and this suggestion was for those friends who did find inconsistencies in his writings. He also suggested that before making their choice, these friends should try to perceive an underlying or abiding consistency between his two seemingly inconsistent statements at different times. He wrote:

Whenever I have been obliged to compare my writing even of fifty years ago with the latest, I have discovered no inconsistency between the two. But friends who observe inconsistency will do well to take the meaning that my latest writing may yield unless, of course, they prefer the old. But before making the choice they should try to see if there is not an underlying and abiding consistency between the two seeming inconsistencies. (1958: Vol 70, p 203)

Gandhi seems to be right in denying any inconsistencies in his position on caste because he, from a very young age, violated most caste restrictions. His attitude towards the caste system remained more or less consistent throughout his life. It is obvious that any inconsistencies in his writings were deliberate and conscious and were not due to any changes in his opinion. Hence, it may not be appropriate to say that there were gradual changes or a line of development over a period of time in Gandhi’s opinions on caste and other related issues.

Gandhi’s Defence of Caste Was a Matter of Strategy

B.R. Nanda, a biographer and Gandhian scholar writes, “Gandhi’s reluctance to make a frontal assault on the caste system in the early years may have been a matter of tactics” (1950: 36). Apart from Nanda, there are other scholars like Ramchandra Guha (2001: 94), Judith M. Brown (1990: 205), and Joseph Lelyveld (2011: 185) who have argued that Gandhi was a strategist in his approach to the caste system. They argue that in South Africa, as early as 1909, Gandhi had publicly decried the caste system, but shortly after returning to India, he understood that a conservative but powerful section of Hindus was not yet ready for radical reforms. And, for strategic reasons alone, he emphasised on the generally beneficial. As Judith M. Brown writes:

Though he had rejected the whole idea far earlier and inveighed and worked against it even in South Africa, once home in India, having tested the temper of public opinion, he was aware of the strength of Hindu orthodoxy and he took care not to equate his campaign against untouchability with the question of caste as a whole. (1990: 205)

At this juncture, it seems to be a more convincing justification than any of the others cited above. Apart from this, the argument that Gandhi was a strategist in his approach to caste resolves the seeming contradiction between Gandhi’s personal practices where he violates several caste restrictions, and his emphasis on some of the positive aspects of the caste system in some of his writings and speeches. Therefore, this paper argues that the best way to understand Gandhi’s writings—where he defends and validates caste—is to see them as a part of his long-term strategy to combat caste, because unlike other explanations, it does not contradict either his practices or his general philosophical outlook.

References


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Poetry and Reason: Why Tagore Still Matters

Amartya Sen

In his book *Raga Mala*, Ravi Shankar, the great musician, argues that had Rabindranath Tagore “been born in the West he would now be [as] revered as Shakespeare and Goethe.” This is a strong claim, and it calls attention to some greatness in this quintessentially Bengali writer—identified by a fellow Bengali—that might not be readily echoed in the wider world today, especially in the West. For the Bengali public, Tagore has been, and remains, an altogether exceptional literary figure, towering over all others. His poems, songs, novels, short stories, critical essays and other writings have vastly enriched the cultural environment in which hundreds of millions of people live in the Bengali-speaking world, whether in Bangladesh or in India. Something of that glory is acknowledged in India outside Bengal as well, and even in some other parts of Asia, including China and Japan, but in the rest of the world, especially in Europe and America, Tagore is clearly not a household name.

And yet the enthusiasm and excitement that Tagore’s writings created in Europe and America in the early years of the twentieth century were quite remarkable. *Gitanjali*, a selection of his poems for which Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, was published in English translation in London in March 1913 and was reprinted ten times by the time the award was announced in November. For many years Tagore was the rage in many European countries. His public appearances were always packed with people wanting to hear him. But then the Tagore tide ebbed, and by the 1930s the huge excitement was all over. Indeed, by 1937, Graham Greene was able to remark, “As for Rabindranath Tagore, I cannot believe that anyone but Mr. Yeats can still take his poems very seriously.”

The title of the book presumes that some of Tagore must be essential. But given the fairly comprehensive neglect of this writer in the contemporary English literary world, it could well be asked whether Tagore is indeed essential at all. We must also ask why a writer who evokes comparison with Shakespeare and Goethe tends to generate so little enthusiasm in Western countries today. There is surely some mystery here.

At one level it is not particularly hard to see that his native readers can get something from Tagore’s writings, especially his poems and songs, that would be missed by those who do not read Bengali. Even Yeats, his biggest promoter in the English-speaking world, did not like Tagore’s own English translations. “Tagore does not know English,” Yeats declared, adding a little theory to his diagnosis, as he often did: “No Indian knows English.”

Yeats was very willing to work with Tagore to overcome that handicap in the production of the English version of *Gitanjali*, though there are some serious problems with the Yeats-assisted translations as well. The more general obstacle to the appreciation of Tagore in English surely comes from the fact that poetry is notoriously difficult to translate. Even with the best effort and talent, it can be hard—if not impossible—to preserve the magic of poetry as it is transplanted from one language to another. Anyone who knows Tagore’s poems in Bengali would typically find it difficult to be really satisfied with any translation, no matter how good. To this impediment must be added the fact that Tagore’s poetry, which often takes the form of songs in an innovative style of lyrical singing, called Rabindrasangeet, has transformed popular Bengali music with its particular combination of reflective language and compatible tunes.

There is, in addition, the problem that Tagore’s influence on Bengali writing is so gigantic and epoch-making that his innovative language itself has profound importance for the Bengali reading public. Kazi Nazrul Islam, almost certainly the most successful Bengali poet with the exception of Tagore, who was constantly expressing his admiration for the person whom he called, uniquely, “the world poet,” has testified that Tagore had altogether transformed the Bengali language. In
many different ways, Tagore’s writings reshaped and reconstructed modern Bengali in a way that only a handful of innovative Bengali writers had done before him, going back all the way, a thousand years earlier, to the authors of Charyapad, the Buddhist literary classics that first established the distinctive features of early modern Bengali.

Not only is language a part of the story in the contrast between Tagore’s appreciation at home and the indifference to him abroad, but a related component of the story lies in the extraordinary importance and unusual place of language in Bengali culture in general. The Bengali language has had an amazingly powerful influence on the identity of Bengalis as a group, on both sides of the political boundary between Bangladesh and India. In fact, the politically separatist campaign in what was East Pakistan that led to the war for independence, and eventually to the formation of the new secular state of Bangladesh in 1971, was pioneered by the bhasha andolon, the “language movement” in defense of the Bengali language.

The movement started on February 21, 1952, only a few years after the partition of the subcontinent, with a large demonstration at Dhaka University in what was then the capital of East Pakistan (and now of Bangladesh), when the police gunned down a number of demonstrators. This turned out to be a decisive moment in the history of what would later become Bangladesh. February 21 is celebrated each year in Bangladesh as the Language Movement Day, and this has resonance across the world, since that day has been declared by UNESCO as the International Mother Language Day for the world as a whole. Language has served as a very powerful uniting identity for Muslims and Hindus in Bengal, and this sense of shared belonging has had a profound impact on the politics of Bengal, including its commitment to secularism on both sides of the border in the post-partition world.

The extraordinary combination of Tagore’s language and themes has had a captivating influence on his Bengali readers. Many Bengalis express their astonishment at the fact that people outside Bengal could fail to appreciate and enjoy Tagore’s writings; and that incomprehension is at least partly due to underestimating the difference that language can make. E.M. Forster noted the barrier of language, as early as 1919, when Tagore was still in vogue, in reviewing the translation of one of Tagore’s great Bengali novels, Ghare Baire, translated in English as The Home and the World. (It would be later made into a fine film by Satyajit Ray.) Forster confessed that he could not make himself like the English version of the novel that he read. “The theme is so beautiful,” he remarked, but the charms have “vanished in translation.”

So the importance of language provides a clue to the eclipse of Tagore in the West, but it cannot be the whole story. For one thing, Tagore’s nonfictional prose writings also have a gripping hold on the attention of Bengalis and also of other Indians, but they are not seen abroad in a similarly admiring way at all. This is so despite the fact that these writings are much easier to translate: indeed, Tagore himself often presented these essays in very effective English about which it would be hard to grumble. In his essays and his lectures, Tagore developed ideas on a remarkably wide variety of subjects—on politics, on culture, on society, on education; and while they are regularly quoted in his homeland, they are very rarely invoked now outside Bangladesh and India. There has to be something other than the barrier of language in the lack of world attention to Tagore. And this raises the larger question: how relevant, how important are Tagore’s general ideas?

Perhaps the central issues that moved Tagore most are the importance of open-minded reasoning and the celebration of human freedom. This placed him in a somewhat distinct category from some of his great compatriots. Tagore admired Gandhi immensely, and expressed his admiration of his leadership time and again, and did more than perhaps anyone else in insisting that he be described as “Mahatma”—the great soul. And yet Tagore frequently disagreed with Gandhi whenever he thought that the latter’s reasoning did not go far enough. They would often argue with each other quite emphatically. When, for example, Gandhi used the catastrophic Bihar earthquake of 1934 that killed a huge number of people as further ammunition in his fight against untouchability—he identified the earthquake as “a divine chastisement sent by God for our sins,” in particular the sin of untouchability—Tagore protested vehemently, insisting that “it is all the more unfortunate because this kind of unscientific view of phenomena is too readily accepted by a large section of our countrymen.”

Similarly, when Gandhi advocated that everyone should use the charka—the primitive spinning wheel—thirty minutes a day, Tagore expressed his disagreement
sharply. He thought little of Gandhi’s alternative economics, and found reason to celebrate, with a few qualifications, the liberating role of modern technology in reducing human drudgery as well as poverty. He also was deeply skeptical of the spiritual argument for the spinning wheel: “The charka does not require anyone to think; one simply turns the wheel of the antiquated invention endlessly, using the minimum of judgment and stamina.” In contrast with Gandhi’s advocacy of abstinence as the right method of birth control, Tagore championed family planning through preventive methods. He was also concerned that Gandhi had “a horror of sex as great as that of the author of The Kreutzer Sonata.” And the two differed sharply on the role of modern medicine, to which Gandhi was not friendly at all.

Many of these issues remain deeply relevant today, but what is important to note here are not the particular views that Tagore advanced in these—and other such—areas, but the organising principles that moved him. The poet who was famous in the West only as a romantic and a spiritualist was in fact persistently guided in his writings by the necessity of critical reasoning and the importance of human freedom. Also, those were the philosophical priorities that influenced Tagore’s ideas on education, including his insistence that education is the most important element in the development of a country. In his assessment of Japan’s economic development, Tagore separated out the role that the advancement of school education had played in Japan’s remarkable development—an analysis that would be echoed much later in the literature on development. He may have been exaggerating the role of education somewhat when he remarked that “the imposing tower of misery which today rests on the heart of India has its sole foundation in the absence of education,” but it is not hard to see why he saw the transformative role of education as the central story in the development process.

Tagore devoted much of his life to advancing education in India and advocating it everywhere. Nothing absorbed as much of his time as the school in Santiniketan that he established. He was constantly raising money for this unusually progressive co-educational school. I have to declare a bias here, since I was educated at this school, and my mother was schooled there decades earlier, in what was one of the early co-educational institutions in India. After learning that he had been awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, Tagore told others about it, or so the story goes, in a meeting of a school committee discussing how to fund a new set of drains that the school needed. His announcement of the recognition apparently took the eccentric form of his saying that “money for the drains has probably been found.”

In his distinctive view of education, Tagore particularly emphasised the need for gathering knowledge from everywhere in the world, and assessing it only by reasoned scrutiny. As a student at the Santiniketan school, I felt very privileged that the geographical boundaries of our education were not confined only to India and imperial Britain (as was common in Indian schools then). We learned a great deal about Europe, Africa, the USA and Latin America, and even more extensively about other countries in Asia. Santiniketan had the first institute of Chinese studies in India; my mother learned judo in the school nearly a century ago; and there were excellent training facilities in arts, crafts and music from other countries, such as Indonesia.

Tagore also worked hard to break out of the religious and communal thinking that was beginning to be championed in India during his lifetime—it would peak in the years following his death in 1941, when the Hindu–Muslim riots erupted in the subcontinent, making the partitioning of the country hard to avoid. Tagore was extremely shocked by the violence that was provoked by the championing of a singular identity of people as members of one religion or another, and he felt convinced that this disaffection was being foisted on common people by determined extremists: “interested groups led by ambition and outside instigation are today using the communal motive for destructive political ends.”

Tagore became more and more anxious and disappointed about India and about the world in the years before his death, and he did not live to see the emergence of a secular Bangladesh, which drew a part of its inspiration from his reasoned rejection of communal separatism. With its independence, Bangladesh chose one of Tagore’s songs (Amar Sonar Bangla) as its national anthem, making Tagore possibly the only person in human history who authored the national anthems of two independent countries: India had already adopted another one of his songs as its national anthem.

All this must be very confusing to those who see the contemporary world as a “clash of civilisations”—with “Muslim civilisation,” “Hindu civilisation,” and “Western civilisation,” defined largely on religious
grounds, vehemently confronting each other. They would also be confused by Tagore’s own description of his own cultural background: “a confluence of three cultures, Hindu, Mohammedan, and British.” Rabindranath Tagore’s grandfather, Dwarkanath, was well known for his command of Arabic and Persian, and Rabindranath grew up in a family atmosphere in which a deep knowledge of Sanskrit and ancient Hindu texts was combined with the study of Islamic traditions as well as Persian literature. It is not so much that Tagore tried to produce a “synthesis” of the different religions (as the great Mughal emperor Akbar had attempted for a time), but his reliance on reasoning and his emphasis on human freedom militated against a separatist and parochial understanding of social divisions.

If Tagore’s voice was strong against communalism and religious sectarianism, he was no less outspoken in his rejection of nationalism. He was critical of the display of excessive nationalism in India, despite his persistent criticism of British imperialism. And notwithstanding his great admiration for Japanese culture and history, he would chastise Japan late in his life for its extreme nationalism and its mistreatment of China and east and southeast Asia.

Tagore also went out of his way to dissociate the criticism of the Raj from any denunciation of British people and British culture. Consider Gandhi’s famous witticism in reply to the question, asked in England, about what he thought of British civilisation: “It would be a good idea.” There are some doubts about the authenticity of the story, but whether or not it is exactly accurate, the purported remark did fit with Gandhi’s amused skepticism about claims of British greatness. Those words could not have come from Tagore’s lips, even in jest. While he denied altogether the legitimacy of the Raj, Tagore was vocal in pointing out what Indians had gained from “discussions centered upon Shakespeare’s drama and Byron’s poetry and above all... the large-hearted liberalism of nineteenth-century English politics.” The tragedy, as Tagore saw it, came from the fact that what “was truly best in their own civilisation, the upholding of dignity of human relationships, has no place in the British administration of this country.”

**Tagore saw the world as a vast give-and-take of ideas and innovations.** He insisted that “whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly becomes ours, wherever they might have their origin.” He went on to proclaim, “I am proud of my humanity when I can acknowledge the poets and artists of other countries as my own. Let me feel with unalloyed gladness that all the great glories of man are mine.” The importance of such ideas has not diminished in the divisive world in which we now live. If that gives at least a part of the answer to the question of why Tagore still matters, it also puts into sharper focus the strangeness of the eclipse of Tagore in the West after an initial outburst of enthusiasm.

In explaining what happened to Tagore in the West, it is important to see the one-sided way in which his Western admirers presented him. This was partly related to the priorities of Tagore’s principal sponsors in Europe, such as Yeats and Pound. They were dedicated to placing Tagore in the light of a mystical religiosity that went sharply against the overall balance of Tagore’s work. In Yeats’s case, his single-minded presentation included adding explanatory remarks to the translation of Tagore’s poems to make sure that the reader got the religious point, eliminating altogether the rich ambiguity of meaning in Tagore’s language between love of human beings and love of God.

However, a part of the answer to the puzzle of the Western misunderstanding of Tagore can be found, I think, in the peculiar position in which Europe was placed when Tagore’s poems became such a rage in the West. Tagore received his Nobel Prize only a year before the start in Europe of World War I, which was fought with unbelievable brutality. The slaughter in that war made many intellectuals and literary figures in Europe turn to insights coming from elsewhere, and Tagore’s voice seemed to many, at the time, to fit the need splendidly. When, for example, the pocket book of Wilfred Owen, the great anti-war poet, was recovered from the battlefield in which he had died, his mother, Susan Owen, found in it a prominent display of Tagore’s poetry. The poem of Tagore with which Wilfred said good-bye before leaving for the battlefield (it began, “When I go from hence, let this be my parting word”) was very much there, as Susan wrote to Tagore, with those words “written in his dear writing—with your name beneath.”

Tagore soon became identified in Europe as a sage with a teaching—a teaching that could, quite possibly, save Europe from the dire predicament of war and disaffection in which it recurrently found itself in the early twentieth century. This was a far cry from the many-sided creative artist and emphatically reasoned thinker that people at home found in Tagore. Even as Tagore urged his countrymen to wake up from blind belief and
turn to reason, Yeats was describing Tagore’s voice in thoroughly mystical terms: “we have met our own image . . . or heard, perhaps for the first time in literature, our voice as in a dream.” There is a huge gulf there.

Tagore argued for the courage to depart from traditional beliefs whenever reason demanded it. There is a nice little story by Tagore called Kartar Bhoot, or “The Ghost of the Leader,” illustrating this point. A wise and highly respected leader who received unquestioned admiration from a community had become, in effect, a kind of tyrant when he lived, and enormously more so after he died. The story describes how ridiculously restrained people’s lives became when the dead leader’s recommendations get frozen into inflexible commands. In their impossibly difficult lives, when the members of the community pray to the dead leader to liberate them from their bondage, the leader reminds them that he exists only in their minds—that they are free to liberate themselves whenever they so decide. Tagore had a real horror of being bound by the past, beyond the reach of present reasoning.

Yet Tagore himself did not do much to resist the wrongly conceived reputation as a mystical sage that was being thrust upon him. Even though he wrote to his friend C.F. Andrews in 1920, at the height of his adulation as an Eastern messiah, that “these people . . . are like drunkards who are afraid of their lucid intervals,” he played along without much public protest. There was perhaps some tension within Tagore’s self-perception that allowed him to entertain the belief that the East had a real message to give to the West, and this conviction fitted rather badly with the rest of his reasoned commitments and convictions. There was also a serious mismatch between the kind of religiosity that the Western intellectuals came to attribute to Tagore (Graham Greene thought that he had seen in Tagore “what Chesterton calls ‘the bright pebbly eyes’ of the Theosophists”) and the form that Tagore’s religious beliefs actually took. His religious inclinations are perhaps best represented by one of his poems (I am taking the liberty of translating the lines into simple English, away from the biblical English that Tagore had been persuaded to use):

*Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom do you worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open your eyes and see your God is not before you! He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path maker is breaking stones.*

He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust.

Even though an affectionate God, who inspires not fear but love, has a big role in Tagore’s thinking, he is guided on all worldly questions not by any variety of mysticism but by explicit and discernible reasoning. This Tagore, the real Tagore, got very little attention from his Western audience—neither from his sponsors nor from his detractors. Bertrand Russell wrote (in letters to Nimai Chatterji in the 1960s) that he did not like Tagore’s “mystic air,” with an inclination to spout “vague nonsense,” adding that the “sort of language that is admired by many Indians unfortunately does not, in fact, mean anything at all.” When an otherwise sympathetic writer, George Bernard Shaw, transformed Rabindranath Tagore into a fictional character called “Stupendranath Beggor,” there was no longer much hope that Tagore’s reasoned ideas would receive the careful and serious attention that they deserved.

In Tagore’s vision of the future of his country, and of the world, there was in fact much emphasis on reason and much celebration of freedom—precisely the subjects on which more discussion can have an enormously constructive role today. In a rousing poem, he outlined his vision of what he so strongly desired for his own country and for the whole world:

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high Where knowledge is free Where the world has not been broken up into fragments By narrow domestic walls.*

The difficulty in Tagore’s reception in the West itself can perhaps be seen as a particular illustration of a world “broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls.”

The fragmentary distortions take distinct forms in different societies and different contexts. In arguing for a world in which “the mind is without fear and the head is held high,” Tagore wanted to overcome all those barriers. He did not quite succeed; but the engagement in open-minded and fearless reasoning that Tagore championed so eloquently is no less important today than it was in his own time.

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Ambedkar’s Rethinking of Religion

Prathama Banerjee

It is urgent that we return to Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar’s thoughts on religion today. He helps us in our immediate fight against a resurgent Hindutva that targets Dalits, Muslims and dissenters in general. More generally, he helps us develop both a critique and an understanding of religion as a phenomenon. Ambedkar’s rethinking of religion has not been studied enough. One, because the religion question in India has historically been reduced to the “Hindu–Muslim question”. And two, because “progressives” have always neglected religion—liberals by insisting that religion is or should be a matter of private faith and Marxists by insisting that religion is false consciousness of people who do not recognise their own true economic interest. Yet religion continues to play a determining role in our contemporary—both in politics and in ordinary people’s everyday lives—and most of us remain but helpless witnesses to this fact.

Ambedkar’s rethinking of religion is a vast subject. Here, I can only foreground a few important aspects of it and invite the readers to elaborate on them further. First, Ambedkar combined fearless and trenchant criticism of religion with a deep sympathy and understanding of it. This was unique—because in his times, public figures either criticised religion for being a divisive or irrational force, or like Gandhi, felt that all religions were true and worthy of respect. Our modern-day sensibility of *sarvadharmasamabhava*—equal treatment of all religions by the state, which stands in for Indian secularism—partakes precisely of this idea that all religions are intrinsically good. While Ambedkar insisted that religion was both inevitable to and necessary for public life, he strongly denied that all religions are good. When he diagnosed Hinduism as a religion of inequality because it sanctified caste or when he converted to Buddhism with his followers, Ambedkar (even at the cost of alienating sympathisers such as the Jatpat Todak Mandal of Lahore, which then refused to let him deliver his *Annihilation of Caste* lecture) was saying that religion can be and must be criticised. This was not to reject religion but to actually arrive at a more just and righteous religion.

Secondly, Ambedkar fought against the reduction of religion to identity. Modernity, we know, emerged in Europe by pitting Reason against Religion and State against Church. Yet modernity failed to either abolish religion or turn it into private faith. Religion continued to play a role in public life, including in the shaping of the modern European state, as the German philosopher Carl Schmitt pointed out, and philosophers of modernity, such as Hegel, conceptualised the world as a map of religious units (Christianity/Europe, Hinduism/India, Confucianism/China, Islam/Near East and so on). Religion thus re-entered discourses of modernity, but through the backdoor as it were. Religion was now recognised not as religion per se but as the mark of culture/civilisation. This (patently false) equation between culture and religion came to be universalised through colonial rule, which anthropologised and administered people across the world as religio-cultural communities. Consequently, nationalism, such as in India, also predominantly took on the form of religious nationalism.

Hence, in Ambedkar’s times, criticism of religion had become a doubly difficult task because it was perceived as a criticism of national culture. So when Ambedkar criticised Hinduism, it offended many of his contemporaries, including Gandhi, because it appeared to be also a criticism of Indian nationalism. But this did not deter Ambedkar. He openly stated that a nationalism that excluded and persecuted a large section of the nation’s people—namely, the Untouchables—was hardly nationalism worth its name. Along with Rabindranath Tagore, Ambedkar was a rare courageous individual who dared critique nationalism at the height of India’s nationalist movement—a risky enterprise for any public figure. “I have no country,” he said to Gandhi. (This reminds us of Marx’s famous statement that the working classes have no country.) Importantly, when Ambedkar called Untouchables a “social minority” and asked for separate electorates for Depressed Classes, on a par with separate electorates for Muslims, he actually redefined the categories of majority and minority from being religio-cultural to being juridico-constitutional categories. This, as we know, was crucial for the history of our democracy in post-1947 India.

But this was not all. Ambedkar also argued that to

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reduce religion to cultural identity was really to empty
religion of its real significance. His task then was to
rescue religion from self-proclaimed religionists, who
had reduced religion to merely a set of cultural markers
and practices, and return to religion the two critical
dimensions of philosophy and theology. This was the
third important aspect of Ambedkar’s rethinking of
religion that we must turn to. In his text Philosophy of
Hinduism, Ambedkar said that religion was constitutive
of the human condition because it dealt with elemental
questions of life such as of birth and death, nourishment
and disease. But to say that religion is part of human
ontology does not at all mean that religion is basically
the same in all places and at all times. Quite to the contrary.
The history of religion is a history of revolutions,
Ambedkar said, and to understand religion we must pay
attention to the convulsive changes that religion has
gone through in the world. “Revolution is the mother of
philosophy,” Ambedkar said. Interestingly, Ambedkar did
not go by the conventional narrative of modernity. The
rise of science and its alleged triumph over religion was
not really the defining event of his story. To Ambedkar,
the most important revolution in the history of religion
was the invention of God!

This is the most fascinating aspect of Ambedkar’s
account of religion. Through an anthropological study
of “primitive” religions, Ambedkar argued that early
forms of religion did not have a concept of God or
even of morality. Religion, concerned as it was with
death, disease, birth, growth, food, scarcity and so on,
propitiated forces of nature, such as sun, rain, wind,
estilence, etc. These forces were neither good nor evil.
They were amoral; they were simply there to be placated,
harnessed, and sometimes even fought. Morality did exist
in society in the form of norms of human interaction, but
that was a domain separate from that of religion. In other
words, religion was simply about life in all its exigencies,
dangers and flourishing.

**God and a ‘political society’**

It was only in ancient, as opposed to primitive,
times that the idea of god came to be integrated into
religion—leading to the first revolution in the history
of religion. The concept of god had an extra-religious
origin. It probably emerged from out of deference to
great and powerful men—heroes and kings—or from
out of pure philosophical speculation about the author/
architect of the world. The invention of god was followed
by a second major revolution. That was the integration of
religion with morality. In earlier times, the relationship
between gods and humans was imagined as a form
of kinship—gods were often called fathers/mothers.
“Political society”—a term Ambedkar uses here—was
thus composed of descendants and worshippers of a
common progenitor-god—and consequently, competing
polities had competing gods. In other words, lineage
and kinship rules applied to human interaction more
than abstract moral rules. In later times, however, once
society came to be imagined as composed only of
humans, and gods became transcendental figures lying
outside political society, the god–human relationship
changed from being that of kinship to that of faith and
belief. Instead of watching over public and civic life of
the community, god now appeared to watch over the
individual—and regulate his/her personal conscience and
conduct. Lineage loyalties came to be replaced by moral
injunctions. Morality and religiosity came to coincide.
Henceforth, it also became possible to imagine a polity
composed of people worshipping different gods, just as it
became possible to imagine a universal god, overseeing
the affairs of a universal humanity irrespective of the fact
that humanity was divided between different nations or
polities. From then on, a change of religion no longer
implied a necessary change of nationality.

Notice that Ambedkar’s is not the standard story of
secularisation, but a more complex story of change in the
relationship between politics and religion. It is not as if
religion becomes irrelevant to politics in modern times.
Rather because of the change in the nature of religion and
in the nature of human–god relationship, in modernity,
religious belonging and political belonging no longer
have a straightforward relationship. They come together
in complicated ways, and sometimes even compete with
each other. Religion continues to have a role in public
life but in terms of very different normative principles.
To quote Ambedkar,

> The Religious Revolution was not thus a revolution
> in the religious organisation of Society resulting
> in a shifting of the centre—from society to the
> individual—it was a revolution in the norms... There
> may be controversy as to which of the two norms is
> morally superior. But I do not think there can be any
> serious controversy that these are not the norms.

In other words, in modernity, debates around religion
take the form of debates around the normative framework
of public life—when, that is, religion is not reduced to mere cultural identity.

This brings us to the fourth important aspect of Ambedkar’s rethinking of religion—namely, his take on the relationship between religion and morality. On the face of it, Ambedkar was saying something very simple—that a religion must be judged in terms of the morality it fosters among its followers. On those terms, Hinduism is clearly wanting, because it sanctifies hierarchy, inequality and untouchability. Buddhism, on the other hand, is a moral religion because it does not discriminate on grounds of caste, gender and species—it historically admitted low-castes and women into the sangha and critiqued the sacrifice of innocent animals in the Vedic fire. But Ambedkar, clearly, is making a far more complex move here than just valorising morality in the name of religion. In The Buddha and his Dhamma, written just before his death, Ambedkar offers us a conception of religion in its purest and barest form, i.e. a religion without the mediation of gods and prophets and without grounding in any notion of an eternal inner being such as soul or atman. For him, the religious subject and the subject of religion is not god, not soul, but the ordinary, mortal, finite human being in his or her everyday life. He distinguished Buddha from Krishna, Christ and Muhammad based on the fact the Buddha never claimed to be either god or god’s messenger. Neither were his words of the nature of revelations or god’s words. Nor did Buddha claim any miraculous powers or special insights into extra-worldly questions (such as what happens after life, what is the nature of the self and so on). Buddhist texts were simply meditations on the human condition, no more and no less—centred around the philosophical concepts of shunyata (emptiness), dukkha (suffering, both social and personal), impermanence of the world, “dependent origination” (i.e. the interconnected and inessential nature of all things) and ahimsa or non-violence. Based on this understanding of the world as ephemeral and ever-changing, without the guarantees of god’s grace and of an afterlife of the soul, but for that very same reason, imbued with the infinite possibility of transformation, Ambedkar proposed new Buddhism as a religion of the world, meant to change lives for the better right here right now, by inspiring responsible action and moral conduct among its followers. Hence his emphasis on siла (virtue)—without which even knowledge was futile. And hence Ambedkar’s statement that in navayana, religion is morality and morality religion.

Revision of the karma theory

As we know, Ambedkar was a trenchant critic of the traditional, brahmanical conception of karma—which said that sufferings in this life were the result of sins in a previous life. He was also a sharp critic of the modern nationalist theory of karma—which said that one should undertake action as sacrifice, without either fear of or desire for the fruits of action. According to Ambedkar, the former justified the current plight of the Untouchables as caused by their own prior failings and the latter denied political status to the Untouchables’ efforts at liberation, because it was evidently desirous and interested action. Through a critique of the Bhagavadgītā in his Revolution and Counter-Revolution in India and through a reframing of Buddhist texts, Ambedkar proposed a revised theory of karma to imply that every action had an inescapable consequence, however delayed or deferred it might be, which fructified right here in the world and affected collective lives. In other words, every actor was ultimately responsible for his or her actions because it came to bear not only upon themself but upon the world in general. To own up responsibility was thus to be moral. Through this revision of the karma theory, what Ambedkar did was to foreground ordinary, everyday activities of life as the critical site of moral judgments—the realm of the quotidian, where caste really played out in all its violence and discrimination—thus denying the centrality ascribed by the nationalist elite to spectacular revolutionary, exceptional or sacrificial action.

But to be moral, Ambedkar further argued, was not simply to follow the right rules. In fact, morality was not about rules at all. It was about principles. Rules told us exactly what to do and how to do it. Rules called for conformity. Manusmriti was precisely such a set of elaborate rules that demanded faithful following. Principles however do not tell us what to do. They call for interpretation and judgment. Rules generate obedience, principles generate creativity. Rules determine, principles produce a responsible freedom. A true religion is a religion of principles rather than rules, because it fosters a creative, responsible and free religious subject. To quote from The Annihilation of Caste:

The principle may be wrong but the act is conscious and responsible. The rule may be right but the act is mechanical. A religious act may not be a correct act but must at least be a responsible act.

A remarkable and counter-intuitive statement if
anything—that an act qualifies to be a religious act when, wrong or right, it is undertaken in responsibility!

Religion for societal transformation

It could of course be asked that if Ambedkar’s real stake was in morality as responsible action, then why call it religion at all. The story becomes even more interesting here. It is clear that Ambedkar had quietly moved away from the modern Kant-ian sense of morality as a purely mentalist and rational judgment (Kant said that morality needed no religious backing). Ambedkar’s morality clearly called for a certain sanctity, which was beyond merely the sanctity of reason. It required a commitment that was akin to religious faith, inspiring, if necessary, a fight to the end, even sacrifice. This was not because Ambedkar was a traditionalist in the conventional sense (though he did take tradition quite seriously, both as an object of critique and as a source of new ideas, as proven by his lifelong engagement with Sanskrit and Pali texts). This was because, as Ambedkar said in his 1950 essay Buddha and the Future of his Religion, “the new world needs a religion far more than the old world did”. That is, morality as religion is particularly the need of modernity. Harking back to his earlier distinction between rules and principles, Ambedkar said that the new world needed a religion because law (the regime of rules as it were), in which we as moderns put too much faith, was an ineffective and unreliable instrument for the transformation of society. To quote him again:

[The law] is intended to keep the minority within the range of social discipline. The majority is left and has to be left to sustain its social life by the postulates and sanction of morality. Religion in the sense of morality, must therefore, remain the governing principle in every society.

This, coming from the greatest constitutionalist and legal reformer of our times, unmistakably tells us that Ambedkar was rethinking religion here with reference to the limits of the modern state and modern liberalism’s “rule of law”. (It was not accidental that he finally converted to Buddhism after his resignation as law minister from Nehru’s cabinet, having experienced the impossibility of fully reforming the Hindu joint family, the crux of both caste and gender discrimination in India, by law.)

This then is the last important aspect of Ambedkar’s rethinking of religion that I want to emphasise—namely, that Ambedkar posits religion as a force that operates at the limits of state and law. The greatest testament to this fact is that on 2 December 1956, just four days before he died, Ambedkar wrote up Buddha or Marx! In this essay, he shows how Buddhism and Marxism share some basics—including the understanding that private property is the source of all inequalities (hence the Buddhist conception of the bhikshu and the Marxist conception of the proletariat, referring to those who have nothing to lose and therefore those who potentially are the real force of change). But Marxism parts ways with Buddhism, because having wished away religion as the “opium of the people”, it inevitably turns to the State as the primary instrument of social change (as did, in his times, both Soviet socialism and Nehruvian socialism). The result, as we know, is dictatorship and violence. To ensure equality, thus, Marxism sacrifices liberty. Ambedkar contrasts the “dictatorship of the proletariat” with the ancient Buddhist sangha, which, according to him, institutionalised democratic governance of those who voluntarily entered the community of the adept. Buddha, he said, was more flexible about the principle of non-violence than he was about the principle of democracy. Unlike Gandhi and the orthodox Jains, Buddha understood that in some cases violence was inevitable and even just. But Buddha never condoned dictatorship—for he believed that right conduct could never be enforced or coerced; it had to emerge from changed dispositions. The changing of disposition required not law but religion. The following is as clear a statement as can be, of Ambedkar’s argument that religion emerges where the jurisdiction of the state ends:

The Communists themselves admit that their theory of the State as a permanent dictatorship is a weakness in their political philosophy. They take shelter under the plea that the State will ultimately wither away. There are two questions, which they have to answer. When will it wither away? What will take the place of the State when it withers away? . . . The Communists have given no answer. At any rate no satisfactory answer to the question what would take the place of the State when it withers away, though this question is more important than the question when the State will wither away. Will it be succeeded by Anarchy? If so the building up of the Communist State is a useless effort... The only thing, which could sustain it after force is withdrawn, is Religion.

cont’d... on page no. 36
Western Railway Employees Union
Grant Road Station Building (E), MUMBAI – 400 007.

WREU, the oldest trade unions in the country, earlier known as BB&CI Railway Employees’ Union, is in the services of Railway men since 1920. WREU, a free, independent and democratic trade union, is a founder member of AIRF and HMS.

WREU fought for upliftment of railway men and their family in particular and labour class in general for the last 94 years. WREU/AIRF is instrumental in creation of PNM, grievance solving machinery in 1951, payment of PLB to Railway men since 1979, implementation of series of Cadre Restructuring in Group ‘C’ and ‘D’ categories in Indian Railways, implementation of recommendations of the 4th, 5th and 6th CPCs with modifications and RELHS Scheme for Railway men.

WREU was led by prominent trade union leaders, viz. late Miss. Maniben Kara, Late Com. Jagdish Ajmera, Late Com. Umraomal Purohit, Late Com. Chandrashekar Menon, etc. In memory of late Maniben Kara, WREU established a charitable trust namely “Maniben Kara Foundation” with the objective of lighting against the evils of the society.

Apart from trade union activities, various non-bargaining activities such as organizing Health Check-up Camps, Blood Donation Camps, Family Planning Camps, Anti-Dowry campaigns, HIV-AIDS Awareness Campaigns, Safety Seminars, Trade Union Education Class, Adult Education, Guidance Camp, etc. are conducted for the benefits of the railway men and the general public.

(R.C. Sharma)  
President  

(J.R. Bhosale)  
General Secretary
Kashmiriyat: The Vitality of Kashmiri Identity

Balraj Puri

The urge for identity as a basic human urge has received specific academic recognition in post-modern political thought. People have sought a sense of belonging and security in groups throughout human history, starting from the primitive tribal life. The forms and basis of groups have changed from time to time and people were not always free, until democratic systems emerged, to belong to a group of their choice.

In the case of Kashmir Valley, Kashmiri identity has been the most persistent and dominating urge of people. It is the most homogeneous and in some respects the most crucial part of what is officially called the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Jammu and Ladakh are its two other regions. The Kashmiris have always perceived their identity as distinct and separate within the subcontinent. This identity was uniquely Kashmiri, which encompassed Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. The purpose of this paper is to examine and explain the distinctiveness of the Kashmiri identity.

Kashmir was the largest state of the British Indian empire ruled by a prince or Maharaja. At the time of its independence and partition into the dominions of India and Pakistan in 1947, the Maharaja aspired to an independent status for his state. But the attempt by Pakistan to annex the state through a tribal raid sponsored by it, forced him to seek the help of the Indian army after exercising his constitutional right to accede to the Indian Union on 26 October 1947. The way people of the valley acclaimed, through large rallies, the decision of the popular National Conference party led by its charismatic leader, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, to support the state’s accession to India, and the way they cooperated with the Indian army in expelling the raiders from the valley, added political and moral legitimacy to the decision of the ruler to accede to the Indian Union.

The armed clash between India and Pakistan (the latter had reinforced the tribal raid with regulars of its army) in the state terminated in a ceasefire on 1 January 1949. The ceasefire line, later rationalised and renamed the Line of Control after the Indo-Pak war of 1971, divided the state into two parts; 84,112 square kilometres of territory remained under the control of Pakistan, including Gilgit and the northern dependencies of the state, Skardu in the former Ladakh district, the Pothoari-speaking western tract of the district of Muzaffarabad in the former Kashmir province, and Poonch Jagir and Mirpur district in Jammu province. None of these areas were originally inhabited by Kashmiris. The Azad Kashmir or POK (Pakistan Occupied Kashmir), as the Pak-held part of the state is called in Pakistan and India respectively, is, therefore, a misnomer. The entire Kashmiri-speaking area, i.e. the valley of Kashmir, is within the Indian part of the state and comprises just over 11% of its area. About 47% of the people in the state speak Kashmiri as their mother tongue, including a small percentage in the Jammu region.

If the Pakistan-held part is also included, the percentage of area and population of the valley will shrink further. But the importance of Kashmir is due to the fact that it is the real bone of contention between India and Pakistan. The rest of the state could have been easily parcelled out between the two neighbouring countries. India is, for instance, almost reconciled to the present division of the state except for occasionally laying a formal legal claim to the Pak-held part as a bargaining counter. Pakistan, on the other hand, has often indicated its willingness to concede Jammu and Ladakh, at any rate their non-Muslim parts, to India. What created the Kashmir problem was the accession of a Muslim majority state in 1947 and the apparent fluctuations in the mind of Kashmiri Muslims thereafter.

Why did Kashmiris remain aloof from the mainstream pre-independent Muslim politics in the subcontinent? Why did they, instead, overwhelmingly opt for India in 1947? Why were they alienated from the Indian mainstream from 1953 to 1975? Yet why did they not respond to Pak-sponsored liberation attempts during the period? Why were they again reconciled to remaining a part of India from 1975, following the Indira–Abdullah Accord, to, say, 1987? Why did a sudden insurgency overtake the valley a little later? Why have non-Kashmiri Muslims of the Indian part of the state not joined the ongoing insurgency? Why, despite the dependence on arms supply from, as also the political, moral and diplomatic support of Pakistan, is the rallying slogan of insurgent Kashmir ‘azadi’—freedom—and not
‘Pakistan’?

The only way this zig-zagging of Kashmir politics can be explained is in terms of the assertion of the Kashmiri identity. The Kashmiri Muslims have reacted against the threat perceived by them to their identity from diverse directions. They do react like any other Muslim community when their religious interests are endangered. But they are unlikely to submerge their Kashmiri identity in the name of Islam.

The beginning of the modern political movement in Kashmir is traced to a religious issue—as a protest by the Muslims of the state against the desecration of the holy Quran by a police officer in 1931. It acquired an organised form with the formation of the Muslim Conference a year later, fully supported by the Indian Muslim League. But as the movement culminated in the demand for the transfer of power from a non-Kashmiri ruler (who belonged to the Dogra community of Jammu) to the people, and the transfer of land from landlords, mostly non-Kashmiri or non-Muslim to the tillers, a contradiction emerged between the interests of Kashmiris and those of the Muslim Leadership, because the latter was patronised by Muslim princes and landlords. The support lent by Indian nationalist leaders of the Congress party to Kashmiri interests and aspirations led to the conversion of the Muslim Conference into the National Conference in 1939.

Alliance of Kashmiri nationalists with Indian nationalism

The assertion of Kashmiri identity led to the split in the Muslim leadership of the state along regional lines. The anti-Maharaja and anti-feudal plank of the National Conference did not get the same emotional response from the Muslims of Jammu as the Maharaja and most of the landlords belonged to Jammu and the latter also included Muslims. The National Conference thus essentially represented a movement of Kashmiri nationalism which became an ally of the Indian nationalist movement.

By 1947, the Muslim League had established its sway throughout the subcontinent. Almost all dissenting Muslim stalwarts collapsed one after the other. Confident in the belief that as the J&K state was a Muslim majority state, its Muslims would not behave differently from Muslims elsewhere, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the supreme leader of the League and founder of Pakistan, declared that the state was in his pocket. He conceded the right of the ruler to take a decision about the future affiliation of the state with either of the two newly independent dominions of India and Pakistan and started negotiations with him. But he also sent tribal raiders to take Kashmir by force, believing that the Muslims of the valley would not resist the opportunity of joining a Muslim country.

Indian leaders, in contrast, had put their bet on the sentiment of Kashmiri patriotism. They proclaimed that sovereignty belonged to the people and not to the ruler. Gandhi’s personal visit to the valley to convey this assurance acted as a magnetic pull on the Kashmiri mind which was outraged by the policy of the Pakistan government to recognise the Maharaja’s sovereignty on one hand, and on the other to decide the issue of accession of the state by force. Leaders of Kashmir thus would claim, after the state’s accession to India, that Indian forces had come to Kashmir to defend their azadi (freedom) which Pakistan had threatened. The insurgency which started around 1990 also proclaimed azadi as its objective, except that the roles were now reversed. Now India is projected as the enemy of azadi while support is sought from Pakistan to defend it.

The alliance between Kashmiri and Indian nationality developed strains as the government of India started pressurising the Kashmiri leadership to cede more subjects to the Centre than those, i.e. Defence, Foreign Affairs and Communications which were stipulated in the instrument of accession. This was what other princely states had to do, under the pressure of their people.

However, while the Kashmiri leaders tried to resist these encroachments by the Centre on the autonomy of the state, they did not concede the demand for regional autonomy within the state of Jammu and Ladakh. These regions, therefore, had no interest in supporting the autonomy of the state. Tensions in inter-regional relations and in Centre-state relations eventually led to the crisis of August 1953 when Sheikh Abdullah was dismissed as Prime Minister and put under detention, even though all the 75 members of the state assembly were members of his National Conference. This treatment of the hero of Kashmiri nationalism and the architect of the state’s accession to India was a big blow to the self-respect and identity of Kashmir. Further blows were struck by the measures taken to force the constitutional integration of the state with the Indian Union. This was accomplished with the connivance of pliable governments imposed upon the state through rigged elections.

However, Pakistan’s military regime and centralised polity did not satisfy Kashmir’s urge for autonomy
and identity either. Moreover, as an ally of Indian nationalism, Kashmir’s political movement had come to share a common political ideology broadly expressed in slogans like secularism, democracy and socialism. Despite the emotional break with the Centre in 1953, these ideological links were not completely snapped. In addition, Sheikh Abdullah and his colleagues had intimate personal associations with many government and non-government national leaders.

It was thus possible for the present writer to play a mediational role and assist the two sides to evolve a formula for the preservation of Kashmiri identity within India and of the regions within the state. The split of Pakistan and emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 improved the prospects of a settlement. For it not only weakened the bargaining capacity of Pakistan, and hence of the Kashmiri leaders as well, but it also reiterated the validity of ethnic identities. The assertion of Bangla identity against Pak–Muslim identity strengthened the case for Kashmiri identity against Pakistani claims. Thus when Sheikh Abdullah returned to power in 1975 after an accord with India’s Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, he received a tumultuous welcome in the valley. For the government of India conceded, inter alia, that Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which accorded the J&K state special status within India, would continue, and that the state could review the central laws extended to the state after 1953 and request the Centre to amend or repeal them. That the hero of Kashmiri nationalism was again at the helm was considered by many Kashmiris as an added guarantee for the defence of Kashmiri identity.

The dismissal of Farooq Abdullah, son and successor of Sheikh Abdullah, from chief ministership in 1984 and his reinstatement, after humiliating parleys for over two years, with his agreement to share power with the Congress, offended the self-respect and dignity of the people of Kashmir. The offence was compounded by the manipulation of the elections in 1987 in a number of constituencies and by denying popular discontent any constitutional expression. Kashmiris were thus forced to seek non-constitutional militant and secessionist outlets. Pakistan provided the wherewithal in the form of arms and training facilities to the militants. Significantly, this time Pakistan used the Kashmiri card instead of the Islamic card it had been using so far. The initiative for the militant movement in Kashmir around 1989 was entrusted to the JKLF (Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front) which swore by Kashmiriyat. Later, similar strains developed between Pakistan’s interests and the claims of Kashmiriyat as had developed between the latter and Indian nationalism after 1947.

Uniqueness of Kashmiri Identity

Events in Kashmir from 1931 to the early 1990s thus eloquently demonstrate the vitality of the Kashmiri identity. It acquired this vitality due among others to geographical, historical and ethnic factors. Enclosed by mountain ranges from 10,000 feet to 18,000 feet high, “Kashmir is the largest valley in the lap of the largest mountains in the world.” They enclose a plain of around 1900 square miles almost uniformly at a height of 5,000 feet; some 84 miles long and 20 to 25 miles wide. Though geographically isolated, the valley is internally well connected. Every place in it is within a few hours ride by car. The fabled beauty of Kashmir, which poets, writers and travellers from all over the world have described as incomparable, further inspires a deep love for the land in its closely knit society.

Kashmir has a homogeneous culture as 94% of its population are Muslims, while over 89% speak Kashmiri as their mother tongue. Kashur—as the language is called by the Kashmiris—is one of the oldest spoken and literary languages of modern India. It has a more than 600-year-old recorded literary heritage if Lai Ded is considered the earliest Kashmiri poetess. According to Sir George Grierson, the pioneering authority on Indian languages, it is not of Sanskrit, but of Dardic origin. If this view is correct, Kashmiri does not belong to the Indo-Aryan family of languages spoken from Dhaka (Bangladesh) to Peshawar (Pakistan). However, G.M.D. Sufi, author of a monumental work, Kashir, concedes that although the Kashmiri language has a Dardic base, it has been influenced by the Indo-Aryan languages spoken in its southern parts. He observes: “The original Dardic language has supplied the skeleton, Sanskrit has given it flesh, but Islam has given it life” (G.M.D. Sufi, Kashir). He also adds that it is the only Dardic language that has a written literature.

Again, Kashmir is a unique civilisational experiment which can claim, as observed by Sir Aurel Stein, the translator of the celebrated history of Kashmir, Rajatarangani, “the distinction of being the only region of India which possesses an uninterrupted series of written records of its history” (Aurel Stein, Introduction to River of Kings). The archaeological excavations at Bourzahama, 15 kilometres from Srinagar, establish its antiquity.
to before 3000 BC. Though it was contemporaneous to the Mohenjodaro civilisation, perhaps it has some independent features also. The widespread prevalence of Naga-worship before and even after the Buddhist period indicate that the Naga and indigenous tribes lived in Kashmir before the advent of the Aryans in the subcontinent. According to James Ferguson, the Nagas were serpent worshippers, an aboriginal race of Turanian stock inhabiting North India, who were conquered by the Aryans (James Ferguson, *Tree and Serpent Worship*, 1873). Durbbavardhna, who ruled Kashmir from AD 627 to 663, is stated to have been the son of a Naga (G.M.D. Sufi, *Kashir*). Abhinava Gupta (AD 915–1009), the eminent Kashmiri philosopher, claims the primacy of *agamas*—religious texts of ancient Kashmir dating between the first to the fifth-sixth century AD—over the Vedas both in point of time and performance of rituals (Abhinava Gupta, *Tantraloka*).

The interaction between Vedic and Kashmiri traditions did develop in the course of time. But in Kashmir’s religious literature, the supremacy of Shiva over the Vedic god Indra, has often been asserted. *Margendre Tantra*, for instance, refers to a legend in which Shiva is regarded as the supreme deity from whom Indra brings the sacred knowledge of Tantra to the world, thereby reducing him to a mere communicator of Shiva’s knowledge (V.N. Drabu, *Saivagamas*, p 50). According to V.N. Drabu, the pre-Vedic people of Kashmir were admitted to Vedic society “with distinctive characteristics of their own life at different periods” (ibid., p 31).

The transition from Naga cults to Buddhism, too, was smooth. According to legend, some Nagas attended the religious seminars of Nagarjuna at Nalanda and, impressed by the way he contradicted the Vedic doctrines, invited him to Kashmir. According to Sufi, “on account of his connections with the Nagas, he received the name of Nagarjuna.” (Some scholars claim that he was a Kashmiri.) He was elevated to the status of Bodhisatava. It was under his leadership that the fourth council of Buddhism was held at Haryvan, near Srinagar in Kashmir in AD 100, where the Mahayan school of Buddhism was founded. Influenced by the Shaivite–Tantric thought of Kashmir, Buddhism got transformed into its Kashmiri version. Eventually indigenous religious beliefs, Vedic thought and Buddhism were synthesised by the great Kashmiri philosopher Vasugupta (ninth century AD) and Abhinava Gupta (tenth century AD) into Kashmiri version of Shaivism called Trikka philosophy.

According to G.M.D. Sufi, the monastic theism of “Kashmir Shaivism is very near to Islam”. He particularly compares it with the celebrated Muslim mystic Mansur al Hallaj (858–922 AD) who proclaimed “An’l Haq” (I am creative truth). Kashmir thus accepted Islam not as a negation but as a culmination of a proud spiritual heritage. It did not surrender to Islam as a spiritually exhausted personality but greeted it in a friendly embrace. Islam did not come to Kashmir as a faith of the conquerors and therefore did not humiliate or hurt its pride. Muslim rule was not an outside import but followed the conversion of a local ruler. The mass conversion of the people of Kashmir to Islam owes to the unique character that emerged from the soil in the person of Alamdar-i-Kashmir, Shaikh Nooruddin Noorani, popularly called Nund Rishi (14th century) who became the patron-saint of Kashmir. He translated Islam into Kashmir’s spiritual and cultural idiom and converted it into a massive emotional upsurge. Farooq Nazki calls him a Muslim Shaivite. According to Dr B.N. Pandit, his poetry is a mixture of Shaivism and Sufism.

Proclaiming himself to be the spiritual son of Lai Ded, who represented the acme of the pre-Islamic spiritual heritage of Kashmir, Nund Rishi carried the heritage forward as a part of its Rishi order. Thus, in Kashmir, Islamic beliefs and practices enjoyed as much autonomy within wider Islamic traditions as pre-Islamic belief during Vedic and post-Vedic times. It “neither affected the independence of Kashmir nor, at first, did it materially changed its cultural and political conditions” (G.M.D. Sufi, *Kashir*).

Many scholars have noted pre-Islamic influences in Kashmiri Islam. Abdullah Yusuf Ali traces the practice of relic worship—as in the Hazaratbal Shrine where the prophet’s hair is preserved—to Buddhist influence (O’Molley (ed), *Modern India and the West*, 1941, p. 391). Dr Arthur Neve observes that, “The Kashmiri Muslim has transferred reverence from Hindu stones to Muslim relics” (*The Tourist Guide to Kashmir; Ladakh, Skardo, etc.*, 1938, p. 103). Similarly, “Muslim saints are worshipped like Hindu gods and godlings” (O’Molley, op. cit.).

Islam in Sufi form thus came to Kashmir not as a destroyer of tradition, as was the case in many other lands, but as its preserver, consolidator and perpetuator. The fact that Islam is rooted in Kashmiri tradition and that tradition is permeated with the Islamic spirit has enabled Kashmiris to reconcile cosmopolitan affiliations
with territorial nationalism. The Kashmiri Muslim has remained a Kashmiri as well as a Muslim and rarely suffers from the schizophrenic pangs which Islamic links and local patriotism often generate among Muslims elsewhere in India.

Kashmir has been a melting pot of ideas and races. It received every new creed with discrimination and enriched it with its own contribution, without throwing away its earlier acquisitions. As Sufi observes, “The cult of Buddha, the teaching of Vedanta, the mysticism of Islam have one after another found a congenial home in Kashmir.” He adds, “It has imbibed the best of Buddhism, the best of Hinduism and the best of Islam.” Similarly, on account of its cultural homogeneity and geographical compactness, all admixtures of races who emigrated to Kashmir from ancient times merged their identities into one whole. According to the renowned Kashmiri scholar and historian Mohammad Din Fauq, even the people who came from Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan and Turkastan as late as 600 or 700 years ago were so mixed with Kashmiri Muslims in culture, civilisation and matrimonial relations that “all non-Kashmiri traces are completely absent from their life” (cited in Sufi, op. cit).

Monumental achievements

Kashmir was, at one period, “the clearing house of several civilisations and the influences of these found into this natural retreat” [Elphistone, History of India (London: 1866), p 515]. It had also made a monumental contribution to Indian culture. Its position within India was similar to that of ancient Greece in European civilisation. It has been one of the biggest seats of Indian culture and learning which, in the words of Jawharlal Nehru, “dominated the intellectual scene of the country for almost 2000 years”. There is no branch of human knowledge to which ancient Kashmir did not make a pioneering and a substantial contribution. G.T. Vigne had hoped, “Kashmir will (again) become the focus of Asiatic civilisation—a miniature England in the heart of Asia” (G. T. Vigne, Travel Vol II, p. 68).

Among the political achievements of Kashmir, mention may be made of Lalitaditya-Muktapida (AD 725–753) whom the great Kashmiri historian Kalhana describes as the universal monarch moving round the earth like the sun. According to Sufi, “He is the most conspicuous figure in Kashmir history. He raised his country to a pitch of glory it had never reached before.” He, writes Mohibbul Hasan, defeated forces led by Junaid, Mohammed Bin Qasim’s successor in Sindh, and overran his territory (Kashmir Under Sultans, p. 35). He collected a galaxy of scholars from all over India in his Durbar.

Kashmiris similarly recall another golden period of their history during the reign of the Muslim king Zain-ul-Abdin, popularly called Bud Shah (the great king) from 1420 to 1470. It “constituted a climax never attained by any other independent king in Kashmir” (Sufi, op. cit.). He invited artisans, craftsmen, scholars and men of letters from far off foreign countries as a result of which Kashmir flourished materially and culturally. He laid the lasting basis of a truly secular polity.

The watershed in the history of Kashmir is not Islam, as generally thought in the rest of the subcontinent, but the changeover from a Kashmiri to non-Kashmiri rule. Indigenous Muslim rule lasted for just 250 years after which Kashmir was annexed by the Mughal Emperor Akbar in 1586. For the next 250 years, Kashmir was ruled by Muslim kings (Mughal followed by Afghan). But since they were non-Kashmiris, their rule, along with 111 years of rule by a Punjabi Sikh and a Dogra Hindu, is regarded by most Kashmiris as a period of slavery. When the organised movement against autocracy started in 1931, its leaders linked it with the four-centuries-old urge for freedom of the people of Kashmir. It culminated in the Quit Kashmir movement in 1946 which, though addressed to the last ruler (a Dogra Hindu), Maharaja Hari Singh, promised to undo Akbar’s act of enslaving Kashmir in 1586.

The identity of Kashmir, that was confronted with the option of joining one of the two dominions into which the Indian subcontinent was divided in 1949, had acquired a unique character and vitality on account of 5000 years of its continuous history, its genius in reconciling claims of continuity and change, its leading role in the intellectual and spiritual life of the country, its ability to assimilate ideas and races, its splendid isolation and distinctness guarded by physical barriers, monumental achievements in every field of human activity and sense of pride in the rich heritage shared by Hindu and Muslims alike.

This identity was obviously a misfit in the monolithic structure of Pakistan which did not recognise any identity other than based on religion. The federal, democratic and secular framework of India, on the other hand, promised a better guarantee for the defence and growth of the Kashmiri identity. The accession of the Muslim majority state of Jammu and Kashmir to India, in which Kashmiri
leaders had played a key role, revitalised and revalidated Indian secularism which had been seriously undermined by partition. It enhanced India’s moral and political prestige in the world, including the Muslim part of it.

Alas, neither did Kashmir explore the potentialities of what it could achieve as a constituent part of the republic of India nor did the republic explore the potentialities of what it could achieve with such a region being a willing and contented part of it. If these potentialities had been realised, the whole subcontinent would have been more at peace with itself and might have played a greater role, befitting its size and cultural and intellectual endowments, in the affairs of the world.

Kashmiri identity in the early 1990s was badly wounded and fractured. It split on religious lines with the exodus of the bulk of its small but vital minority of Kashmiri Pandits (all Kashmiri Hindus are Pandits). The physical distance between the two communities unfortunately also reflects the mental distance between them. Kashmir not only underwent colossal physical suffering; its soul also suffocated.

Why a wonderful experiment came to such a tragic end and what the prospects are of retrieving the situation, are beyond the purview of the present study.

[Balraj Puri (1928–2014) was an Indian political commentator and human rights activist.]

Let me end here by pointing out Ambedkar’s unmatched originality in the rethinking of religion. As opposed to the modern secularisation thesis, which sees pure politics emerging after the cessation of religion, Ambedkar’s proposition is that religion comes into play precisely when secular politics fails or is exhausted. It is therefore a mistake to believe, as many do, that Ambedkar conceptualised religion as a subordinate instrument for politics. It is true that he named “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”—the unmistakably political slogan of the French Revolution—as ideals of his religion. But it must not be forgotten that unlike anybody else, he made Fraternity the basis on which Equality and Liberty became possible. Fraternity was a community of understanding and compassion (karuna in Buddhist terms), which could only be ensured by good faith and silata towards others, i.e. by a religious disposition and not by mere disciplined or rule-governed behaviour, nor by pure political rationality. In other words, Ambedkar’s rethinking of religion cannot be understood within liberalism’s framework of secularism and religious tolerance. It cannot also be understood, as some seek to do, within the framework of “civil religion”, as proposed by Jean Jacques Rousseau in The Social Contract. For one, civil religion is a religion, shorn of the church and of theological elaboration, clearly in service of the modern state. For the other, civil religion is based on a concept of a natural and originary equality of all humans—as Rousseau famously said, “all men are born equal”—thus making possible the imagination of a primordial and pre-given political community. But as Ambedkar never failed to remind us, all men, rather humans, are not born equal. There is no prior political community that gets corrupted in later times and can therefore be recovered from an earlier pristine and primitive state. Political community has to be built, painstakingly, against all odds and for the first time ever, from an ancient condition of hierarchy and exploitation. Hence, the need for a new and unprecedented religion, because nothing short of or less than religion will do.

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The Unemployment Crisis: Reasons and Solutions

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The princely states comprised almost half of the Indian territories in the subcontinent at the time of the proclamation of 1858 by the British colonial powers and their princes enjoyed full sovereignty in the internal matters subject only to the paramountcy of the British Crown. These territories together were referred to as “Indian India” in contrast to the rest of India, which by now had come to be known as “British India”—the territories directly administered by the British Crown.

The princely state of Jammu and Kashmir was one such state of the “Indian India” ruled by the Dogra lineage of kings under British paramountcy. Maharaja Hari Singh of this lineage was the ruler of “Jammu and Kashmir” during the turning point of the state’s history in 1947.

The Cabinet Mission of 1946 through their memorandum articulated clearly the policy of the new government towards the native princes on the withdrawal of British Rule from India. It affirmed that the rights surrendered by the Indian states to the British Crown would revert to the rulers of the states when the new dominions of India and Pakistan came into existence following the withdrawal of the British from India. The Cabinet Mission, however, advised the native states to evolve their relationship with the successor governments as the British would no longer be in a position to extend to them any protection. Legally speaking, the princely states of Indian India became fully independent with the lapse of British paramountcy on the coming into force of the Indian Independence Act, 1947 passed by the British Parliament, creating two dominions out of British India, namely, India and Pakistan.

The native Indian states numbering 565 at that time, of which Jammu and Kashmir was one, were now left with three choices: (i) to remain completely independent; (ii) to accede to India; or (iii) to accede to Pakistan. The power to make the choice was vested in the ruler of the state concerned. Jammu and Kashmir state which bordered both India and Pakistan and was ruled by Hari Singh, the then Dogra king, vacillated in making a prompt choice and did not sign the instrument of accession in favour of either India or Pakistan on the date of transfer of power by the British in August 1947. Perhaps, he harboured an ambition of keeping an independent existence, free from both India and Pakistan which eventually proved to be a costly political blunder for him and his people.

Accession to India

Peace in Kashmir was not to last long after the withdrawal of the British. Barely two months after independence, on 20 October 1947, a large number of armed tribesmen invaded Kashmir from the side of the border with Pakistan causing grave devastation and carrying out killings, rapes, loot and plunder in the Valley of Kashmir. Hari Singh was unable to meet the situation with his own forces. So, he had to give up his ambition of remaining independent, and decided to accede to India by an Instrument of Accession on October 26, 1947. The Governor General of India signed his acceptance on the instrument the very next day. The execution of the Instrument of Accession by the maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir and its due acceptance by the Governor General of India made the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India final, complete and legally unassailable. For, the power to accede to any successor dominion of British India was vested in the ruler of the native state concerned and none else.

Under the Instrument of Accession signed by the ruler of Jammu and Kashmir, the state had acceded to India in respect of only three subjects—defence, foreign affairs and communications. A schedule listed precisely 16 topics under these heads plus four others (elections to Union legislature and the like). The other subjects were retained by the ruler of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, to be governed in accordance with the Jammu and Kashmir Constitution Act 1939. Kashmir was then governed internally by its own Constitution of 1939.

Clause 5 said that the Instrument could not be altered without the State's consent. Clause 7 read: "Nothing in this Instrument shall be deemed to commit me in any way to acceptance of any future Constitution of India or fetter my discretion to enter into arrangements with the Government of India under any such future Constitution."

The Drafting of Article 370

The Maharaja made an Order on October 30, 1947 appointing Sheikh Abdullah the Head of the Emergency Administration, replacing it, on March 5, 1948, with an Interim Government with the Sheikh as Prime Minister. It was enjoined to convene a National Assembly based on adult franchise "to frame a Constitution" for the State.

Negotiations were held on May 15 and 16, 1949 at Vallabhbhai Patel's residence in New Delhi on Kashmir's future set-up. Nehru and Abdullah were present. Foremost among the topics were “the framing of a Constitution for the State” and “the subjects in respect of which the State should accede to the Union of India.” On the first, Nehru recorded in a letter to the Sheikh (on May 18) that both Patel and he agreed that it was a matter for the State's Constituent Assembly. “In regard to (ii) the Jammu and Kashmir State now stands acceded to the Indian Union in respect of three subjects; namely, foreign affairs, defence and communications. It will be for the Constituent Assembly of the State when convened, to determine in respect of which other subjects the State may accede”.

During this period of time, the Constituent Assembly of India was engaged in the gigantic task of drafting the constitution, which was finally adopted and enacted on 26 November 1949 and put to effect on 26 January 1950 when India became a democratic republic in accordance with the Constitution of India. Unlike the 560 and odd states which took part in the deliberations and decided to fully integrate as states of the Union of India treaties, Jammu and Kashmir was not represented in the Constituent Assembly engaged in the drafting of the Constitution of India.

It was only in June 1949 that the Maharaja of Kashmir, advised by his council of ministers, nominated four representatives—Sheikh Abdullah, Mirza Mammad Afzal Beg, Maulana Mohammed Saeed Masoodi and Moti Ram Bagda—to the Constituent Assembly who also made it clear that the relationship between India and the state of Jammu and Kashmir was to be guided by the Instrument of Accesssion only.

As already stated, the Instrument of Accession with India conferred powers on the Union of India in matters of only external affairs, defence and communications. Internal administration was retained by the state as is evident from the Clause 8 of the instrument. The instrument was a standard text as engaged into by other native states as well. But while other native states voluntarily lost their independence in internal administration by signing supplementary treaties with India and by accepting in totality the Constitution of India, it was not so with Jammu and Kashmir. This special legal status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir was upheld by the Supreme Court in *Premnath Kaul vs State of Jammu and Kashmir* (A 1959 SC 749) and was again reaffirmed by the Supreme Court in *Rehman Shagoo vs State of Jammu and Kashmir* (A 1960 SC 1).

It therefore became necessary to accommodate Kashmir in the Constitution of India by providing a special provision. With the joining of representatives of J&K in the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly, negotiations began on this special provision, then called Article 306A, that later became Article 370. Article 370 was necessitated to accommodate the then prevailing legal status of the Jammu and Kashmir state in the body of the Constitution of India. It was only after all differences in the text of the resolution were resolved between Patel and Abdullah on October 16, that it was moved in the Constituent Assembly the next day (unilaterally altered by Ayyangar; in its original form, the draft would have made the Sheikh's ouster in 1953 impossible).

Ayyangar's exposition of Article 370 in the Constituent Assembly on October 17, 1949 is authoritative. "We have also agreed that the will of the people through the instrument of the Constituent Assembly will determine the Constitution of the State as well as the sphere of Union jurisdiction over the State... You will remember that several of these clauses provide for the concurrence of the Government of Jammu and Kashmir. Now, these relate particularly to matters which are not mentioned in the Instrument of Accession, and it is one of our commitments to the people and Government of Kashmir that no such additions should be made except with the consent of the Constituent Assembly which may be called in the State for the purpose of framing its Constitution."

It is now part of undisputed history that the Constituent Assembly of Jammu and Kashmir was duly convened. While providing a constitution for cont'd... on page no. 56
What Article 35A Implies

The Sangh Parivar’s chauvinism and ignorance feed on each other. Nowhere is this more evident than on the distinct identity of the State of Jammu and Kashmir. The State’s autonomy was guaranteed by Article 370 of the Constitution. Its people’s ancient rights are guaranteed by Article 35A.

We discuss Article 35A in this article. It reads thus: “35A. Saving of laws with respect to permanent residents and their rights:– Notwithstanding anything contained in this Constitution, no existing law in force in the State of Jammu and Kashmir, and no law hereafter enacted by the Legislature of the State, – (a) defining the classes of persons who are, or shall be, permanent residents of the State of Jammu and Kashmir; or (b) conferring on such permanent residents any special rights and privileges or imposing upon other persons any restrictions as respects:– (i) employment under the State Government; (ii) acquisition of immovable property in the State; (iii) settlement in the State; or (iv) right to scholarships and such other forms of aid as the State Government may provide, shall be void on the ground that it is inconsistent with or takes away or abridges any rights conferred on the other citizens of India by any provision of this Part.”

Special provisions

Compare this with Article 371A on Nagaland, which reads thus: “371-A. Special provision with respect to the State of Nagaland:– (1) Notwithstanding anything in this Constitution, (a) No Act of Parliament in respect of – (i) religious or social practices of the Nagas, (ii) Naga customary law and procedure, (iii) administration of civil and criminal justice involving decisions according to Naga customary law, (iv) ownership and transfer of land and its resources, shall apply to the State of Nagaland unless the Legislative Assembly of Nagaland by a resolution so decides.”

Article 35A was inserted by the President by an order under Article 370 on May 14, 1954, but on the explicit recommendation of Kashmir’s Constituent Assembly on February 15, 1954, while adopting the report of its drafting committee. The President cannot delete it because the Constituent Assembly is gone. Without its concurrence, Article 35A can neither be amended nor deleted. The other “special provisions” were enacted by Parliament as amendments to the Constitution. Will Parliament dare to repeal them?

Article 35A cannot be amended or deleted by Parliament. For, Clause (2) to Article 368 on constitutional amendments says that “no such amendment shall have effect in relation to the State of Jammu and Kashmir unless by order of the President under clause (1) of Article 370”.

For this, the approval of the State’s Constituent Assembly is necessary. Any concurrence of the State government is always subject to the Assembly’s final approval. When the State is under Governor’s Rule or President’s Rule, neither can accord that concurrence as if he was the State government. The Centre cannot acquire “concurrence” from its own handpicked appointee removable at will. Yet, on February 28, 2019, the Union Cabinet decided to amend the Jammu and Kashmir Reservation Act to extend benefits of reservation to those near the international border in Jammu. It will extend the Constitution (77th Amendment) Act, 1995, and the Constitution (103rd Amendment) Act, 2019, to Kashmir by an order by the President under clause (1) of Article 370.

That will be a nullity for such an order could have been passed only on the recommendation of the State government and then also subject to its ratification by the State’s Constituent Assembly which vanished in 1956. There is no elected government now, and an Explanatory note to clause 1 of Article 370 explicitly defines the State government to mean a Council of Ministers in the State. There is no such Council of Ministers now.

There is a clear ruling of the highly respected and truly independent Supreme Court of Sri Lanka on this. It was delivered on November 1, 2012, and was extensively reported by Puneeth Nagaraj in The Hindu on December
7, 2012. It concerned the Divineguma Bill. He reported:
“The Bill was challenged before the Supreme Court through several petitions. As per Article 154G (3) of the Constitution, the Supreme Court sent it back to the government saying it had to be ratified by the Provincial Councils. There has never been a provincial council in Northern Sri Lanka (not counting the short-lived North-Eastern provincial council), and the province is run by Colombo through the Governor. It was the Governor who ratified the Divineguma Bill on behalf of the Northern Province. This was immediately challenged by the Tamil National Alliance before the Supreme Court through two petitions. On November 1, the Supreme Court held that the Governor cannot ratify the Bill in place of the Provincial Council.”

But the law will not suffice, for Article 35A is embedded in Kashmir’s history and psyche. Talk of repeal poses an existential threat. The Maharaja’s order of June 27, 1932, imposed a ban on “foreign nationals” in respect of citizenship and purchase of immovable property. Even the British dared not to flout it. Hence the houseboats on which they lived for years. Earlier, a notification of April 20, 1927, defined “State Subjects”. In 1950, Section 6 of the State’s Constitution defined “permanent residents”. Even in the 19th century such protection was granted. The Dogras of Jammu demanded it as much as the Kashmiri Pandits of the Valley. Both feared that Punjabis would grab lands and jobs.

Permanent occupants

Pandit Prem Nath Bazaz dealt with this topic in his books, Inside Kashmir (The Kashmir Publishing Co., Srinagar, 1941) and in The History of Struggle for Freedom in Kashmir (Pamposh Publications, 1954). In Inside Kashmir he recorded: “The Maharaja owned the lands. Chekdars or tenants-at-will could occupy them so long as they paid the revenue but could neither sell nor mortgage his land. At the beginning of the 20th Century ‘a new problem confronted the people’—the outsider occupying posts in the administration. In 1912 a definition of the ‘State Subject’ was formulated for the first time. ‘The cry of “down with the outsider” was raised mostly by the Hindus.’” Muslims were excluded from State jobs by the Dogra ruler and were too poor to own lands.

In 1922 a State Council of Ministers was formed. Hari Singh, the heir apparent to the throne and Senior Member of the Council, issued a circular which said:

The Maharaja Sahib Bahadur has been pleased to direct that in future no non-State subject shall be appointed to any position without the express orders of His Highness-in-Council in each case. Each such proposal shall be accompanied by a full statement of reasons in writing as to why it is considered necessary to appoint a non-State subject, it being definitely stated whether there is no State subject qualified and available for the appointment proposed. In like manner no scholarships or training expenses of any kind should be granted to non-State subjects. His Highness has also directed that any infringement of this order will be very seriously dealt with.

His Highness the Maharaja Sahib has been pleased to inform you that in future all grants of land for agricultural and house-building purpose and grant of houses and other State property shall be made to State subjects only...

A State Subject Definition Committee was set up. It submitted its report in 1925, the year Hari Singh became Maharaja. He readily accepted its recommendations. A definition of “Hereditary State Subject” was formulated and it became law from January 31, 1927, in the form of a notification dated April 20, 1927.

Bazaz pursued the topic in his History showing how Muslims were outside the entire debate. “The poverty of the Muslim masses was appalling. Dressed in rags which could hardly hide his body and barefooted, a Muslim peasant presented the appearance rather of a starving beggar than of one who filled the coffers of the State. He worked laboriously in the fields during the six months of the summer to pay the State its revenues and taxes, the officials their rasum and the money-lender his interest. Most of them were landless labourers working as serfs of the absentee landlord.... In the countryside the Muslim was synonymous with the hewer of wood and drawer of water. All sort of dirty and menial work was to be done by him. A Hindu was respectable in the eyes of the society, and the Muslim, because he was a Muslim, was looked down upon as belonging to an inferior class.” It was the Kashmiri Pandits who had launched the movement “Kashmir for Kashmiris”.

Bazaz wrote that the 1927 “definition all at once stopped the recruitment of the Punjabis in the services. But it did not equally benefit all the communities residing in the State. With Hari Singh’s pro-Dogra policy in operation, the people of Jammu, particularly Rajputs, got the most of the big jobs while the Pandits were recruited...
as clerks in offices vacated by the Punjabis. Needless to say that the Muslims were as yet out of the picture.”

Thus, Article 35A is purely “clarificatory”. It is based on the Maharaja’s notification of April 20, 1927, which was issued at the instance of Kashmiri Pandits, who feared an influx from Punjab.

**Delhi Agreement**

The matter came up in 1952 when the Delhi Agreement was under negotiation. On July 20, 1952, Jawaharlal Nehru met a Kashmiri delegation comprising Sheikh Abdullah, Mirza Afzal Beg, Bakshi Ghulam Mohammed, Girdhari Lal Dogra and D.P. Dhar. Nehru’s record of the talks reads:

> The Kashmir delegation were anxious that the rights and privileges given to ‘State subjects’ (Jammu and Kashmir notification dated 20th April 1927) should be preserved, subject to such variations as the Constituent Assembly of the State might decide upon. These rights and privileges relate more specially to the acquisition and holding of immovable property, appointment to services, etc.

> It was pointed out that under Article 19(5) of the Constitution this was clearly permissible both in regard to existing law or any subsequent legislation on the subject... It was agreed therefore that: ‘The State Legislature shall have power to define and regulate the rights and privileges of the permanent residents of the State, more especially in regard to the acquisition of immovable property, appointments to service and like matters. Till then, the existing State law would apply.’

Article 35A is based on a solemn pact between the Union and the State in 1952. It cannot be altered unilaterally.

**Nehru’s statement**

Speaking in the Rajya Sabha on August 7, 1952 on the Delhi Accord, Nehru said:

> Honourable Members know that Kashmir is supposed to be one of the beauty spots of the world. And apart from its being a beauty spot, there are many other things which attract people there. And from olden times the old Maharajas, who succumbed to many things that came from the then British Government, did not succumb to one thing. They were afraid that the climate of Kashmir and its other attractive features being what they are, that Kashmir might become a kind of colony of the British if they came and settled down there in large numbers. They were afraid of that. So they stuck to one thing—that no foreigner could acquire property in Kashmir. And they did keep them out. They made rules to the effect that only State subjects could acquire property except by special permission, and so on. . . .

> These rules in regard to property still subsist. Those are the rules in regard to property in Kashmir and everybody in Kashmir, to whatever group or community or religion he belongs, wants to uphold these rules, naturally, because they are for the benefit of the residents of Kashmir, whether Hindus or Muslims. They are afraid that people from India or elsewhere, rich people and others, might come and buy up property there, and thereby gradually all kinds of vested interests would grow up in property in Kashmir on behalf of people from outside....

> We thought it was a perfectly justifiable feeling on their part, and that acquisition of property in Kashmir State should be protected on behalf of the people there....

> The House will perhaps remember that we have given protection in this regard in various parts of the territories of India. For instance, in the north-east of Assam tribal areas we have given them protection. Nobody from outside can go and take possession of property there, because if we once give them permission, there is no doubt that these tribal people will be exploited by outsiders who will go there and buy up their lands and use them for making money while the people of those areas will go to the wall. So we agreed that to avoid exploitation of the (J&K) State territory it was desirable that these rights and privileges should continue. As a matter of fact, under Article 19(5) of our Constitution this was clearly permissible—and that is our view even now—both in regard to existing law or any subsequent legislation.

It is highly significant that even New Delhi’s stooges, who staged the coup of August 8, 1953, at Nehru’s instance, did not dare to renege on the understandings of 1952 in 1956. The Drafting Committee, now radically changed, presented its report to Kashmir’s Constituent Assembly on February 11, 1954. The Report recommended certain amendments to the Constitution of India in its application to Kashmir. Article 35A was one...
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Constitution Torn to Shreds

Siddharth Varadarajan

One of the abiding myths of the right-wing in Indian politics has been that Jammu and Kashmir enjoys some sort of unwarranted constitutional status and that the problems there stem from the special treatment Kashmiris receive thanks to Article 370 of the constitution.

From now on, at least, that complaint will no longer apply—with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Bharatiya Janata Party calling their own bluff by doing away with this troublesome article.

Not only has Union home minister Amit Shah stripped Article 370 of its essence, he has gone one step further and abolished the entire state as well, replacing it with two ‘Bantustans’—grandly called ‘union territories’—in which key decisions on a range of issues like law and order and land will be taken not by the people and their elected representatives, but by bureaucrats from New Delhi.

So after being pampered and appeased, the poor Kashmiris—whose ‘special status’ brought them benefits such as ‘human shields’, ‘half-widows’, pellet blindings, fake encounters like Pathribal and Machhil, torture and disappearances—need to brace themselves for a bout of tough love.

That Shah’s bombshells were accompanied by the kind of measures one normally associates with a police state—the stealthy introduction of major constitutional changes, the lack of adequate time for debate, the late night arrest of mainstream political leaders in Kashmir, the prohibition of public gatherings, the shutdown of internet services and even landlines—adds the sort of odour one normally associates with coups. The message is clear: there will be no room in Kashmir for free politics of the kind every integral part of India takes for granted.

All those celebrating the adventurist two-step of abolishing Article 370 and ending the statehood of Jammu and Kashmir need to explain how this will change the security scenario when all it means is that the same folks who have been in charge till now, with the power to do whatever they wanted, are going to remain in charge, with the power to do whatever they want.

Article 370: Correcting the record

In response to opposition objections, Amit Shah told the Rajya Sabha it was a myth that Article 370 was what tied Jammu and Kashmir to India. “It is the Instrument of Accession which made Kashmir a part of India and that was signed in 1947,” he said, two years before Article 370 was adopted.

What Shah did not say was that Article 370 did not drop from mid-air. It was the direct product of a solemn bargain the Union of India struck with Maharaja Hari Singh of Jammu and Kashmir in the very same Instrument of Accession he praised. India became independent from the British on August 15, 1947 but the princely state of
J&K, which wanted to be independent, did not accede to India till after it was attacked by Pakistani ‘tribesmen’. Under the terms of the October 1947 Instrument, the Maharaja said—and India agreed—that Kashmir would primarily be acceding in respect of defence, foreign affairs and communications. All other areas were to be subject to the state’s subsequent concurrence.

Shah needs to be reminded of what Article 7 of the Instrument of Accession actually says:

Nothing in this instrument shall be deemed to commit me in any way to acceptance of any future Constitution of India or to fetter my discretion to enter into arrangements with the Government of India under any such future Constitution.

Article 370 was a carefully drafted and negotiated provision that was intended to cement Jammu and Kashmir’s place in the Union on the basis of the conditions under which it acceded to India. For this purpose, Sheikh Abdullah and three others joined the constituent assembly as members and their exchanges with Gopalswami Ayyangar and Vallabhbhai Patel on the drafting committee were sometimes acrimonious. While lots of other states have special provisions in the constitution—there is 371A for Nagaland, for example, which allows legal mechanisms under Naga customary law—none of these flowed from a legal compact like an Instrument of Accession.

From ‘temporary’ to permanent

Article 370 came into being on January 26, 1950 and allowed for the president of India to extend certain sections of the Indian Constitution to J&K with the concurrence of the state government. Article 370 also said these would have to be placed before the state’s constituent assembly “for such decision as it may take thereon,” implying that the state’s constituent assembly was actually the final authority as far as presidential orders were concerned.

Since Article 370 is listed as a “temporary provision”, some people imagine it is not a basic structure of the constitution and can thus be done away with. The fact is that yes, it could have been done away with—but only by the J&K constituent assembly, which chose not to do so, thus rendering it permanent.

Of course, Article 370 does have a provision for amendment, but this is what it says:

Art. 370 (3)—Notwithstanding anything in the foregoing provisions of this article, the President may, by public notification, declare that this article shall cease to be operative or shall be operative only with such exceptions and modifications and from such date as he may specify:

Provided that the recommendation of the Constituent Assembly of the State... shall be necessary before the President issues such a notification.

Amit Shah has tried to get around this hurdle with a two-step process. First, he asserts the power of the president to issue an order that can amend the manner in which another article of the constitution—Article 367—applies to J&K, and has used this to redefine the term ‘constituent assembly of Jammu and Kashmir’ in Article 370 to mean the state’s legislative assembly. Having resorted to this unconstitutional sleight—something preceding governments, including Congress ones, have also done though not with such lethal intent—Shah then claimed that since the J&K assembly is currently dissolved and the state is under Central rule, parliament can act as a substitute for the legislative assembly and the defunct J&K constituent assembly as well.

This is a truly breathtaking assertion.

The J&K constituent assembly adopted the J&K constitution in 1956 and formally dissolved itself with effect from January 26, 1957. As the constitutional expert A.G. Noorani notes, the language the assembly chose was deliberate. On January 24, 1950, the constituent assembly of India meeting for the last time had merely adjourned itself sine-die, i.e. with no set date for its next meeting. By contrast, the J&K constituent assembly resolution in its last sitting was:

Today this historic session ends and with this the Constituent Assembly is dissolved according to the resolution passed on 17th November, 1956.

The idea behind saying so was to ensure that with the dissolution of the J&K constituent assembly, the ‘temporary’ nature of Article 370 would be rendered permanent—since the only body capable of effacing or amending it would no longer exist.

This interpretation was upheld by a constitution bench of the Supreme Court in 1959 in Prem Nath Kaul vs State of J&K. However, first Jawaharlal Nehru and then subsequent governments whittled away at the autonomy of the state—including the abhorrent practice of issuing presidential orders that extended additional parts of the
constitution to the state—with the backing, regrettably, of two subsequent rulings by the Supreme Court.

While those judgments weakened Article 370, they did not question its permanence. Indeed, in a more recent judgment, Justice Rohinton Nariman has reiterated the impossibility of its abrogation, writing in 2016:

Despite the fact that it is . . . stated to be temporary in nature, sub-clause (3) of Article 370 makes it clear that this Article shall cease to be operative only from such date as the President may by public notification declare. And this cannot be done under the proviso to Article 370 (3) unless there is a recommendation of the Constituent Assembly of the State so to do.

For these reasons, and especially for the fiction of trying to pass off the concurrence of parliament as a substitute for the concurrence of the state assembly (even if we accept the ‘redefinition’ of the state’s defunct constituent assembly as its extant legislature) when the latter stands conveniently dissolved, the Shah–Modi formula of gutting Article 370 by simply pushing through a presidential order will not pass the test of constitutionality.

The disappearance of a state

Along with its ‘special status’, Amit Shah has also ‘disappeared’ the state. By what legal right can the government, or parliament, unilaterally convert the state of Jammu and Kashmir into a Centrally-administered union territory, and then also order its bifurcation?

Under Article 3 of the constitution, this is surely not permissible.

Article 3 says that before parliament can consider a Bill that diminishes the area of a state or changes its name, the Bill must be “referred by the president to the legislature of that state for expressing its views thereon”. This is an essential safeguard of India’s federal system and has clearly not been followed in this case. In parliament, Shah invoked the legal fiction that since the J&K assembly was dissolved and the state is under Central rule, it is parliament which gets to exercise the prerogatives of the assembly. But think about just how dangerous this logic is. The next time a state like, say Tamil Nadu or West Bengal is under president’s rule, can parliament simply go ahead and vote to abolish that state?

I find it astonishing that regional parties like the YSR Congress and Telugu Desam Party of Andhra Pradesh, the Biju Janata Dal of Odisha and the Aam Aadmi Party have declared their support for this kind of unconstitutional, anti-federal package.

Make no mistake about this—what Amit Shah and Narendra Modi have unveiled on Monday is not just an assault on the unique place that Jammu and Kashmir enjoys in India but on the very federal structure of the Indian constitution. If they spent their first term in office undermining a whole host of institutions, Modi 2.0 will target the one institution that was still somewhat intact—federalism.

Kashmir is a whipping boy to be used to accelerate the Hinduisation of the Indian polity and bring in votes from the rest of the country even if the political and security situation in the state deteriorates. The next goal of the party, and the RSS, is a centralised rashtra in which all states of the Union know their place. Sangh is the word for Union and the Sangh is now clearly supreme.

(Siddharth Varadarajan is journalist, political analyst and academic. He is a Founding Editor of The Wire. He was earlier the Editor of The Hindu.)
The Terrible Truth of Climate Change

Joëlle Gergis

In June, I delivered a keynote presentation on Australia’s vulnerability to climate change and our policy challenges at the annual meeting of the Australian Meteorological and Oceanographic Society, the main conference for those working in the climate science community. I saw it as an opportunity to summarise the post-election political and scientific reality we now face.

As one of the dozen or so Australian lead authors on the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s (IPCC) sixth assessment report, currently underway, I have a deep appreciation of the speed and severity of climate change unfolding across the planet. Last year I was also appointed as one of the scientific advisers to the Climate Council, Australia’s leading independent body providing expert advice to the public on climate science and policy. In short, I am in the confronting position of being one of the few Australians who sees the terrifying reality of the climate crisis.

Preparing for this talk I experienced something gut-wrenching. It was the realisation that there is now nowhere to hide from the terrible truth.

The last time this happened to me, I was visiting my father in hospital following emergency surgery for a massive brain haemorrhage. As he lay unconscious in intensive care, I examined his CT scan with one of the attending surgeons who gently explained that the dark patch covering nearly a quarter of the image of his brain was a pool of blood. Although they had done their best to drain the area and stem the bleeding, the catastrophic nature of the damage was undeniable. The brutality of the evidence was clear—the full weight of it sent my stomach into freefall.

The results coming out of the climate science community at the moment are, even for experts, similarly alarming.

One common metric used to investigate the effects of global warming is known as “equilibrium climate sensitivity”, defined as the full amount of global surface warming that will eventually occur in response to a doubling of atmospheric CO2 concentrations compared to pre-industrial times. It’s sometimes referred to as the holy grail of climate science because it helps quantify the specific risks posed to human society as the planet continues to warm.

We know that CO2 concentrations have risen from pre-industrial levels of 280 parts per million (ppm) to approximately 410 ppm today, the highest recorded in at least three million years. Without major mitigation efforts, we are likely to reach 560 ppm by around 2060.

When the IPCC’s fifth assessment report was published in 2013, it estimated that such a doubling of CO2 was likely to produce warming within the range of 1.5 to 4.5°C as the Earth reaches a new equilibrium. However, preliminary estimates calculated from the latest global climate models (being used in the current IPCC assessment, due out in 2021) are far higher than with the previous generation of models. Early reports are predicting that a doubling of CO2 may in fact produce between 2.8 and 5.8°C of warming. Incredibly, at least eight of the latest models produced by leading research centres in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and France are showing climate sensitivity of 5°C or warmer.

When these results were first released at a climate modelling workshop in March this year, a flurry of panicked emails from my IPCC colleagues flooded my inbox. What if the models are right? Has the Earth already crossed some kind of tipping point? Are we experiencing abrupt climate change right now?

The model runs aren’t all available yet, but when many of the most advanced models in the world are independently reproducing the same disturbing results, it’s hard not to worry.

When the UN’s Paris Agreement was adopted in December 2015, it defined a specific goal: to keep global warming to well below 2°C and as close as possible to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels (defined as the climate conditions experienced during the 1850–1900 period). While admirable in intent, the agreement did not impose legally binding limits on signatory nations and contained no enforcement mechanisms. Instead, each country committed to publicly disclosed Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to reduce emissions. In essence, it is up to each nation to act in the public interest.

Even achieving the most ambitious goal of 1.5°C will see the further destruction of between 70 and 90 per
cent of reef-building corals compared to today, according to the IPCC’s “Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C”, released last October. With 2°C of warming, a staggering 99 per cent of tropical coral reefs disappear. An entire component of the Earth’s biosphere—our planetary life support system—would be eliminated. The knock-on effects on the 25 per cent of all marine life that depends on coral reefs would be profound and immeasurable.

So how is the Paris Agreement actually panning out? In 2017, we reached 1°C of warming above global pre-industrial conditions. According to the UN Environment Programme’s “Emissions Gap Report”, released in November 2018, current unconditional NDCs will see global average temperature rise by 2.9 to 3.4°C above pre-industrial levels by the end of this century.

To restrict warming to 2°C above pre-industrial levels, the world needs to triple its current emission reduction pledges. If that’s not bad enough, to restrict global warming to 1.5°C, global ambition needs to increase fivefold.

Meanwhile, the Australian federal government has a target of reducing emissions by 26 to 28 per cent below 2005 levels by 2030, which experts believe is more aligned with global warming of 3 to 4°C. Despite Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s claim that we will meet our Paris Agreement commitments “in a canter”, the UNEP report clearly identifies Australia as one of the G20 nations that will fall short of achieving its already inadequate NDCs by 2030.

Even with the 1°C of warming we’ve already experienced, 50 percent of the Great Barrier Reef is dead. We are witnessing catastrophic ecosystem collapse of the largest living organism on the planet. As I share this horrifying information with audiences around the country, I often pause to allow people to try and really take that information in.

Increasingly after my speaking events, I catch myself unexpectedly weeping in my hotel room or on flights home. Every now and then, the reality of what the science is saying manages to thaw the emotionally frozen part of myself I need to maintain to do my job. In those moments, what surfaces is pure grief. It’s the only feeling that comes close to the pain I felt processing the severity of my dad’s brain injury. Being willing to acknowledge the arrival of the point of no return is an act of bravery.

But these days my grief is rapidly being superseded by rage. Volcanically explosive rage. Because in the very same IPCC report that outlines the details of the impending apocalypse, the climate science community clearly stated that limiting warming to 1.5°C is geophysically possible.

Past emissions alone are unlikely to raise global average temperatures to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. The IPCC report states that any further warming beyond the 1°C already recorded would likely be less than 0.5°C over the next 20 to 30 years, if all anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions were reduced to zero immediately. That is, if we act urgently, it is technically feasible to turn things around. The only thing missing is strong global policy.

Although the very foundation of human civilisation is at stake, the world is on track to seriously overshoot our UN targets. Worse still, global carbon emissions are still rising. In response, scientists are prioritising research on how the planet has responded during other warm periods in the Earth’s history.

The most comprehensive summary of conditions experienced during past warm periods in the Earth’s recent history was published in June 2018 in one of our leading journals, Nature Geoscience, by 59 leading experts from 17 countries. The report concluded that warming of between 1.5 and 2°C in the past was enough to see significant shifts in climate zones, and land and aquatic ecosystems “spatially reorganise”.

These changes triggered substantial long-term melting of ice in Greenland and Antarctica, unleashing 6 to 13 metres of global sea-level rise lasting thousands of years.

Examining the Earth’s climatic past tells us that even between 1.5 and 2°C of warming sees the world reconfigure in ways that people don’t yet appreciate. All bets are off between 3 and 4°C, where we are currently headed. Parts of Australia will become uninhabitable, as other areas of our country become increasingly ravaged by extreme weather events.

This year the Australian Meteorological and Oceanographic Society’s annual conference was held in Darwin, where the infamous Cyclone Tracy struck on Christmas Day in 1974, virtually demolishing the entire city. More than 70 per cent of the city’s buildings, including 80 per cent of its houses, were destroyed. Seventy-one people were killed and most of the 48,000 residents made homeless. Conditions were so dire that around 36,000 people were evacuated, many by military aircraft. It was a disaster of monumental proportions.

cont'd... on page no. 54
Global Commodity Chains and the New Imperialism

Intan Suwandi, R. Jamil Jonna

Twenty-first-century capitalist production can no longer be understood as a mere aggregation of national economies, to be analysed simply in terms of the gross national products (GDPs) of the separate economies and the trade and capital exchanges occurring between them. Rather, it is increasingly organised in global commodity chains (also known as global supply chains or global value chains), governed by multinational corporations straddling the planet, in which production is fragmented into numerous links, each representing the transfer of economic value. With more than 80 percent of world trade controlled by multinationals, the annual sales of which now equal around half of global GDP, these commodity chains can be seen as fastened at the center of the world economy, connecting production, located primarily in the global South, to final consumption and the financial coffers of monopolistic multinational firms, located primarily in the global North.

The commodity chain of General Motors includes twenty thousand businesses worldwide, mostly in the form of parts suppliers. No US automobile manufacturer imports less than around 20 percent of its parts from abroad for any of its vehicles, with imported parts sometimes amounting to around 50 percent or more of the assembled vehicle. Likewise, Boeing purchases from abroad about a third of the parts it uses for its aircraft. Other US companies, such as Nike and Apple, offshore their production to subcontractors, mainly in the periphery, with production carried out according to their exact, digital specifications—a phenomenon known as arm’s length contracting, or what is sometimes referred to as non-equity modes of production. This offshoring of production by today’s multinational corporations in the center of the world economy has led to a vast shift in the predominant location of industrial employment, from the global North up through the 1970s to the global South this century.

Studies have found that the accelerating pace of offshoring is closely related to foreign direct investment (FDI) in low-wage areas in the periphery, associated with intrafirm trade. In 2013, the global FDI inflows to “developing economies” reached a record high of 52 percent of total FDI, exceeding flows to developed economies for the first time ever, by $142 billion. But of equal importance today is arm’s length contracting. The World Bank indicates that 57 percent of all US trade is arm’s length trade, while a rapidly growing part of this is taking the form of monopolistic arm’s length contracting, involving specified production carried out by subcontracting firms (such as the Taiwanese Foxconn operating in China) producing commodities (such as iPhones) for buyer-driven multinational corporations (such as Apple). In general, the lower the per-capita income of a US trading partner, the higher the share of US arm’s length trade, indicating that this is all about low wages. Even multinationals with high levels of FDI are heavily involved in arm’s length trade, moving in this way between direct and indirect exploitation. Arm’s length contracts generated about $2 trillion in sales in 2010, much of it in developing countries. In 2010–14, the world economy grew at a 4.4 percent rate while arm’s length trading grew at a 6.6 percent rate, far exceeding the former.

Although these phenomena are not entirely new, the scale and sophistication of commodity chains today represent qualitative changes that are transforming the character of the entire global political economy. Twenty-first-century imperialism therefore cannot be studied, as in earlier periods, mainly on the level of the nation-state, without a systematic investigation of the increasing global reach of multinational corporations or the role of the global labour arbitrage, sometimes referred to in business circles as low-cost country sourcing. At issue is the way in which today’s global monopolies in the center of the world economy have captured value generated by labour in the periphery within a process of unequal exchange, thus getting more labour in exchange for less. The result has been to change the global structure of industrial production while maintaining and often intensifying the global structure of exploitation and value transfer.

The complexity of the world employment situation generated by global commodity or supply chains is indicated in Table 1, which includes the countries with the largest shares of employment in global commodity chains in 2008 and/or 2013.
As Table 1 shows, China and India provide by far the largest share of the total employment engaged in global commodity chains, while, for both countries, the United States is the primary export destination. This creates a situation where production and consumption in the world economy are increasingly severed from each other. Moreover, value added, associated with such commodity chains, as we shall see, is disproportionately attributed to economic activities in the wealthier countries at the center of the system, although the bulk of the labour occurs in the poorer nations of the periphery or the global South.

In this article, we seek to understand how the new imperialism of the global labour arbitrage works and how value, derived from low-wage labour in the periphery, is being captured globally. Utilising a publicly available database of world economic activity, we construct a series on unit labour costs incorporating both labour productivity and wage levels.

Examination of unit labour costs of key countries in both the center and the periphery of the world economy demonstrates that, in twenty-first-century imperialism, multinational corporations are able to carry out a process of unequal exchange in which they get, in effect, more labour for less, while the excess surplus obtained is often misleadingly attributed to innovative, financial, and value-extractive economic activities taking place at the center of the system. Indeed, much of the immense value capture associated with the global labour arbitrage circumvents production in the center economies, at the expense of workers there who have seen their jobs offshored. This has contributed to the amassing of vast pyramids of wealth disconnected from economic growth in the center economies themselves. Much of this draining of value from the periphery takes the form of unrecorded illicit flows. According to one recent pioneering study of global financial flows by the Centre for Applied Economics of the Norwegian School of Economics and the United States-based Global Financial Integrity, net resource transfers from developing and emerging economies to rich countries were estimated at $2 trillion in 2012 alone.

Huge quantities of this loot captured from peripheral economies in the global South ends up being parked in the “treasure islands” of the Caribbean where trillions of dollars of money capital are now deposited, outside of the tax and accounting apparatuses of even the most powerful nation-states.

What is clear is that the globalisation of production is built around a vast chasm in unit labour costs between center and periphery economies, reflecting much higher

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<td>Share of all GSC jobs</td>
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rates of exploitation in the periphery. This reflects the fact that the difference in wages is greater than the difference in productivity between the global North and the global South. Our data shows that the gap in unit labour costs in manufacturing between key core (United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Japan) and key periphery emerging states (China, India, Indonesia, and Mexico) has been on the order of 40–60 percent during most of the last three decades. This enormous gulf between global North and global South arises from a system that allows for the free international mobility of capital, while tightly restricting the international mobility of labour. The result is to hold wages down in the periphery and to make possible the enormous siphoning off of economic surplus from the countries of the South.

**Global Commodity Chains and Imperialist Value Capture**

The term supply chain is often used to refer to “a sequence of production operations,” which begins at conception and development of the product or system, goes through the production process including acquisition of inputs (raw materials, tools, equipment), and finishes with distribution, maintenance and consumption.

Global commodity chains are integrated global spaces created by financial groups with manufacturing activities. Such spaces are integrated in that they are made up of hundreds, even thousands, of subsidiaries (production, R&D [research and development], finance, etc.) whose activities are coordinated and controlled by a central body (the parent company or a holding company) that manages resources to ensure that the whole process is profitable both financially and economically.

The participation of countries in such global commodity chains has a profound impact on labour. This can be seen from the rapid increase in the number of jobs related to global commodity chains, from 296 million workers in 1995 to 453 million in 2013. This growth in commodity-chain production is concentrated in “emerging economies” where such job growth reached an estimated 116 million from 1995 to 2013, with manufacturing as the predominant sector and directed at exporting to the global North. In 2010, 79 percent of the world’s industrial workers lived in the global South, compared to 34 percent in 1950 and 53 percent in 1980. Manufacturing has become the chief source of the third world’s dynamism both in exports and in production, especially in East and Southeast Asia, where, by 1990, the manufacturing share of GDP was higher than that of other regions. A report by the Asian Development Bank shows that most countries in Southeast Asia, particularly those that are considered developing, experienced an increase in their manufacturing output shares from the 1970s to the 2000s.

The key driver in this ‘new wave’ of globalisation is a new corporate strategy. The strategy involves a search for lower costs and greater flexibility, as well as a desire to allocate more resources to financial activity and short-run shareholder value while reducing commitments to long term employment and job security. Major multinational corporations today do not manufacture their own products. They have become large retailers and branded marketers, and they are the new drivers in the global chains that have become more prominent over the last couple of decades. Arm’s length production by multinational corporations—of which Nike and Apple are perhaps the best-known examples—is associated with governance structures in which corporations, usually situated at the center of the world economy, play a pivotal role in setting up dispersed production networks in exporting countries, typically in the third world. They are actually not real manufacturers, but merely merchandisers, that is, companies that ‘design and/or market, but do not make, the branded products they sell.’

Economists often highlight arm’s length corporate contracting as a new decentralised system of production. But there is actually no decentralisation; the ‘dispersed’ commodity chains associated with a given multinational with no equity in the various production segments that it has subcontracted out are crucially governed by its centralised financial headquarters. The financial headquarters of a multinational retains monopolies over information technology and markets, and appropriates the larger portion of the value added in each link in the chain. Despite China’s reputation as the largest exporter of high-technology goods, economist Martin Hart-Landsberg points out that 85 percent of the country’s high-technology exports are mere links or nodes in the global commodity chains of multinationals. As Hymer said a few decades ago: the headquarters of multinationals “rule from the tops of skyscrapers; on a clear day, they can almost see the world.”

Arm’s length contracts actually allow firms to capture extremely high profit margins through their international operations and exert strategic control over their supply lines—regardless of their relative lack of actual FDI. But
this is profit flow is difficult to identify, as there are no visible flows of profits from these foreign subcontractors to their global North customers—multinationals. Thus, not a single cent of H&M’s, Apple’s or General Motors’ profits can be traced back to the super-exploited Bangladeshi, Chinese and Mexican workers who toil for these MNCs’ independent suppliers, and it is this “arm’s length” relationship which increasingly prevails in the global value chains that connect MNCs and citizens in imperialist countries to the low-wage workers who produce more and more of their intermediate inputs and consumption goods.

However, a closer look at the logic behind these forms of offshoring will allow us to see the labour-value commodity chains and power relations embedded in them. The question is not merely about how the multinationals govern commodity chains, but also how they facilitate the extraction of surplus from the global South. This is captured in the concept of the global labour arbitrage, defined as the replacement of high-wage workers in the United States and other rich economies with like-quality, low-wage workers abroad—taking advantage of the difference in wages—based on the unequal freedom of movement of capital and labour. Although labour is still largely constrained within national borders due to immigration policies, global capital and commodities have far more freedom to move around, further heightened in recent years due to trade liberalisation. The global labour arbitrage thus serves as a means for multinationals to benefit from the enormous international differences in the price of labour.

The global labour arbitrage is made possible in part by what Marx refers to as the industrial reserve army of the unemployed—which in this case is on a global scale, thus a global reserve army of labour. The creation over the last few decades of a much larger global reserve army is partly connected to the “great doubling” phenomenon, which refers to the integration of the workforce of former socialist countries (including China) and formerly heavily protectionist countries (such as India) into the global economy, with the resulting expansion of the size of both the global labour force and its reserve army. Also central to the creation of this reserve army is the depeasantisation of a large portion of the global periphery through the spread of agribusiness. This forced movement of peasants from the land has resulted in the growth of urban slum populations.

Making use of the global reserve army of labour not only serves to increase shorter-term profits; it serves as a divide-and-rule approach to labour on a global scale in the interest of long-term accumulation by multinationals and the state structures aligned with them. Although competition among corporations is limited to oligopolistic rivalry, competition among workers of the world (especially those in the global South) is greatly intensified by increasing the relative surplus population. This divide-and-rule strategy serves to integrate disparate labour surpluses, ensuring a constant and growing supply of recruits to the global reserve army who are made less recalcitrant by insecure employment and the continual threat of unemployment.

It follows from the above discussion that the freely competitive model has been made obsolete. Nevertheless, the “traditional” rule of fighting for low-cost production is still alive and well. Indeed, one may argue that it is intensified in the age of monopoly-finance capital. The goal of multinationals is always the creation and the perpetuation of monopoly power and monopoly rents, that is, the power to generate persistent, high economic profits through a mark-up on prime production costs. As production becomes globalised, the leading oligopolies in the Triad of the United States and Canada, Europe, and Japan compete to reduce labour and raw materials costs. They export capital to the underdeveloped countries in order to secure a high return on the exploitation of abundant cheap labour and the control of economically pivotal natural resources.

**Estimating the Value Captured by MNCs through Global Labour Arbitrage**

To get an idea about the value captured by MNCs from labour in the global South through offshoring practices, we make a comparison of national differences in unit
labour cost—a measurement of the labour cost to produce one unit of a product. Unit labour cost is a composite measure, combining data on labour productivity and wages to assess the price competitiveness of a given set of countries. It is typically presented as the average cost of labour per unit of real output, or the ratio of total hourly compensation to output per hour worked (labour productivity). We are interested in determining how changes in unit labour costs over time relate to countries’ participation in global commodity chains, and how this relationship can help explain the extraction of surplus from the global South.

For this, it is useful to look first at a comparison of hourly compensation in dollar terms, which points to the vast discrepancies in wage levels internationally between the global North and the global South. Chart 1, which reports average hourly labour compensation in manufacturing industries in 2017 US dollars, illustrates the wage chasm that exists between economies of the global North and global South. The data show that there is a massive discrepancy in wage levels between center (global North) and periphery (global South). Here, hourly compensation is converted into actual dollars.

Chart 2 presents an index of unit labour costs in a number of key core developed and periphery emerging countries accounting for significant shares of global supply chain jobs in the global economy between 1995 and 2014—a period stretching from the development of the high-tech bubble of the 1990s to the Great Financial Crisis of 2007–09 to the early years of recovery from the crisis. The chart shows the huge gap that exists between unit labour costs in manufacturing in the advanced industrial economies in the global North and the emerging economies in the global South. The four advanced industrial economies (United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Japan) are fairly tightly clustered together, while all four have much higher unit labour costs than the four emerging economies (China, India, Indonesia, and Mexico).

It is obvious that other factors besides unit labour costs, such as infrastructure, taxes, primary export country, shipping costs, and finance affect location of critical nodes in commodity chains. Nevertheless, with China’s unit labour costs rising relative to the United States and India’s remaining flat, it is hardly surprising that Apple through its Foxconn subcontractor has recently decided to assemble its top-end iPhones as well as cheaper models in India beginning this year. While in 2009 Apple’s gross profit margins on its iPhones assembled in China were 64 percent, rising unit labour costs have clearly cut into these margins.

The conclusion that much higher profit margins can be obtained through outsourcing production to poorer, emerging economies—when compared to profit margins to be obtained through labour in the wealthy economies at the center—is inescapable. All four of the global South countries depicted in this study (China, India, Indonesia,
and Mexico) have seen generally flat or declining unit labour costs relative to the United States.

Altogether, the above data shows clearly why it has been so beneficial—indeed, necessary from the standpoint of profitability—for economies of the global North to maintain substantial parts of their labour-value commodity chains in poor emerging economies. By means of these commodity chains, corporations in the North are able to secure low-cost positions essential to their global competitiveness, based on much higher rates of labour exploitation. Here it is important to underscore that a given product, such as an iPod or an iPhone, often has its parts manufactured in a number of different countries, for example, Germany, Korea, and Taiwan, but the assembly occurs in China—a country that has among the lowest unit labour costs and offers developed infrastructure, scale effects, etc.—so it is marked as made in China. In other words, while the commodity chain is complex and extended, the country with the lowest unit labour costs tends to be the site of final production/assembly and becomes the most critical node for the enlargement of gross profit margins.

The way in which the labour-value commodity chains work at the ground level is best illustrated by looking at a particular example, like the Apple iPhone hitherto manufactured in China, which has become the global assembly center for much of modern manufacturing. Most production for export via multinational corporations in China is assembly work, with Chinese factories relying heavily on cheap migrant labour from the countryside to assemble products. The main technological components of this final assembly are manufactured elsewhere and then imported into China. Apple subcontracts the production of the component parts of its iPhones to a number of countries, with Foxconn subcontracting the final assembly in China. Due in large part to low-end wages paid for labour-intensive assembly operations, Apple’s gross profit margin on its iPhone 4 in 2010 was found to be 59 percent of the final sales price. The share of the final sales price actually going to labour in mainland China itself was only a fraction of the whole. For each iPhone 4 imported to the United States from China in 2010, retailing at $549, only about $10, or 1.8 percent of the final sales price, went to labour costs for production of components and assembly in China.

Similar conditions of globalised exploitation pertain to other countries, particularly where multinational corporations rely on subcontractors (or arm’s length production). In the international garment industry, in which production now takes place almost exclusively in the global South, direct labour cost per garment is typically around 1–3 percent of the final retail price, according to senior World Bank economist Zahid Hussain.

In 1996, a year for which data on the labour-value component of Nike’s commodity chain for its shoes...
is available, a single Nike shoe consisting of fifty-two components was manufactured in five different countries. The entire direct labour cost for the production of a pair of Nike basketball shoes in Vietnam in the late 1990s, retailing for $149.50 in the United States, was $1.50, or 1 percent.

A 2019 study published by the Blum Center for Developing Economies at the University of California, which interviewed 1,452 Indian women and girls (including children 17 years old or younger)—85 percent of whom did home-based work “bound for export to major brands in the United States and the European Union”—determined that these workers earn as little as fifteen cents per hour. They “consist almost entirely” of female workers from “historically oppressed ethnic communities” in India, and their work typically involves “finishing touches” like embroidery and beadwork.

These extremely exploitative economic relations help us understand the reality of labour-value commodity chains and how they relate to the global labour arbitrage. In essence, each node or link within a labour-value chain represents a point of profitability. In effect, labour values generated by production are “captured” and not registered as arising in the peripheral countries due to asymmetries in power relations, in which multinational corporations are the key conduits.

Hidden in the pricing and international exchange processes of the global capitalist economy is an enormous gross markup on labour costs (rate of surplus value) amounting to superexploitation, both in the relative sense of above-average rates of exploitation and also, frequently, in the absolute sense of workers paid less than the cost of the reproduction of their labour power. So extreme is this overaccumulation that the twenty-six wealthiest individuals in the world, most of whom are Americans, now own as much wealth as the bottom half of the world’s population, 3.8 billion people. Structurally, this level of inequality has become possible as a result of a globalised commodity-chain system of exploitation—a new imperialist division of labour associated with global monopoly-finance capital.

The world capitalist economy, judged in terms of the amassing of financial wealth and asset concentration, is becoming in many ways more centralised and hierarchical than ever. What we are seeing is the emergence of a global wealth pyramid in which the fabled wealth hierarchy of the pharaohs pales into insignificance in comparison. Inequality is increasing in almost all nations as well as between the richest and poorest countries. As Oxfam indicates, the issue before us is the question of “an economy for the 99%.” In the meantime, imperialism continues to cast its long shadow over the global economy.

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As I collated this information for my presentation, it became clear to me that Cyclone Tracy is a warning. Without major action, we will see tropical cyclones drifting into areas on the southern edge of current cyclone zones, into places such as south-east Queensland and northern New South Wales, where infrastructure is not ready to cope with cyclonic conditions.

These areas currently house more than 3.6 million people; we simply aren’t prepared for what is upon us.

There is a very rational reason why Australian schoolkids are now taking to the streets—the immensity of what is at stake is truly staggering. Staying silent about this planetary emergency no longer feels like an option for me either. Given how disconnected policy is from scientific reality in this country, an urgent and pragmatic national conversation is now essential. Otherwise, living on a destabilised planet is the terrible truth that we will all face.

As a climate scientist at this fraught point in our history, the most helpful thing I can offer is the same professionalism that the doctor displayed late that night in Dad’s intensive-care ward. A clear-eyed and compassionate look at the facts.

We still have time to try and avert the scale of the disaster, but we must respond as we would in an emergency. The question is, can we muster the best of our humanity in time?

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Democracy’s Inherent Flaws

Democracy evolved as an integral part of the world’s project of “modernity”, even as some of its early forms had been practiced in different civilisations of the ancient world. The “modern” democracy evolved as part of a package of the individual’s rights in opposition to the absolute, divine right of the medieval monarch legitimised by theology. A new economic regime, centred on the factory in lieu of land which released human labour from being tied to land and made it mobile, was another facet of evolving individual freedoms, which took centuries and varied enormously from region to region and time to time. But it ended up becoming a universal aspiration. This is Democracy in brief.

The most developed form of democracy thus far is the practice of regular multi-party “free and fair” elections which has come to be accepted as its sine qua non. The underlying assumption is that each person exercises her franchise by her individual will and the majority of such “wills” exercised in favour of one of competing parties gives it the right to rule over the entire population on behalf of the “majority”.

Simple. But that is also one of its major flaws. To begin with 50 percent + 1 vote is not weighty enough to give it such dominance over its rival with 50 percent – 1 vote as to give it the monopoly of state power until the next round. But even this majority of 50 percent + 1 is an extreme rarity in the world around us. Most elected majorities have been brought in place through most of the history of franchise in the “democratic” world by a small or large minority of those who actually cast their vote. For instance, the BJP’s own majority in the 2014 elections was the making of 31 percent of the votes cast, which makes it about 20 or 22 percent of the total electorate or about 14 percent of the populace; 69 percent or an overwhelming majority did not favour it. In 2019 again, a bigger majority for the BJP has been elected by under 38 percent; 62 percent did not elect it. But this has been true throughout the past 67 years of the elections since Independence. The Congress under Rajiv Gandhi touched the highest ever score of MPs in 1984, yet without 50 percent + 1 vote. Indeed, perhaps barring the first two or three elections in South Africa where universal franchise was still very new and the African National Congress won power by a majority of votes (which ultimately gave them a Jacob Zuma!), no “free and fair” elections have ever led to governments with a majority of popular vote anywhere. In the universal role model of democracy, the USA, Donald Trump has been elected President by 2.5 million fewer votes than his main competitor, Hillary Clinton. The French Constitution requires the President to be elected by 50 percent +1 vote, but the rule is not binding on the rest of the government. Indeed, the rule is not binding on any of the elected representatives, members of Parliament or any other body anywhere where such democracy is practiced. How does this then square with Democracy’s claim to be the rule of the majority, much less the rule of the “people”? And “free and fair” elections come at the end of enormous manipulations and incessant falsehoods of every sort which distort genuinely free and fair electoral choices.

Another problem: “Modernity” creates its self-image by announcing a definitive break from its medieval past which it equates with religion, religiosity and superstition, collectively characterised by it as the Dark Age. The basic claim of medieval Christian or Islamic theology was the monopoly of the single Truth; written in it was universal validity and its inevitable ultimate universal triumph over all “falsehoods”. Much as the rationality of “modernity” denounces the superstitions of the Dark Age, it has unreservedly imbibed the assumption of the single Truth of democracy from theology and therefore the inevitability of its ultimate universal triumph. In the process of achieving it by the use of persuasion or force, it reinforces the theological logic in a new garb. Theology too was not averse to using immense amount of violence, besides persuasion, to conquer the world.

If Democracy asserts the equality of human beings on the principle of individual freedoms, its practice through the single medium of elections eliminates all other anterior egalitarian assertions through history whether in religious or non-religious forms. Paradoxically, if theology had legitimised divine right of rulers, the underlying principle of monotheism, forcefully articulated in human history several times through Christianity, Islam and Sikhism, is the notion of social equality, even if its descent into practice did not coincide

Harbans Mukhia
with the theory. Marxian socialism too asserted the same principle, though it largely failed in practice. But the aspiration for social equality has kept erupting repeatedly in different civilisations and different times, its failures notwithstanding. By substituting elections as the single expression of the assertion of equality, Democracy has put an end to the great diversity of humanity’s endeavours to realise its dream.

Yet, what is the alternative to it? Well, that is truly hard to visualise. Ironically, if Democracy had challenged the unbridled power and authority of one ruler and created a structure for its percolation down to the last voter, the working of the structure has practically reinvested all power and authority in one individual at the head of government. Elections are mostly contested around individuals, the very anti-thesis of democracy. Clearly, evolving structures ensuring decentralisation of power is the fundamental premise of a genuine departure from autocracy, whether medieval or modern. But then evolution is a long historical process and even our present day democracy took over three or four centuries to arrive at its present state. Perhaps before the present century comes to a close, humanity might devise some new modes to overcome its present flaws.

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itself, it also ratified the state’s accession to India on 15 February 1954. But the state of Jammu and Kashmir has a distinct status different from other Indian states inasmuch as it has reserved to itself all subjects relating to internal administration of the state transferring only the defence, external affairs and communications as per the Instrument of Accession and no more.

**Betrayal**

Unfortunately, events took a tragic course. The Sheikh was dismissed from office and imprisoned on August 9, 1953. (This sordid saga of manipulations and betrayal of the Kashmiri people is exposed in A.G. Noorani’s articles in Frontline, “The Legacy of 1953”, August 16–29, 2008 and “Brought to Heel”, August 30–September 12, 2008). On May 14, 1954 came a comprehensive Presidential Order under Article 370. Although it was purported to have been made with the "concurrence" of the State government it drew validity from a resolution of the Constituent Assembly on February 15, 1954 which approved extension to the State of some provisions of the Constitution of India. It certainly paved the way for more such Orders—all with "the concurrence of the State Government", each elected moreover in a rigged poll. Ninetyfour of the 97 Entries in the Union List and 26 of the 47 in the Concurrent List were extended to Kashmir as were 260 of the 395 Articles of the Constitution.

Worse, the State's Constitution was overridden by the Centre's orders. Its basic structure was altered. The head of State elected by the State legislature was replaced by a Governor nominated by the Centre. Article 356 (imposition of President's Rule) was applied despite provision in the State's Constitution for Governor's rule (Section 92). This was done on November 21, 1964. On November 24, 1966, the Governor replaced the Sadar-i-Riyasat after the State's Constitution had been amended on April 10, 1965 by the 6th Amendment in violation of Section 147 of the Constitution.

Article 370 was used freely not only to amend the Constitution of India but also of the State. On July 23, 1975 an Order was made debarring the State legislature from amending the State Constitution on matters in respect of the Governor, the Election Commission and even "the composition" of the Upper House, the Legislative Council.

Article 370 had thus already been emaciated; all that had remained was the husk! Now, even the husk has been dumped into the dustbin.

(A.G. Noorani is an Indian lawyer, constitutional expert and political commentator. Jai Shankar Agarwala is an advocate at the Supreme Court of India.)
Chávez and the Communal State

John Bellamy Foster

On October 20, 2012, less than two weeks after being reelected to his fourth term as Venezuelan president and only months before his death, Hugo Chávez delivered his crucial El Golpe de Timón (“Strike at the Helm”) speech to the first meeting of his ministers in the new revolutionary cycle. Chávez surprised even some of his strongest supporters by his insistence on the need for changes at the top in order to promote an immediate leap forward in the creation of what is referred to as “the communal state.” This was to accelerate the shift of power to the population that had begun with the formation of the communal councils (groupings of families involved in self-governance projects—in densely populated urban areas, 200–400 families; in rural areas, 50–100 families). The main aim in the new revolutionary cycle, he insisted, was to speed up the registration of communes, the key structure of the communal state. In the communes, residents in geographical areas smaller than a city unite in a number of community councils with the object of self-governance through a communal parliament, constructed on participatory principles. The communes are political-economic-cultural structures engaged in such areas as food production, food security, housing, communications, culture, communal exchange, community banking, and justice systems. All of this had been legally constituted by the passage of the Organic Laws of Popular Power in 2010, including, most notably, the Organic Law of the Communes and the Organic Law of the Communal Economic System.

Chávez’s “Strike at the Helm” speech, which insisted on the rapid construction of communes, was to be one of the most important and memorable speeches of his career. It offers the key to the past, present, and future of the Venezuelan revolution. More than that, it presents us with new insights into the whole question of the transition to socialism in the twenty-first century.

In March 2011, when I was the sole US participant in a small group of socialist intellectuals from the Americas and Europe invited to Caracas to confer with the country’s top ministers on the future of the Bolivarian Revolution, it was already apparent that the full implementation of Venezuela’s 2010 “Organic Law of the Commons,” the most crucial enactment of the revolution, faced major obstacles. Although there were thousands of communal councils, there were as yet no registered communes—the larger territorial organisations of which communal councils were to form a part, and which would represent the real basis for popular power. Nor at that point, during a presidential election cycle that was to determine the future of the Bolivarian Revolution, was it easy to move forward in this respect. Indeed, there was clearly considerable confusion at the ministerial level around the question of how the establishment of the communes, the most important element in the revolutionary process, would be accomplished, if at all.

Hence, it was a historic moment when Chávez in his October 2012 speech crossed this Rubicon. He insisted on a full-scale socialist political transformation, with the intention of decisively shifting political power to the people, and by that means making the revolution irreversible. In addressing the communes in his “Strike at the Helm” speech, Chávez commenced by referring to István Mészáros’s Beyond Capital, not only in order to lay down certain basic principles, but also with the aim of once again urging those engaged in the Bolivarian Revolution to study Mészáros’s analysis, as the most developed and strategic theory of socialist transition:

Here I have a [book written by] István Mészáros, chapter XIX called “The Communal System and the Law of Value.” There is a sentence that I underlined a while ago, I am going to read it to you, ministers and vice president, speaking of the economy, of economic development, speaking of the social impulses of the revolution: “The yardstick,” says Mészáros, “of socialist achievements is the extent to which the adopted measures and policies actively contribute to the constitution and deep-rooted consolidation of a substantively democratic...mode of overall social control and self-management.”

Therefore we arrive at the issue of democracy. Socialism is in its essence truly democratic, while, on the other hand, there is capitalism: quintessentially anti-democratic and exclusive, the imposition of capital by the capitalist elite. But socialism is none of these things, socialism liberates; socialism is democracy and democracy is socialism, in politics, the social sphere, and in economics.
Presenting an age-old principle of revolutionary theory, associated most famously with Marx, Chávez argued: “It must always be this way: first the political revolution, political liberation and then economic revolution. We must maintain political liberation and from that point the political battle is a permanent one, the cultural battle, the social battle.” The problem of a transition to socialism was then, first of all, a political one: creating an alternative popular, participatory, protagonist base. Only then could changes in economics, production, and property take place. This new popular base of power had to have equivalent power in the organisation of what Mészáros called the necessary “social metabolic reproduction” to that of capital itself, displacing the latter. It needed, in Chávez’s words, to “form part of a systematic plan, of something new, like a network... a network that works like a gigantic spider’s web covering the new territory.” Indeed, “if it didn’t work this way,” he insisted, “it would all be doomed to fail; it would be absorbed by the old system, which would swallow it up, because capitalism is an enormous amoeba, it is a monster.”

Chávez’s analysis was clearly rooted in Mészáros’s concept of “social metabolic reproduction.” The capital system, in this view, was an overall system of reproduction, a kind of organic metabolism, albeit in a form that alienated human beings from themselves, each other, their communities, and external nature. To create a genuine socialist political economy thus required instituting an alternative communal state, as the basis of social production and exchange; one that would have an organic metabolism that was as vital (indeed more vital since unalienated) as capitalism itself, basing itself on the power of protagonist democracy. As Chávez insisted in his “Strike at the Helm” speech, such a democratic–communal political organisation, as an absolute necessity of socialism, stood in sharp contrast to the practice that emerged in the Soviet Union where “there was never democracy, there wasn’t socialism, it was diverted.” Hence, the goal in the transition to twenty-first-century socialism, he said, was to create “a new democratic hegemony which obliges us not to impose, but rather to convince.”

Chávez went on to suggest that for all of the achievements of the Bolivarian Revolution it had not yet taken the decisive step: the real transfer of power to the people, the creation of the communes. Although the first commune had been registered in August 2012, the process had been slow, not conforming to the necessary acceleration of revolutionary progress. Without the communes, the communal state (“the commune”) could not be built. Chávez asked “Where is the commune?”

Turning to Vice President Nicholás Maduro, he said: “Nicholás I entrust you with this task as I would entrust my life to you: the communes... There is already a Law of the Communes, of communal economy. Therefore, how will we make it happen?” The communes of the people that were already in the making, Chávez stated, “dictate that we search out the Law of the Communes, that we read it, and study it. Many people, I am sure, and I am not necessarily speaking about those of you here, haven’t read it, because it is believed that it isn’t important to us.” In answer, Chávez declared, the principles should be “either independence or nothing, either the commune or nothing.”

What made the communes so important was that “Socialism Cannot Be Made By Decree.” The formation of socialism, Chávez stated, “is about creating, as Mészáros says, a coordinated combination of parallel systems and from there the regionalisation, the initiative districts. But we still haven’t created a single one, and we have the law, we have our decree, but it was just a decree, and inside the initiative districts are the communes.” How then to create the communes?

A similar, integrated approach was to be directed at other areas of the Bolivarian Revolution. Chávez insisted “we must implant social property with the spirit of socialism.” This meant that parallel, interconnected developments should take place, social housing should be coupled with social production, social property in land should support “small producers,” transportation and highways would need to be geared to communities and their cultural and economic needs. Efficiency in meeting all these needs demanded “a level of communication, of coordination, a crossing, or an intersection of plans, of diagnosis, of problems, of coordinated action. It’s like a war... We are nothing without integrating our vision, in our work, in everything, it will be hard but we will persevere.” Likewise there was a need for “Reinforcing the National Public Media System.” Speaking especially to Ernesto Villegas, Minister of Popular Power for Communication and Information, Chávez asked Villegas to convert himself “into the leader of this system” and demanded greater popular involvement and communication at every level. “Why not,” he asked, “have [television] programs with workers? Where we
can voice our self-criticisms, we should not be afraid to criticise, nor to self-criticise. We need it, it gives us nourishment.”

The creation of the communes demanded also the furthering of social property, of communication, and of a national media system, so that all of these developments in the formation of a protagonist democracy could feed on each other, generating an entirely different social metabolism. But the core of the new cycle of revolutionary transition, Chávez insisted, was to be the creation of the communes upon which the future of the Bolivarian Revolution depended: “either the commune or nothing.”

The Political Theory of the Communal State

Despite the extraordinary role he played in the liberation struggles in South America against Spain, resulting in his being given the unique title El Libertador in Venezuela, Simón Bolívar famously described himself as “a weak piece of straw caught up in the revolutionary hurricane,” thereby dramatising how he had been swept along by the force of the revolution of the people. There is no doubt that Chávez viewed the part that he himself had played in the revolutionary hurricane of the Bolivarian Revolution in these same terms, even quoting Bolívar in this respect. Chávez constantly stressed the role of the people as the protagonist of the revolution, and tied the Bolivarian struggle to the larger insurgent tradition in Venezuela, represented by the heroic triad of: Bolívar, El Libertador himself; Simón Rodríguez, Bolívar’s teacher and mentor; and Ezequiel Zamora, the leader of the peasant revolt of the 1850s and ’60s. In this way Chávez depicted as the historical antecedents of the Bolivarian Revolution: (1) the great struggle for liberation from Spain, legal equality, and the freeing of the slaves via Bolívar; (2) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the French Revolution, and utopian socialism via Rodríguez; and (3) the continual struggles for freedom on the part of Venezuela’s peasants via Zamora.

Chávez portrayed the Bolivarian Revolution as the outcome of a historical process with deep, centuries-long roots, arising out of interconnected liberation struggles in Europe and the Americas: marking a long struggle for freedom. This conception was later extended through the critical incorporation of Marxian theory and a thoroughgoing reexamination of the question of the state, as it had presented itself in the revolutions of the twentieth century.

All of this contributed to a view of the institutionalisation of popular power as the main revolutionary objective in a socialist transition, and to a critique in this respect of the Soviet model. The new, emerging synthesis was what Chávez called the new model of “twenty-first-century socialism.” The key strategic element in Chávez’s overall conception was Mészáros’s notion of capital as an alienated system of social metabolic reproduction and the need to replace this with an organic system of social metabolic reproduction emanating from below.

Writing from Yare prison in 1993—where he had been confined for his role in the abortive military coup unleashed by the Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario (MBR-200) following the Caracazo uprising and subsequent state repression—Chávez insisted that “the sovereign people must transform itself into the object and the subject of power. This option is not negotiable for revolutionaries.” He argued on this basis for a vast structural change in the political system:

>a veritable polycentric distribution of power, displacing power from the centre towards the periphery, increasing the effective power of the decision making and the autonomy of the particular communities and municipalities. The Electoral Assemblies of each municipality and state will elect Electoral Councils which will possess a permanent character and will function in absolute independence from the political parties. They will be able to establish and direct the most diverse mechanisms of Direct Democracy: popular assemblies, referenda, plebiscites, popular initiatives, vetoes, revocation, etc.... Thus the concept of participatory democracy will be changed into a form in which democracy based on popular sovereignty constitutes itself as the protagonist of power. It is precisely at such borders that we must draw the limits of advance of Bolivarian democracy. Then we shall be very near to the territory of utopia.

Chávez’s initial Bolivarian revolutionary strategy was thus envisioned as one that would promote a participatory and protagonist form of democracy. It would institute structures of direct democracy and popular power, retaining a relation to existing political structures but nonetheless constituting a revolutionary attack on capitalist representative democracy. It was this vision that Chávez was to promote as a “Third Way”
when he ran for and won election as president in 1998, followed by the election of a constituent assembly and codification of these principles into a new Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in 1999. Yet, these changes were only made possible by a massive revolutionary popular mobilisation, which had its own logic, and revolutionary political thrust.

In political theory going back to the eighteenth century, the question of democratic popular power and its relation to the state is often treated as one of constituent versus constituted power. The best known contemporary work on this history is Antonio Negri’s Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State, which Chávez read in prison concurrently with Rousseau’s Social Contract. Constituent power, or direct democracy based on popular sovereignty, of the kind theorised by Rousseau, is generally considered by political theorists to be the rare exception, exercising its force in modern times mainly in periods of revolutionary ferment. From the standpoint of constituent power, the political is not a separate, superstructural realm alienated from the people, but must be rooted in popular sovereignty. Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel writes in a similar vein of the “necessary institutionalisation of the power of the people,” which he calls potestas. This is the real delegation of power, which is democratic only insofar as it conforms with the potentia (constituent power) of the people.

In sharp contrast to constituent power, constituted power goes hand in hand with the subordination of labour to capital, for which such concentrated state power is essential. Here political representation, the mainstay of the capitalist liberal-democratic state, “presents itself,” in Negri’s words, as a “centralised mediation” between the people and the state apparatus. Edmund Burke penned the classic defense of limited democratic or representative government as a form of constituted power—whereby representatives, once they are elected, are free for their entire term of office to make decisions independent of and even in opposition to their constituencies—in his famous “Speech to the Electors of Bristol” in 1774. Political representatives, Burke argued, owe to their constituencies only their independent judgments. “Your representative... betrays instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it [his judgment] to your opinion.” In his 1791 Letter to a Member of the National Assembly, one of his works in response to the French Revolution, Burke coupled a long, vituperative attack on Rousseau, with the contention that “the people at large, when once these miserable sheep have broken the field,” were ill fit to rule, representing a “retrograde order of society.”

Marx, in sharp contrast to such reigning liberal views, can be seen as arguing passionately for a system of constituent power in the first draft of The Civil War in France, defending the Paris Commune, when he stated:

The true antithesis to the Empire itself—that is to the state power, the centralised executive, of which the Second Empire was only the exhausting formula—was the Commune... This was, therefore, a Revolution not against this or that, legitimate, constitutional, republican, or Imperialist form of State Power. It was a Revolution against the State itself, of this supernatralist abortion of society, a resumption by the people for the people of its own social life. It was not a revolution to transfer it from one fraction of the ruling classes to the other, but a Revolution to break down this horrid machinery of Class domination itself. It was not one of those dwarfish struggles between the executive and the parliamentary forms of class domination, but a revolt against both these forms, integrating each other.

In the final version of The Civil War in France, Marx stated: “The Communal Constitution would have restored to the social body all the forces hitherto absorbed by the State parasite feeding upon, and clogging the free movement of, society... It was essentially a working-class government... the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labour.”

Dario Azzellini, writing in 2013 on “The Communal State: Communal Councils, Communes, and Workplace Democracy,” presented the dynamic tension between dual—constituent and constituted—power as the secret of the entire Bolivarian Revolution. Venezuela, we are told, adopted “a two-track approach,” participatory and protagonistic democracy, on the one hand, constituted power within the state, on the other. The complex aspect of the revolution under Chávez, however, was that the constituted state power had as its main objective the creation of a communal state, the shifting of power to the populace through a myriad of structures: constituent assemblies, plebiscites, social missions, cooperatives, socialist workers councils, communal councils, communes, and communal cities. The emphasis on the promotion of constituent power was already underway by the time of the attempted coup against Chávez in 2002 (defeated by the Venezuelan population who rose up against the coup). It was accelerated in 2005 with
Chávez’s declaration of the new strategy of “socialism in the twenty-first century” and his insistence that it was necessary to build a communal economy and state.

Chávez was to draw increasingly on Mészáros’s Beyond Capital as a source of theoretical and strategic insight and revolutionary inspiration. In 1993, when Mészáros was completing Beyond Capital, he read Chávez’s political pamphlet, Pueblo, Sufragio y Democracia, written while Chávez was confined in Yare prison (and quoted from above). Mészáros not only laid stress on the extraordinary revolutionary conception of Chávez, but connected it to the theory of constitutive power embedded in Rousseau’s Social Contract. Rousseau, Mészáros argued, had insisted, rightly, on the fact that the legislative power cannot be represented, and must rest directly on the people’s sovereignty, expressing the general will. However, Rousseau, in contrast to standard interpretations, had argued quite differently with respect to the executive power: that it could and must be delegated. A socialist revolution, building on this conception and recognising the failure of the Soviet model, would need to rely on a combination of direct and delegated power controlled by the associated producers: going against representative government and the separation of the state from the people. It would have to put political revolution, and the reabsorption of the state within society, before even economic emancipation, creating the cell structure for a socialist revolution. The division between political and civil society would have to be dissolved altogether.

“For without the progressive and ultimately complete transfer of material reproductive and distributive decision making to the associated producers there can be no hope for the members of the postrevolutionary community of transforming themselves into the subject of power.” (Meszaros, citing Rousseau.)

Chávez was soon aware of Mészáros’s analysis. Beginning in 2001 with the appearance of the Spanish translation of Beyond Capital, Chávez began studying it voraciously, meeting on a number of occasions with Mészáros for extensive talks. Two strategic elements of Mészáros’s work were central for Chávez. The first of these, as we have seen, was Mészáros’s conception, drawn from Marx, of capital as a system of social metabolic reproduction, a self-reinforcing, integrated system of complex reproductive relations, which could not simply be abolished, but which had to be replaced with an alternative organic metabolism, based in communal relations. The second was Mészáros’s understanding of the necessary framework of “The Communal System and the Law of Value,” which provided the strategic foundation for the revolutionary institutionalisation of a system of “communal social relations,” whereby the population reabsorbed sovereign rule into itself: a new kind of communal state or system. Such shifting of power to the people was at the same time a way of making the revolution, in Mészáros’s terms, “irreversible,” since the people would defend what was their own. In the Organic Law of the Commune, passed in 2010, those elected by the communal assemblies are not representatives, as in bourgeois representative democracy, but delegates or spokespeople.

It was in 2005, as a key part of the building of twenty-first century socialism, that Chávez, rooting his analysis in Mészáros’s work, began to call for the immediate building of a communal economy and state: “The Point of Archimedes, this expression taken from the wonderful book of István Mészáros, a communal system of production and of consumption—that is what we are creating, we know we are building this. We have to create a communal system of production and consumption—a new system... Let us remember that Archimedes said: ‘You give me an intervention point [a point on which to stand] and I will move the world.’ This is the point from which to move the world today.” Such a permanent political revolution was the means to the creation of new, creative, socialist human beings able to make their own culture, their own economy, their own history, and their own individual and collective needs. As Mészáros put it in 2007, in his article “Bolívar and Chávez: The Spirit of Radical Determination,” “it remains as true today as it was in Bolívar’s time that one cannot envisage the sustainable functioning of humanity’s social macrocosm without overcoming the internal antagonisms of its microcosms: the adversarial/conflictual constitutive cells of our society under capital’s mode of social metabolic control. For a cohesive and socially viable macrocosm is conceivable only on the basis of the corresponding and humanly rewarding constitutive cells of interpersonal relations.” This demanded substantive equality in the cell structure of society: the family, community, and communal structures.

The goal of twentieth-century socialism initiated by Chávez was to build “socialism as an organic system.” In January 2007, Chávez presented the general economic–social objectives of the Bolivarian socialist revolution by introducing (once again on the basis of Mészáros) the notion of “‘the elementary triangle of socialism’—the
combination of social property, social production, and satisfaction of social needs.” For Lebowitz—who, at Chávez’s request, had played a key mediating role in the interpretation of the relevant passages of Mészáros’s Beyond Capital in this respect, leading to Chávez’s formulation of the elementary triangle of socialism—this represented a crucial theoretical turning point:

Once again, Chávez’s theoretical step can be traced back to Mészáros’s Beyond Capital. Drawing upon Marx, Mészáros had argued the necessity to understand capitalism as an organic system, a specific combination of production–distribution–consumption, in which all the elements coexist simultaneously and support one another. The failure of the socialist experiments of the twentieth century, he proposed, occurred because of the failure to go beyond “the vicious circle of the capital relation,” the combination of circuits “all intertwined and mutually reinforcing one another” that thereby reinforced “the perverse dialectic of the incurably wasteful capital system.” In short, the lack of success (or effort) in superseding all parts of “the totality of existing reproductive relations” meant the failure to go “beyond capital.”

The goal of the creation of a communal system of production and exchange required first the formation of communal councils, proposed by Chávez in 2005, based on already existing revolutionary developments in this area. This was followed by his promotion of the larger communes, in 2007—territorial entities large enough to act as the basis of the new communal state. In a speech in 2010 entitled “Onward Towards the Communal State!”—the same year as the enactment of the Organic Law of the Commune—Chávez declared: “Simón Rodriguez was right when he said in his American Societies in 1828: ‘You will see that there are two kinds of politics: popular and governmental; and that the people are more political than their governments.’” He also quoted the Venezuelan revolutionary, Kléber Ramirez, who said in 1992, in what Chávez called “the purest Robinsonian spirit” (referring to the ideas of Simón Rodriguez): “The time has come for the communities to assume the powers of the state; which will lead administratively to the total transformation of the Venezuelan state and socially to the real exercise of sovereignty by society through communal powers.” As Chávez himself put it: “By socialism we mean unlimited democracy... From this comes our firm conviction that the best and most radically democratic of the options for defeating bureaucracy and corruption is the construction of a communal state which is able to test an alternative institutional structure at the same time as it permanently reinvents itself... Let’s go, with Zamora, Robinson [Rodriguez] and Bolívar, towards a Communal State! Towards Socialism!”

Indeed, what was most extraordinary about Chávez’s leadership in the Bolivarian revolutionary process was that at each new, successive phase over a fourteen-year period (during which Venezuela had sixteen nationwide votes), he sought to shift more and more power and responsibility to the population, encouraging their own self-organisation and the invention of new structures with which to direct and delegate power from below. Hence the Bolivarian Revolution under Chávez’s guidance and inspiration relentlessly sought to devolve the sovereign power, formerly constituted in the state, transferring it to the people themselves. His “Strike at the Helm” speech, insisting on “the commune or nothing,” was an attempt to fulfill the promise of twenty-first century socialism by bringing about the most urgent shift: the creation of an irreversible socialist revolution.

Maduro and the Communal State

In the two years since Chávez’s death, the Venezuelan opposition and the United States have stepped up the attempts to overturn the democratically established Bolivarian Republic through pressures exerted both within and without. New presidential elections were held in April 2013, and Nicolás Maduro—who as vice president under Chávez became interim president on the latter’s death, serving in that capacity for a month—was elected by a slim margin. From the moment of Maduro’s ascendance to the presidency, the political and economic pressures imposed on Venezuela have been relentless. A key factor threatening the Bolivarian Republic has been the 38 percent drop in oil prices between June and December 2014, caused by the increased supply of oil and natural gas from fracking—together with the decision of Saudi Arabia to maintain production rather than support prices and the slowdown in economic growth in China and Europe. The result has been a severe economic crisis in Venezuela. The crisis was complicated by the violent tactics of the Venezuelan opposition’s “exit now” strategy in spring 2014, aimed at bringing down the government, leaving forty-three people dead. The pressure on the Bolivarian Republic has been further intensified with widespread hoarding of imported goods—a form of
economic corruption introduced by vested interests of the rentier–importer economy, directed at thwarting price controls introduced to regulate the growing inflation. In addition, food purchased at relatively low prices in Venezuela has been transported over the border to sell for higher prices in Colombia.

Seeing Venezuela as vulnerable, Washington introduced sanctions (restricting visas and freezing assets of Venezuelan officials) under the name of the “Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014.” In February 2015 (as the present article was being written), Venezuela thwarted a coup plot against the government, which would have taken the combined form of: (1) an economic assault on the country, (2) violent, opposition-led demonstrations, (3) the bribing of key officials, and (4) a series of coordinated bombings of government buildings and strategic sites throughout the country. The bombings, it was soon discovered, were to be carried out by a Brazilian-manufactured Super Tuscano attack aircraft, registered to Blackwater Worldwide—pointing to Washington’s involvement in the planned coup. Subsequent evidence (including a recorded Skype call) revealed that the coup was planned in the United States. On March 3, Maduro indicated that a member of the US Embassy in Venezuela had met with the opposition, handing over documents related to the preparation of the coup.

Yet even while these crises and attacks on the Bolivarian Revolution were occurring, Maduro’s government was pushing the revolution forward. The key slogan of Maduro’s presidential campaign was the “Commune or Nothing!” taken from Chávez’s “Strike at the Helm” speech. At the time that Chávez gave his speech to the ministry of the new revolutionary cycle in October 2012, there were almost no registered communes—although many were in formation (some of which had begun to emerge at the grassroots level as early as 2010). By September 2013 there were more than 40,000 registered communal councils (some going back to 2006), while the number of registered communes had topped a thousand, with substantial political power devolving to the emerging communal state. Despite cutbacks in government spending (starting with his own salary), Maduro increased the 2015 budget for the communes by 62 percent. He has called the communes “the maximum expression of democracy” and “pure socialism.” The goal, he declared at the National Communal Economy Conference in February 2014, was not just creating the communal state but the communal economy as well: “democratising property, generating new forms of social property such as communal ones, is necessary for strengthening participative and protagonistic democracy.”

Although the communes are at the heart of the Bolivarian Revolution, they do not stand alone. Venezuela has moved forward in promoting the elementary triangle of socialism. The Bolivarian Revolution has thus progressed on multiple fronts. Already by 2011, 3.6 million acres of land had been expropriated for distribution. By 2010, over 70,000 cooperatives had been formed with some 2 million members. At the same time 26,000 agricultural units had been developed in the cities and suburbs aimed at food security and food sovereignty. Socialist workers councils have proliferated. “The most successful attempt at a democratisation of ownership and administration of the means of production,” Azzellini states, “is the model of Enterprises of Communal Social Property (ESPQ), promoted to create local production units and community service enterprises.” These enterprises “are collective property of the communities, which decide on the organisational structure of enterprises, the workers incorporated and the eventual use of profits.” The Bolivarian state has promoted these collective enterprises since 2009, and by 2013 there were several thousand.

Nevertheless it is the growth of the communes that occupies a central place, creating a system of dual power with regional and local governments, understood as a process of co-responsibility—but with the stipulation that local governments should be “obedient” to the communes and that more and more political power will devolve to the communal state. In September 2014, Maduro announced the program called the “Five Big Revolutions”: (1) the economic revolution, promoting social production; (2) the knowledge revolution, emphasising education, culture, and science; (3) the social missions, crucial to building socialism; (4) the creation of a new democratic and communal state, ending “what remains of the bourgeois state”; and (5) the “territorial socialism” revolution, requiring the creation of a “new ecosocialist model.”

One of the five “historical objectives” of Venezuela’s present national development plan, drawn up by Chávez, is to “contribute to the preservation of planetary life and to save the human species.” In May 2014, over a thousand Venezuelan environmental organisations met in a conference aimed at promoting “ecosocialism.” The primary goal of Bolivarian ecosocialism is to emphasise local, sustainable, communal, and diversified
production. The “ecosocialist model,” Maduro argues, is “not about environmentalism, it’s about ecosocialism, environmentalism is not enough.” As Chávez repeatedly warned, it was necessary for Venezuela to break with its dependence on the rentier-oil economy.

Lessons in the Transition to Socialism

“Transitions from one social order to another,” Paul Sweezy stated, “involve the most difficult and profound problems of historical materialism.” Such revolutionary historical transitions are never the same, occur over protracted periods, with all sorts of forward and backward motions, and arise within unique conditions and cultures. Nevertheless, broad conclusions can be drawn. The greatest difficulty, Sweezy emphasised, is posed by the fact “that the transition to socialism does not, and in the nature of the case cannot, take the same course as the transition from feudalism to capitalism.” Bourgeois society arose as a kind of alternative cell structure within feudal society, which was not immediately threatening or antagonistic to the latter. A “newly emergent ensemble of social relations” and with it a new kind of human nature, laws, and customs emerged, particularly in the urban centers of feudal society. As Sweezy stated: “Bourgeois relations grew up within the framework of feudal society and moulded bourgeois human nature over a period of several centuries.” This is not possible in the same way with respect to the transition of capitalism to socialism. There are no pores in bourgeois society in which socialist relations can readily emerge; rather capitalism is an aggressive social metabolic system of reproduction that constantly moves to incorporate everything within itself. This is what Mészáros means when he refers to the centrifugal tendencies that characterise capital as a system, constantly seeking to reproduce its own organic, if alienated, microcosms, integrating this with its destructive macrocosm.

Socialist and radical democratic strategies have thus generally focused by default on seizing the state and using the state apparatus or constituted power as the sole means of instituting socialism. But in the process the revolutionary, constituent power becomes first subordinated and then negated. The result is a new system of political alienation. The force of the people and the people’s sovereignty is lost. Indeed, in Chávez’s analysis, like that of Mészáros, the Soviet model of the state, standing above society, perpetuated the necessary element (the political alienation enforcing economic alienation) of the capital system, even with the formal abolition of capitalism and private ownership. The simple replacement of private property by state property (a change in social ownership) does not alter the essential relations. Rather, a “withering away of the state,” as Marx and Engels contended, is necessary in any socialist transition.

This has been the conundrum that all attempts at the transition to socialism have faced. The Venezuelan revolution, as a sui generis revolution arising out of roots in both Latin American and European revolutionary traditions, has sought, as we have seen, to cut this Gordian knot with a sword, through the promotion, growing in each new revolutionary cycle, of participatory and protagonist democracy, as a constitutive basis for what Marx called the absorption of the state by society. At the same time, more and more parts of the economy are removed—as Che insisted in his famous “Man and Socialism in Cuba” speech—from the domination of the law of value. The new social foundation is thus to be increasingly based on communal production and exchange—relying on the exchange of use values and of direct labor, a new social accountancy. The goal is to produce the communal cell structure for an organic socialist metabolism, nurturing new, creative, human–social relations, in revolutionary opposition to capitalist class relations: the concrete constitutional construction at every level of the collective power of the people.

Whatever the final outcome of Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution, it has forever changed the debate on the transition to socialism, mapping a whole new terrain of struggle. The struggle is determined by the endless quest for the widest possible human fulfillment, and the satisfaction of people’s own needs. Twenty-first century socialism, Chávez insisted, is the active, relentless pursuit of the values always associated with socialism, namely, “love, solidarity, equality between men and women and equity among all”—the social institutionalisation of which becomes possible as the result of a practice that is uncompromising and irreversible. “When one sees a people voting for crazy things like the construction of Bolivarian socialism or the preservation of the planet,” Venezuela’s Minister for Communes, Reinaldo Iturriza, declares, “one knows that one is in the presence of a revolution.”

(John Bellamy Foster is professor of sociology at the University of Oregon and editor of the American socialist magazine, Monthly Review.)
Letter to Editor

Some Suggestions for Promoting Communal Harmony

Radhey Shiam

Communal harmony is of paramount component for the social, economic and cultural development of any country. If only the followers of different religions had the vision of Swami Vivekananda who had proclaimed: “Different religions are like the streams which lead to the same ocean”! If all people developed a deeper understanding of their separate religions, they will realise that all religions talk of love and internal bliss and prohibit harming all creatures—living as well as non-living.

Unfortunately, in our society, communal divisions are deepening. The last general election of 2019 would be remembered for polarisation of votes on the basis of caste and religion while the real issues like poverty, unemployment, suicide of farmers and other economic & social problems receded in the background. Majority of political leaders openly canvassed on the basis of caste and religion. If this trend continues, we are heading for a serious social and political crisis.

Some suggestions for promoting Communal Harmony:

1. Promoting the spirit of the Preamble of Indian Constitution: This reflects the spirit of national integration of our national leaders who fought against British empire, culminating in India becoming free in 1947.
2. Political & Administrative measures: Each ethnic, tribal, religious and linguistic group should have freedom to protect their own culture and freedom, as also envisaged by the Constitution. At the same time, there is an urgent need to ban all communal parties and communal organisations by which the danger of communalism can be made less serious.
3. Involve NGOs as well as social, cultural and educational institutions in promoting National Integration.
4. Set up an Interfaith Dialogue Committee: This will help promote understanding between different religions.
5. Promote Moral Education in Education institutions: This should include the basic teachings of all religions.
6. Exhort people to celebrate festivals of different religion together.
7. Organise exhibitions highlighting unity in diversity in the country.
8. Organise film festivals and screen films that depict our country’s rich diverse culture, and appreciation of this diversity.
9. Promote intercaste & interreligious marriages: Dr B.R. Ambedkar was of the opinion that the most effective way to tackle with the problem of casteism is to promote intercaste marriage. Unfortunately, our society is moving in the opposite direction, and young couples are being killed for marrying across religion and caste. The government should openly promote inter-caste and inter-religious marriages, and publicly honour couples who have such marriages.
10. Set up of Mohalla committees to promote peace communal harmony.
11. Exhort the Media to promote Communal Harmony: The media should be mobilised to maintain and spread communal harmony and take the message of ‘unity in diversity’ as well as teachings of different religions that emphasise the unity of mankind and the values of humanism to the people of India.
12. Promote social movements at the grassroot level for promoting communal harmony, and involve eminent intellectuals and social activists for this.
13. Promote visits of people of different religions to each other’s religious places—not only will this have economic benefits for the locals, it will also enable a greater appreciation of different religions.
14. Organise ‘Festivals of communal harmony’: Festivals like Delhi’s oldest secular festival, Phool Waloon Ki Sair, need to be organised throughout the country.
15. Teachings of different religions should be compiled and distributed among the people of the country, including teachings of Saint Vivekananda and other saints who propagated religious harmony and respect for all religions. Such teachings also need to be integrated in the curriculum of schools and colleges.

(Radhey Shiam was formerly the General Secretary of Bharatiya Ekta Parishad.)

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(Nishikant Kolge earlier taught history at Tripura University; presently, he is with the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi. This article has been slightly edited for reasons of space. The full article is available on CSDS website.)
MAY OUR NATION’S RELENTLESS SPIRIT CONTINUE TO INSPIRE US.

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Aristotle

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Thousands Pledge to Join Global Climate Strike on September 20

Julia Conley

Organisers behind the global climate strike movement—from teenage students to adults who have fought for climate action for decades—have called on all people who want to halt the climate crisis to join the worldwide action on September 20.

350.org, one of dozens of international, national, and local groups organising the strike, announced on August 20 that with a month to go before the demonstration, thousands of people have already signed up to take part in the strike and the Week of Action that's planned for the days that follow.

"Youth and adults, institutional and grassroots organisations, climate-focused and social justice groups, are coming together as a unified front to demand transformative action on climate," the grassroots group said in a press statement.

"Time is running out," said Vic Barrett, a plaintiff in the Juliana v. United States case involving children, teenagers and young adults who are suing the US government for failing to protect them from fossil fuel emissions. "This decade is our last chance to stop the destruction of our people and our planet. This is our time to join in solidarity with communities around the world to fight for a just future. This is why we strike."

The strike is being organised amid increasingly dire news and predictions about the climate crisis. The US agency NOAA reported last week that July 2019 was the hottest month on record, with scientists cautioning that warming will get worse unless fossil fuel emissions are drastically reduced. On Sunday, Icelanders held a funeral for the country's first glacier to be entirely lost due to the warming of the planet.

350.org co-founder and author Bill McKibben tweeted, "In September, we have to turn up the political heat" to convince world governments that carbon emissions must be reduced to net zero as quickly as possible to keep the Earth from warming more than 1.5 degrees Celsius.

Large gatherings are expected in major cities including New York, London and Berlin, with strikes taking place across Africa, Latin America and Asia as well.

In addition to the global climate strike on the 20th, during the Week of Action from September 24 to 28, organisers will hold protests
targeting specific fossil fuel companies and projects, teach- ins, people's assemblies and other events.

"We're talking about trying to get two to three percent of the population, which doesn't sound like a lot but that's a lot of people," a student organiser named Sana, who is attending a climate strike in New Jersey, told the UN Foundation. "We're calling for adults and students to be striking. Don't go to work, don't go to school, speak up about climate change because it's something that we need to be talking about and something that we need to show our leaders that we care about."

"Because of the actions of the United States government and the fossil fuel industry, my generation has never known a world free from the impacts of climate change," said Barrett.

Millions of people have taken part in climate strikes all over the world since September 20, 2018, when Greta Thunberg held a one- person protest outside Swedish Parliament and refused to attend school until her government took meaningful action to curb fossil fuel emissions which have helped make the last four years the warmest on record.

The strikes, which have taken place on a weekly basis since then in countries including Belgium, Uganda, the US, Australia and Japan, have been credited with helping to convince several countries and municipalities to declare a climate emergency and the European Commission to commit $250 billion to combating the crisis.

"We will go on for as long as it takes" to achieve more meaningful action, Thunberg tweeted on August 20.

"Our movement continues to grow and we will not rest until we stop burning fossil fuels and until we begin a rapid energy revolution with equity, reparations, and climate justice at its heart," said May Boeve, executive director of 350.org. "This is why we support the incredible and brave young people from every corner of this globe who are demanding that we all rise together now."

The global grassroots movement Extinction Rebellion, which has organised its own public actions around the world, expressed support for the climate strike and called on those who are concerned about the future of the planet to push through their "despair and eco-anxiety" and "turn such energy to action."

Shortly after the Week of Action ends on September 28, Extinction Rebellion will begin its own "Worldwide Rebellion" involving the peaceful occupation of parts of London and calling on people all over the globe "to rise up and rebel for our deep love of life and the need to protect it."

(Julia Conley is staff writer for Common Dreams, a non-profit independent US news portal.)

Ambedkar to Payal Tadvi: Dalits' Nightmares Continue

E. Edhaya Chandran

I felt that I was in a dungeon, and I longed for the company of some human being to talk to. But there was no one. In the absence of the company of human beings, I sought the company of books, and read and read. Absorbed in reading, I forgot my lonely condition. But the chirping and flying about of the bats, which had made the hall their home, often distracted my mind and sent cold shivers through me—reminding me of what I was endeavouring to forget, that I was in a strange place under strange conditions.

Many a time I must have been angry. But I subdued my grief and my anger through the feeling that though it was a dungeon, it was a shelter, and that some shelter was better than no shelter. So heart- rending was my condition that when my sister's son came from Bombay, bringing my remaining luggage which I had left behind, and when he saw my state, he began to cry so loudly that I had to send him back immediately. In this state I lived in the Parsi inn, impersonating a Parsi.

The above is an excerpt from the book Waiting for a Visa, an anthology of incidents that shaped Ambedkar's life. Ambedkar had to come back from London after his scholarship by the king of Baroda ended. Back in India in 1918, he was appointed as a probationer in the accountant general's office by the king. After only 11 days, he was forced to leave Baroda because he was constantly being humiliated by peons and other workers there. The floors of his office, which his colleagues believed had been rendered impure in the presence of an untouchable, were cleaned every day after he left. The files he touched were not touched by others. The office assistants never listened to him.
If work was humiliating, home was a nightmare. The above excerpt was written by Ambedkar recalling the terror he felt in the Parsi inn where he was staying in Baroda. Ambedkar posed as a Parsi as he knew he would not be given a place to stay in hotels if he revealed his Dalit identity. Eventually, he was caught in his lie and was thrown out by goons. He was never treated as a man should be but “was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility”.

The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of star dust. In every field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living.

This is an excerpt from the searing suicide note written by Vemula before he hanged himself. Vemula, a Ph.D. student at the University of Hyderabad, committed suicide on January 16, 2016 after his fellowship amount of Rs 25,000 was suspended following a complaint filed against him by the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, a student body affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Vemula was accused of indulging in “casteist and anti-national” activities.

Ambedkar’s humiliation and Vemula’s suicide are separated by almost a century, but it is baffling to see how both of them were made to go through the same struggles. After 72 years of Independence, India is still enslaved by the age-old cynical system of caste.

Dalits continue to be humiliated, threatened, harassed, lynchéd and killed.

The Constitution of India promises to provide justice, liberty of thought and expression, and equality of status and of opportunity to all its citizens.

The statistics given by various institutions prove otherwise. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, crimes against Dalits have risen by 25% between 2006 to 2016. Almost 99% of cases are pending police investigation. The conviction rate has also reduced by 2%.

Police also often refuse to file complaints in a number of cases, a fact which shows that the system of justice is futile for some. The paramount example of this is the dilution of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, by the Supreme Court.

While the number of Dalit killings increases day by day, the Supreme Court has diluted the act on the logic that the number of false cases has increased. The judiciary, which is touted to be the guardian of the Constitution, has failed to keep up the promise of justice given by the Constitution itself. These statistics compel us to ask a deeply disturbing question: Does the state recognise Dalits as citizens of India or are they outcastes in the eyes of the state also?

Incidents of caste discrimination in educational institutions in rural areas have been common, but institutions which are thought of as leading intellectual breeding grounds have also seen a surge in caste-based discrimination on campus. The case of Rohit Vemula is just the tip of the iceberg. Vemula’s suicide was followed by Muthukrishnan who was a Ph.D. student at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

Muthukrishnan, from Tamil Nadu, was found dead in his hostel room. Before killing himself, he wrote on Facebook, “When equality is denied, everything is denied. There is no equality in M.Phil./Ph.D. admission, there is no equality in viva-voce, there is only denial of equality, denying professor Sukhadeo Thorat recommendation, denying students protest places in ad-block, denying the education of the marginals.”

He was refused equality, he was refused the constitutional promise.

Dalit students have long been subjected to harassment but in these two incidents, it was institutionalised—a fact that becomes obvious from the reactions of the concerned institutions after the incidents had happened. After Vemula’s suicide, instead of strengthening protection for marginalised students, the police, courts and government were keen to prove that he was not from a Dalit community.

Muthukrishnan had clearly stated that he was discriminated against in the viva voce. In the recent case of Payal Tadvi, who was harassed by her seniors and committed suicide, humiliation after humiliation followed. She was told that she is only good to clean toilets. But the Indian Medical Association only vaguely acknowledged caste discrimination in medical education. The appointed investigative panel also submitted that Tadvi was harassed and ragged but held that there was no evidence of caste-based harassment.

In a sudden turn of events, Tadvi’s suicide notes were recovered from her phone and they turned the case. By not acknowledging the role of caste in these crimes, the institutions have ended up indirectly authorising them.
When discrimination is institutionalised, it kills upliftment. The new India is seeing a new code of discrimination. Dalits, who had been refused the right to education for centuries, have now gained it through the constitutional provision. But now, they are being subjected to constant harassment and humiliation within the educational institutions.

They are being made to feel that they don’t belong “here”. This new code of discrimination has been in development for more than a decade. In a number of reports on The Wire, Makepeace Sithlhou, a former campaigner with Amnesty International India, gives us haunting statistics of this new code. She starts with a report produced by a committee set up in 2007 by the All India Institute of Medical Sciences to look into the issue of caste discrimination on campus by teachers. As many as 84% of the Dalits students who were covered in the survey said that they have been asked about their caste either directly or indirectly by teachers during evaluation.

Another report highlights that only 155 universities out of 800 have implemented the UGC act on protecting oppressed students by adding a Scheduled Castes & Scheduled Tribes redressal portal in their college website and by establishing separate committees to look into the issue. In June 2015, IIT Roorkee dismissed 73 students based on poor performance. Almost three-quarters of the students who were dismissed were SCs and STs. The National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, which investigated the issue, said that the institution lacked facilities to support students from diverse backgrounds; it lacked English classes, summer classes and other remedial programmes.

In all these years since Independence, Dalits have held the Constitution as “their” political document and have seen it as the path to emancipation. But every act of arrogance or cruelty and the state’s indifference towards it breaks this constitutional promise to Dalits.

It is time that we critically analyse the Constitution. Suraj Yengde, in his book Caste Matters, discusses the constitutional limitations in the process of Dalit emancipation. He says, “Owing to the limited control of this institution, the Constitution has become synonymous to a grievance cell offering no immediate solutions.”

Dalits will have to organise themselves and transcend economic and intellectual barriers. Most Dalits do not even realise that the Constitution has given them a written set of rights, to be claimed. The recent conclusion of elections gives a clear representation of how Dalits have very little understanding about their rights and therefore seem to have voted for a party whose very agenda strikes at the core of Dalit issues.

Caste has always evolved to suit the change of times. It has taken on a new form now and the fight against it should also evolve. It is time that we bring forward a new theory of Dalitism which encompasses all Dalits and provides them with a common forum to fight for their rights. Until then, we must “educate, organise and agitate.”

(E. Edhaya Chandran is pursuing post-graduate studies in political science at Madras Christian College.)

The Article 370 Amendments: Key Legal Issues

Gautam Bhatia

In this post, I will attempt to break down the constitutional changes to Article 370, and highlight some key legal issues surrounding them. In essence, to understand what has happened today, there are three important documents. At the heart of everything is Presidential Order C.O. 272, which constitutes the basis for everything that follows. The second is a Statutory Resolution introduced in the Rajya Sabha, which—invoking the authority that flows from the effects of Presidential Order C.O. 272—recommends that the President abrogate (much of) Article 370. The third is the Reorganisation Bill, that breaks up the state of Jammu and Kashmir into the Union Territories of Ladakh (without a legislature) and Jammu and Kashmir (with a legislature).

To understand the legal issues, we need to begin with the language of unamended Article 370. Article 370, as is well known, limited the application of the provisions of the Indian Constitution to the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Under Article 370(1)(d), constitutional provisions could be applied to the state from time to time, as modified by the President through a Presidential
Order, and upon the concurrence of the state government (this was the basis for the controversial Article 35A, for example). Perhaps the most important part of 370, however, was the proviso to clause 3. Clause 3 itself authorised the President to pass an order removing or modifying parts of Article 370. The proviso stated that:

Provided that the recommendation of the Constituent Assembly of the State referred to in clause (2) shall be necessary before the President issues such a notification.

In other words, therefore, for Article 370 itself to be amended, the recommendation of the Constituent Assembly of J&K was required. Now, the Constituent Assembly (CA) of J&K ceased functioning in 1957. This has led to a long-standing debate about whether Article 370 has effectively become permanent (because there is no CA to give consent to its amendment), whether it would require a revival of a J&K CA to amend it, or whether it can be amended through the normal amending procedure under the Constitution.

C.O. 272, however, takes an entirely different path. C.O. 272 uses the power of the President under Article 370(1) (see above), to indirectly amend Article 370(3), via a third constitutional provision: Article 367. Article 367 provides various guidelines about how the Constitution may be interpreted. Now, C.O. 272 adds to Article 367 an additional clause, which has four sub-clauses. Sub-clause 4 stipulates that “in proviso to clause (3) of Article 370 of this Constitution, the expression “Constituent Assembly of the State referred to in clause (2)” shall read “legislative Assembly of the State.”

In other words, this is what has happened. Article 370(1) allows the President—with the concurrence of the government of J&K (more on that in a moment)—to amend or modify various provisions of the Constitution in relation to J&K. Article 370(3) proviso states that Article 370 itself is to be amended by the concurrence of the Constituent Assembly. C.O. 272, therefore, uses the power under 370(1) to amend a provision of the Constitution (Article 367) which, in turn, amends Article 370(3), and takes out the Constituent Assembly’s concurrence for any further amendments to Article 370. And this, in turn, becomes the trigger for the statutory resolution, that recommends to the President the removal of (most of) Article 370 (as the Constituent Assembly’s concurrence is no longer required).

This is very clever. Is it legal? One serious objection is Article 370(1)(c). Article 370(1)(c) (unamended) stated that “notwithstanding anything contained in this Constitution, the provisions of Article 1 and this Article shall apply in relation to that State.” This is absolutely crucial, because it makes clear that the power of the President to amend provisions of the Constitution in relation to J&K does not extend to Article 1 and “this Article”, i.e., Article 370 itself. 370(1)(d) makes it even clearer where it refers to the “other provisions” of the Constitution that may be altered by Presidential Order (and this is how the present Presidential Order is different from previous ones, such as those that introduced Article 35A). Article 370 itself, therefore, cannot be amended by a Presidential Order such as C.O. 272 (the one exception was a clarificatory amendment, which is not analogous to this one).

Now, it may be immediately objected that C.O. 272 does not amend Article 370: it amends Article 367. The point, however, is that the content of those amendments do amend Article 370, and as the Supreme Court has held on multiple occasions, you cannot do indirectly what you cannot do directly. I would therefore submit that the legality of C.O. 272—insofar as it amends Article 370—is questionable, and as that is at the root of everything, it throws into question the entire exercise.

There is a second important point to be noted here. C.O. 272 says—as it must—that the concurrence of the government of the state of Jammu and Kashmir has been taken. However, Jammu and Kashmir has been under President’s Rule for many months now. Consequently, actually, the consent is that of the Governor. However, there are two serious problems with basing C.O. 272 upon the consent of the Governor. The first is that the Governor is a representative of the Central Government—like the President. In effect, therefore, Presidential Order 272 amounts to the Central Government taking its own consent to amend the Constitution.

There is, however, a more important issue. President’s Rule is temporary. It is only meant to happen when constitutional machinery breaks down in a state, and an elected government is impossible. President’s Rule is meant to be a stand-in until the elected government is restored. Consequently, decisions of a permanent character—such as changing the entire status of a state—taken without the elected legislative assembly, but by the Governor, are inherently problematic. Formally,
they may be within the bounds of legality; however, as the Supreme Court held in *D.C. Wadhwa*, on the question of re-promulgation of Ordinances, formal legality can nonetheless, in effect, amount to a fraud on the Constitution. Using the Governor to sign off on a Presidential Order that fundamentally alters the constitutional character of a federal unit appears, to me, to be straying dangerously close to the constitutional fraud line.

For these two reasons, therefore—first, on the indirect amendment of Article 370(3) proviso via 370(1), and secondly, on the use of the Governor as a substitute for the elected assembly in a matter of this kind—I would submit that there are serious legal and constitutional problems with Presidential Order C.O. 272—which, of course, forms the basis of both the statutory resolution and the Reorganisation Bill.

*(Gautam Bhatia is a lawyer.)*

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**India’s Withering Public Employment**

**C.P. Chandrasekhar**

While the neoliberal focus has been on attempts to “shrink the state” on the grounds of corruption and inefficiency, sensible people have long recognised that high levels of public employment tend to be associated with better quality of life for people in a society.

After all, the essential public services, from infrastructure to amenities, security and social services, mostly have to be delivered by governments. This is because private markets either under-provide these amenities, or simply do not provide them at all, and also because private provision, based on profitability, delivers much more unequal results.

And delivering all this necessarily requires employing people.

Because of this, it is possible to argue that the extent of public employment can be a useful indicator of the coverage and quality of public services in a country. By this marker, unsurprisingly, Scandinavian countries (known also to be among the most equal societies in the world) have the largest extent of public employment.

But what is also remarkable is just how low India’s public employment is by international standards.

Relative to population, public employment in India is only one-tenth of that in Norway, only 15 per cent of that in Brazil and much less than a third of that in China (see Chart 1).

Clearly, India is hugely under-providing public services, and it is therefore no surprise that so many people remain excluded from the essential public services that ensure quality of life, or receive such services only very partially and inadequately.

**Existing posts**

It is not just that such employment (and the number of public jobs) is absolutely low, which indicates that both coverage and quality of public services is grossly inadequate. It is also that the governments at both Central and State levels have been very poor even in filling the

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**Chart 1: Public Employees per Thousand Population (in 2015)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Employees per Thousand Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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vacancies in existing posts, so that despite some increase in sanctioned posts, the absolute number of those employed has barely budged over time despite increasing population.

As a result, in 2014, nearly 7.5 lakh positions were lying vacant in the Central government alone, amounting to almost one in five of all sanctioned positions (Chart 2).

However, instead of trying to ensure that all vacant posts are filled, both Central and State governments appear to have further reduced the number of those in employment.

**Decline in stability**

An examination of the total employment in central public sector enterprises (CPSEs) provides a telling example. Even in the period between 2011–12 and 2017–18, employment in CPSEs fell by as much as 2.2 lakh in total. What is more, the biggest declines in such employment were not at the managerial and supervisory levels—such employment remained mostly stable with only minor declines—but among “non-executive” workers of all kinds. In other word, fewer actual workers were being handled by relatively more managers and supervisors.

Even worse, among such “non-executive” workers, the proportion that are under contract or casual/daily work has increased significantly (Chart 3).

By 2017–18, such insecure workers accounted for more than one-third of the actual workforce. Less secure contracts and deteriorating conditions of work obviously spell bad news for the workers involved, but they also have implications for the workings of such enterprises and for long-run productivity gains, because the advantages of learning by doing are less likely to be realised.

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**Chart 2: Total Central Government Employment (in lakhs)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sanctioned posts</th>
<th>Posts filled</th>
<th>Vacant posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>38.25</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>38.92</td>
<td>32.31</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>40.49</td>
<td>33.02</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chart 3: Share of Casual and Contract Workers in Total CPSE Workers (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>34.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Government’s strategy

It is not clear whether the Central government’s niggardly attitude towards public employment results from ideological predilection or is rather a ham-handed attempt to deal with the fiscal mess in which it is undoubtedly trapped.

It is true that simply leaving posts vacant saves the government some money by reducing the potential wage bill.

But that is not just short-sighted strategy; it is also deeply irresponsible and unjust, because it deprives people of the goods and services the government should be providing, lowers the quality of such delivery, and also reduces the level of employment that could be generated (directly and through multiplier effects) if all the posts were filled and if the posts were expanded to fill the clear needs.

In a functioning democracy, the political process would be one that would force the government to provide such necessary employment. Sadly, that does not seem to be the situation in India at present.

(C.P. Chandrasekhar is Professor at the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.)

India’s Real Economy Tanking

Jayati Ghosh

Suddenly, it seems like everything is shrinking in India: Our capacity for tolerance and diversity, the space for democratic expression and dissent—and now, economic growth.

The warning signs have reached a point where they cannot be ignored any longer, and more people, including prominent business leaders, are speaking out. Yet, at least overtly, the government is in denial, claiming that this serious slowdown is at most a “correction,” resulting from “an excess of reforms,” all of which will make everything better very soon.

The writing is on the wall

The economic data coming out now are stark. There is negative growth in the core industrial sector as passenger vehicle sales, tractor sales, two-wheeler sales, and domestic air traffic growth have all been declining for around six months.

Other consumer durables, like white goods, also show a hit in sales. Sales of fast moving consumer goods (FMCG), normally the last to react, are slowing down.

Capacity utilisation in all manufacturing segments is apparently below 70% on average, even as inventories pile up, rail freight traffic is now below the past five years’ average, and the real estate sector is stuck with over seven years’ stock of unsold buildings.

All this comes even as the credibility of India’s official GDP data is being questioned, as it does not appear to capture the material realities faced by millions of producers, employers, and workers.

Meanwhile, low inflation rates, the only bright spot on the horizon, seem to be yet another symptom of the slowdown. Core inflation is at its lowest in two years, reflecting weak demand for both consumption and investment goods.

Poor management

What is happening now is only the culmination of a medium-term trend, that has been apparent for a while.

This is clearly a crisis of aggregate demand, brought about by poor economic management over the past several years, in a broader context of a growth process based on increasing inequality.

The unfolding scenario of falling employment and wages, ever since demonetisation in November 2016, which was exacerbated by the poorly implemented goods and services tax (GST), has added to a medium-term growth trajectory in which the fruits of growth went disproportionately to a small elite of big capital and rich individuals, without translating into broader economic improvements.

Meanwhile these badly managed policy measures served as body blows to informal economic activity, which went through significant declines in employment and output. However, they did not immediately affect the formal sector.

This is because, at first, formal enterprises gained at the cost of informal ones (except in agriculture where almost all producers suffered), and so they experienced no real downturn and, in some sectors, possibly even a slight increase in sales. But the resulting loss in
livelihoods and wages eventually had an effect on the demand for the formal sector output, because there were no counterbalancing moves by the government.

This is starkly evident from the employment data, which otherwise would make no sense.

**Shrinking labour force**

Data from the latest labour force survey reveal that the total workforce reduced by 9.1 million people (from 474 million to 465 million) between 2011–12 and 2017–18, a period when GDP was supposedly growing rapidly and the demographic dividend was supposed to bring us the greatest benefits.

Employment in agriculture fell by 26.7 million, mostly women, but this could be expected and would even be desirable in a period of rapid industrialisation. Unfortunately, the manufacturing industry did not create jobs either—employment in manufacturing also fell in this period, by 3.5 million. The boom sectors of the 2000s, construction and services, added only 3.6 million and 17.1 million respectively, not enough to make up for the job losses in other sectors.

This has to have a negative impact on aggregate demand, which would then have a more prolonged and severe impact through the negative multiplier effects of employment losses.

**Cosmetic changes**

But in subsequent years, even as consumption demand was negatively affected (which in turn reduced the profit expectations of producers in formal enterprises), the government did not step up in terms of a fiscal stimulus designed to counteract these negative effects.

Instead, it kept assuming or hoping that cosmetic measures (like fiddling with “ease of doing business” indicators and further measures to ease foreign capital inflow) would somehow attract investment into the economy that would counteract all the negative impulses.

**Macroeconomically speaking, this was hardly likely, since investment comes where there is expectation of profits, which in turn comes with growing markets.**

**In the Indian case, the insufficiency of domestic investment was worsened by problems in the banking sector, which was saddled with high ratios of non-performing loans.**

In the wake of demonetisation, when bank credit froze for a while, non-bank financing was promoted heavily, especially to medium-sized enterprises; but that too has come a cropper with the near-collapse of Infrastructure Leasing & Financial Services (IL&FS).

So those who can access credit are wary of investing and would rather invest abroad, while those who still wish to invest cannot access credit.

The obvious immediate task for the government is to revive demand, which at the moment is only possible through an injection of public spending, ideally in necessary infrastructure and in social sectors that have high employment multipliers.

This is the immediate medicine required to keep the patient alive. Further improvement requires more fundamental reforms that would change the orientation of economic strategy away from the misplaced belief that markets will solve everything, to more employment-generating innovation-based growth.

*(Jayati Ghosh is Professor of Economics at the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, School of Social Sciences, at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi.)*

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**Malerkotla: A History of Compassion**

**Ishmeet Nagpal**

When we think of Punjab, we visualise a vibrant and colourful culture, warm people, and of course great food. The land has a rich history, but it is also one fraught with violence and turmoil. When British lawyer Cyril Radcliffe drew an arbitrary border for the Partition of India–Pakistan in 1947, it sliced right through the heart of Punjab, sparking violence that still lingers like a thorn on the tongues of our grandparents who speak of the villages they can never return to or know. But while there were mass killings of Sikhs and Muslims in villages and cities across Punjab in 1947, Malerkotla in Punjab saw no instances of communal violence and till date, the city stands in continued communal harmony. Malerkotla is the only Muslim majority city in Punjab with 68.5% residents being Muslim and the rest being Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Christians and Buddhists.
History of peace

To understand what made Malerkotla an oasis of peace even as Partition violence progressed all around it, we need to delve into a centuries-old story of compassion. When the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh ji, was waging a dharma yudh to protect non-Muslims from forced conversions by ruler Aurangzeb, his two youngest sons Sahebzada Zorawar Singh (age 9) and Sahebzada Fateh Singh (age 7), along with his mother Mata Gujri, were captured by the Nawab of Sirhind Wazir Khan while escaping from the siege of Anandpur in 1704. After keeping them captive for a few days, Wazir Khan ordered for the two children to be bricked behind a wall and hence, suffocated alive. Sher Mohammad Khan, the Nawab of Malerkotla, who was present at court, raised his objection to this order saying that the execution of children was a heinous act and was against the tenets of the Qur'an which did not allow the killing of innocent children. Despite his objection and appeals that reached even Aurangzeb, Wazir Khan’s orders were eventually followed and the children were executed. Mata Gujri is said to have collapsed because of the shock of her grandchildren’s deaths. When the news of the demise of his mother and youngest children reached Guru Gobind Singh ji, he was also informed about Nawab Sher Mohammad Khan’s protest. The Guru is said to have blessed the house of the Nawab, declaring that its "roots shall remain forever green".

Residents of Malerkotla believe this could be one of the reasons the town produces an abundance of vegetables throughout the year and is referred to as the “vegetable capital” of Punjab, supplying its produce to the entire state.

The Nawabs of Malerkotla before Sher Mohammad Khan had also kept the spirit of harmony alive by practicing secularism and tolerance during their reign. In her book Sharing the Sacred: Practicing Pluralism in Muslim North India, Anna Bigelow cites the example of Nawab Bayzid Khan (1659) who invited a Chishti Sufi saint, Shah Fazl, and a Bairagi Hindu saint, Mahatma Sham Damodar, to bless the site of establishment of Kotla in a public enactment of pluralism. Today the tomb complex, or dargah, of Shah Fazl is a popular local mosque and shrine.

Blessings of a Guru honoured

During Partition, when Punjab was ravaged by riots, looting, violence, sexual abuse and mass killings, Malerkotla remained almost untouched. Sikhs from surrounding areas assured the resident Muslims that they were safe in Malerkotla and did not need to migrate to the newly formed Pakistan and risk their lives in the process of crossing the border.

In present day Malerkotla, inter-religious friendship is celebrated through shared festivals, partnering of communities in business and trade, mixed neighbourhoods and mutual respect of the residents. Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus live side by side and come to each other’s aid whenever needed. Sikhs built Gurudwara Haa Da Nara in Malerkotla, named so to honour the “rallying cry for justice” raised by Nawab Sher Mohammad Khan and it remains a revered place of worship for Sikhs.

Pippa Virdee, author of From the Ashes of 1947: Reimagining Punjab included a chapter on “Sacred Malerkotla” in the book. When Sabrang India asked her to what factors she thought Malerkotla owed its enduring peace, she told us, “Based on the fieldwork I conducted in Malerkotla I found that many of the residents still cited Sher Mohammad Khan’s protest as one of the most important reasons for Malerkotla’s peaceful communal relations. However, having looked at the state records, my research concluded that the role of the state was very important in maintaining peace during the partition violence. It was also quite apparent and exceptional that communal harmony was emphasised rather than the usual propaganda of enmity and tension amongst different communities. If the state is determined to maintain peace and prevent violence, it can play a positive role. If on the other hand, it wants to promote tension between the communities for its benefits, it was possible to do that as well because there was tension, but this was quickly and effectively diffused by the Nawabs. Of course, for the residents, the protest by Khan and the long history of communal harmony in the princely state is an important reminder to observe restraint rather than escalate tension.”

She makes an important point about the role of the state and administration in promoting communal harmony. In present day Malerkotla, children learn Urdu and Punjabi in schools together and are living in an environment that shows them examples of communal harmony all around them, giving us hope that the teachings of their ancestors will be carried forward.

As Anna Bigelow says, “Whether the people attribute the communal unity to Allah’s grace, the Guru’s blessing, the protective power of a
saint, or to the secular policies of the nawabs, they greatly value this legacy of peace and are justifiably proud of it.”

**Conclusion: Little Acts build up a Grand(er) Narrative**

In this age of technology and instant gratification, with 24 hour news cycles that highlight how our country is disintegrating from within its seams, we seem to have lost touch with stories from our past that highlight the plurality and tolerance as well as a sense of community that had united India. It is these stories that make and build the present and even the future. The story of Malerkotla shows us how a simple act of compassion can span generations of peace, and how we can bring harmony to our country if each of us were to emulate the spirit of Malerkotla in our own small way. It will be our little acts of compassion that will build a strong and peaceful India for the generation to come.

(Ishmeet Nagpal is a social activist, poet, theatre artist and writer. She works as Communications Manager at Save The Children India in Mumbai.)

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**Remembering George Orwell, the Socialist**

Anjan Basu

To most readers, George Orwell (June 25, 1903–January 21, 1950) remains the author of *Nineteen Eighty-four and Animal Farm*, Stalinism’s most trenchant critic and champion of liberal democracy. Essentially, this view is not wrong, except that his most-read fiction provides us with only a fragmented perspective on Orwell’s moral and intellectual universe. The popular view, however, is carefully nurtured and widely propagated for a reason.

Consider, for example, these words that you would read in the introduction to the 1950s’ Signet edition of *Animal Farm*: “If the book itself had left any doubt of the matter (of Orwell’s artistic intentions), Orwell dispelled it in his essay ‘Why I Write’: Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against Totalitarianism….”

This seems to make sense. ‘Why I Write’, published a year after *Animal Farm*, was some kind of a statement of literary intent—a writer’s manifesto, if you like. And, anti-totalitarianism is without a doubt one of *Animal Farm*’s major themes. But is it the only theme, as the Signet introduction would have us believe? There’s the rub. *Animal Farm* is not only a statement, indeed a very angry statement, against totalitarianism: equally, it is a passionate statement for the equality of all men also. And the sentence ‘quoted’ from ‘Why I Write’ actually reads like this:

> “Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic Socialism, as I understand it” (italics Orwell’s).

In this selective quoting from an Orwell text by the Signet editor is implicit what was once memorably called “the politics of ellipsis”, a familiar Cold War stratagem of the McCarthy era. And, in case you did not notice, the ‘quotation’ spells totalitarianism with a capital T while the original does not: instead, Orwell had used a capital S for Socialism, as was his wont. This editorial sleight-of-hand assumes significance in light of the fact that *Animal Farm* has been a more-or-less permanent fixture in the school literature curriculum in the UK and the US since the 1950s. It sold well over 20 million copies in these two countries alone.

The fact of the matter is, George Orwell was a socialist above everything else, a clear-eyed, committed socialist. And it was in his socialism that his deep distrust of all dictators and megalomaniacs was firmly anchored. His engagement with socialism was not only emotional. It was a sharply articulated intellectual engagement also, as we will see presently. If you look once more at the sentence we quoted above, you will find Orwell identifying the year 1936 as some kind of a watershed in his career—1936 was the year of the Spanish Civil War, the war that for many of its contemporaries was as pure and compelling a cause to fight for as few other things in history have ever been. Orwell himself fought in the Civil War, not until its bitter end, but till a sniper’s bullet that nearly killed him caught him.
on his throat and incapacitated him.

He had not, unlike many others, come to Spain as a member of the International Brigade, but—as he wrote later—“with some notion of writing newspaper articles” about the war. “But I had joined the militia almost immediately, because at that time and in that atmosphere it seemed the only conceivable thing to do”. He happens to talk about that atmosphere himself, and it will be worth our while going over his description of it:

“When one came (to Barcelona) straight from England the aspect of Barcelona was somewhat startling and overwhelming. It was the first time that I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle.... In outward appearance it was a town in which the wealthy classes had practically ceased to exist. Except for a small number of women and foreigners there were no ‘well-dressed’ people at all. Practically everyone wore rough working-class clothes, or blue overalls, or some variant of the militia uniform. All this was queer and moving. There was much in it that I did not understand, in some ways I did not even like it, but I recognised it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for.”

And again, although practically everything was in short supply in the Barcelona of December 1936, Orwell found it remarkable how “so far as one could judge the people were contented and hopeful. There was no unemployment and the price of living was still extremely low; you saw very few conspicuously destitute people ... Above all, there was a belief in the revolution and the future, a feeling of having suddenly emerged into an era of equality and freedom. Human beings were trying to behave as human beings and not as cogs in the capitalist machine.”

The excerpts above are from Homage to Catalonia, Orwell’s account of the Spanish Civil War as he saw it. Perhaps not many of Orwell’s readers read Homage or count it among his major works, and they are apt to do the same in regard to his journalistic writings also.

The truth, however, is that for a proper reading of Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-four, one needs to have some familiarity with Orwell’s non-fictional and journalistic writing, and with the kind of person he happened to be. Barely a year before he started writing Animal Farm, Orwell declined an invitation from the Duchess of Atholl to speak at the ‘British League for European Freedom’ because he “could not associate with a Conservative body that defended Democracy in England but had nothing to say about British Imperialism”. He went on in the same letter to say, presumably leaving that noble lady quite scandalised, that he “belong(ed) to the Left and must work inside it, however much I hate Russian totalitarianism and its poisonous influence in this country.”

At another place, Orwell speaks with loathing of “the truly frightening spectacle of Conservative MPs (in the English Parliament) wildly cheering the news that British ships, bringing food to the Spanish Republican government, had been bombed by Italian aeroplanes.” And this is why Orwell thought the British government was so ambivalent towards fascism in the years leading to the Second World War: “The British ruling class were not altogether wrong in thinking that Fascism were on their side. It is a fact that any rich man, unless he is a Jew, has less to fear from Fascism than either Communism or democratic Socialism.” One imagines that a clearer articulation of Orwell’s politics is not necessary.

The last two quotes are from the 1940 essay ‘The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius’—by far Orwell’s most serious attempt at articulating the need for social and political change in England. And his effort was not only to etch the contours of the kind of society he thought desirable, but also to flesh it out. The first half deals with what contemporary English society looked like, with the many fault lines standing out prominently across its surface. “There is no question about the inequality of wealth in England. It is grosser than in any European country, and you have only to look down the nearest street to see it. Economically, England is certainly two nations, if not three or four”. And about the nature of the English ruling classes: “They could not struggle against Nazism or fascism, because they could not understand them.... To understand Fascism they would have to study the theory of Socialism, which would have forced them to realise that the economic system by which they lived was unjust, inefficient and out-of-date.... After years of aggression and massacres (by the Nazis/Fascists), they have grasped only one fact, that Hitler and Mussolini were hostile to Communism. Therefore, it was argued, they must be friendly to the British dividend-drawer.” And again, “What this war has demonstrated is that private capitalism—that is, an economic system in which land, factories, mines and transport are owned privately and operated solely for profit—does not work. It cannot deliver the goods”.


After this, Orwell sets out his programme for the establishment of a socialist order. He begins by defining socialism, his definition pretty much approximating to the famous ‘Clause 4’ of the constitution of the British Labour Party, namely, a society whose economic foundation is built on a ‘common ownership of the means of production’. “Crudely, the State, representing the whole nation, owns everything, and everyone is a State employee. This does not mean that people are stripped of all private possessions such as clothes and furniture, but it does mean that all productive goods such as land, mines, ships and machinery are the property of the State. The State is the sole large-scale producer.”

Orwell shows a remarkably clear understanding of the dynamics of the productive forces under different societal models: “Unlike capitalism, it (Socialism) can solve the problems of production and consumption. At normal times, a capitalist economy can never consume all that it produces, so that there is always a wasted surplus … and always unemployment. In time of war, on the other hand, it has difficulty in producing all that it needs, because nothing is produced unless someone sees his way to making a profit out of it…. In a Socialist economy these problems do not exist. The State simply calculates what goods will be needed and does its best to produce them.”

In simple, un-cluttered prose, this sums up the contradictions between productive forces and relations of production inherent in the capitalist system, as a Marxist would see them.

As for the Socialist programme proper, here are the six legs on which Orwell expects it to stand in England’s case:

- Nationalisation of land, mines, railways, banks, major industries.
- Limitation of incomes, so that the highest tax-free income never exceeds the lowest by more than ten to one.
- Democratic reforms in the educational system.
- Immediate Dominion status for India, with power to secede after the war.
- Formation of an Imperial General Council, in which the colonies are to be represented.
- A formal alliance with China, Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and all other victims of the Fascist powers.

Orwell’s six-point programme is solid common sense. But noteworthy here is his recognition that an imperialist power could not aspire to become a socialist society without first disbanding its empire. It is also striking how Orwell could pare away the woolly sentimentality sticking to the idea of socialism and propose a programme of socialist transformation in such simple terms.

Written in 1940, in the shadow of the World War, the essay makes the point that “the war and the revolution are inseparable”, that “we cannot win the war without introducing Socialism, nor establish Socialism without winning the war”. One can argue that things eventually did not turn out in quite the way Orwell had predicted, but such an argument need not detain us here. What is important is that, for Orwell, it was socialism that was fascism’s strongest antidote, a way of life that you had to embrace if you were to fight fascism in right earnest.

The values that inform Orwell’s best writing are the simple, uncomplicated values of decency, compassion and faith in the innate goodness of ordinary men. He gravitated towards socialism—‘democratic Socialism’, in his words—because he believed that only socialism was compatible with these values in their true sense. He never abandoned the idea of socialism because of disenchantment with Stalin’s Russia, much as he hated Stalinism. His commitment to the idea of socialism was, thus, not so much ideological as organic, moral.

It is small wonder, then, that the Signet edition of Animal Farm felt the need for the ellipsis that we encountered above. Orwell’s Socialism (as he would always spell the word) in its unexpurgated form would have clearly made him a persona non grata in the US, at any rate in the US of Joseph McCarthy.

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

**Books by Surendra Mohan**

2. Samajwad, Dharma Nirapekshata aur Samajik Nyaya Reissued as second edition; Price 500 rupees
   Published by Rajkamal Prakashan, 2a Netaji Subhash Road, New Delhi 11002
3. Vartaman Rajneeti ki Jwalant Chunautiyan. Price 400 rupees
   Published by Anamika Publishers and Distributors. Ansari Road, New Delhi 110002
4. Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia ki Neetiyan: (This booklet was published late last year.) Price 25 rupees.
Having listened to the debates on Kashmir in the Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha, the Prime Minister’s address to the nation, and having watched subsequent developments in Kashmir, we as citizens of India inspired by the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi feel compelled to state that the government has pushed the country into a blind alley. The gun that was used to silence Kashmir is now being used as a telescope through which to see Kashmir. This is shameful, unfortunate and ominous for India.

A whole state has vanished from the map in broad daylight. The Indian Union had 28 states, now it has 27. This is not a magic show, where a magician shows us, we know, something unreal and illusory. Here we are witnessing something cruel, ugly, undemocratic and seemingly irreversible. It reveals the poverty of our democratic politics.

Even during the Emergency, the Lok Sabha was not humiliated in this manner—the Opposition then ensured that. This time our democracy has plunged to a new low. It is being said that democracy is driven by the majority and a large majority has decided the fate of Kashmir. What is blithely concealed is that a true majority implies a multiplicity of opinions and the presence of contending views. What took place in the Parliament this time was far from an exchange of views or a serious debate. One man shouted, more than three hundred thumped desks, and the rest sat crestfallen, defeated. This is not bahumat or majority, but bahusankhya or majoritarianism—an attempt to rule by numbers. There was no clash of well-thought-out opinions or convincing arguments. You were only offered heads to be counted.

History bequeathed Kashmir to us with a challenge—how to make it a part of our geography. Globally it was a rare example of a state signing a conditional treaty of accession. That is how Kashmir came to us and we accepted it. Article 370 was an instrument of that treaty. In its original conception, as pronounced by Jawaharlal Nehru, it was described as a temporary provision, which would become in the long run redundant. Indeed, that is what it became. Barring those who took advantage of it and those who could not take advantage of Kashmir because of it, there were only a handful of people aware of the existence of Article 370.

Alas, along with the redoubtable challenge Kashmir posed, history also bestowed us with a new combination of amoral politics, an insatiable hunger for power, national and international machinations of communal forces, and imperialist interventions through Pakistan. Kashmir, known as a heaven on earth, came to us enmeshed in hellish complications. And this was at a time when we had just emerged from a bloodbath of our own, and were struggling to reassemble a fragmented self. It was the most delicate moment in the life of newly decolonised India.

We could have closed our doors on Kashmir, but we did not. It was an act of courage, a new political experiment. We have drifted so far from that moment in history that we cannot fully appreciate the subtle balance at which the triumvirate of Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel and Sheikh Abdullah arrived. They were the ones who shaped the contours of Kashmir, as we know it today. Of course, there were mistakes and errors of judgment but popular opposition leaders with moral stature—such as Jayaprakash Narayan, Vinoba Bhave and Ram Manohar Lohia—did not allow absolutist measures in Kashmir. And now, we suddenly find, Kashmir has become a mortuary.

It is being said that a handful of people, especially three families, have run regimes of loot and plunder all these years. Perhaps, but why were no legal remedies sought for that? Instead, the entire state has been turned into a prison. Is the government so weak that it cannot take on the might of these three families? Not only the Congress but also Atal Bihari Vajpayee and the present regime have shared power with these families. Does that mean that they too have a share in the loot? In any case, it is doubtful if our political system is capable of running without corruption? Can somebody tell us, how did the ruling party receive the billions of rupees reported by newspapers recently? How is it that the stream of wealth somehow begins to flow towards those in power? Corruption and nepotism are not confined to Kashmir. Mahatma Gandhi rightly called the entire system rotten.

We will not be able to lock down Kashmir forever. The doors will surely open, the people will come out, and their anguish will burst forth. Foreign elements will poison their minds with even more vigour.

Statement on Kashmir

Gandhi Peace Foundation
All the leaders of the opposition who were urging the people to maintain peace and abide by the rule of law have been imprisoned. We have burnt all the bridges for a possible dialogue.

The picture is far from bucolic. The leaders of the ruling party are busy displaying their ugly private fantasies and greed in public statements on Kashmir. This naked display of the desire to exploit Kashmir in the guise of investment and development has become disgusting. The Prime Minister is right in saying that celebrations are premature and there is a great deal of work to be done in Kashmir. But how does one trust his words? The Parliament was illuminated with celebratory lights right after the passage of the Bill. What is there to celebrate in the unfortunate step we have taken in our own country, against our own people? Such celebrations only deepen the wounds of the Kashmiris.

Those who truly love India and care about its honour and its sovereignty must step in to compensate for the failure of vision, leadership and integrity. What happened in Parliament is not irrefutable or inevitable. Duly elected lawmakers can reverse last week’s decisions. If the Emergency could be overturned, there is no reason why the abrogation of Article 370 cannot be undone, provided enough MPs feel that way. What is harder to undo is the damage done to our democratic political culture. What cannot be bridged is the trust deficit.

We must stand with the Kashmiris in their hour of crisis, which is equally our hour of crisis. Our helpless fellow-citizens who have been imprisoned must know that all right-thinking Indians share their anguish. The government must protect law and order, but it must also allow free expression at every level. That will help us to normalise the situation.

Sd /-
Kumar Prashant, Ashish Nandy, Ashok Vajpeyi, Satypal Grover, Apoorvanand, Anand Kumar and many others.

Major Economies Move Towards Recession

Nick Beams

16 August, 2019: Markets around the world fell yesterday in response to the biggest fall on Wall Street for the year on August 14, amid further indications from bond markets and production data that the global economy is moving into recession.

In response to the Wall Street decline, markets in Asia fell, with Japan’s Topix index down 1 percent while the Australian market dropped 2.9 percent, wiping $60 billion off share values. Markets in Europe also fell before recovering some of their losses later in the day.

Yesterday Wall Street whipsawed in response to news reports on the state of the US–China trade war. Futures markets were down before the start of trade on the basis of a statement from Beijing that it would “retaliate” against the latest imposition of tariffs by the US, but the market rose in response to what was seen as a more conciliatory statement from Beijing.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Hua Chunying said: “We hope the US can work in concert with China to implement the two presidents’ consensus that was reached in Osaka, and to work out a mutually acceptable solution through equal-footed dialogue and consultation with mutual respect.”

But any prospect of such a resolution appears no closer with Trump saying that any agreement with China had to be “on our terms”.

As trade war tensions show no sign of easing, the bond markets continue to send out signals that the conditions for a recession are building. This week the yield curve inverted in both the US and the UK, meaning that the yield on two-year government debt rose above that on ten-year bonds. This is regarded as a forecast of recession because it indicates that investors are seeking a “safe haven”.

Deutsche Bank strategist Jim Reid told the Financial Times: “For me yesterday’s … inversion is the one that worries me the most. In my opinion, it has the best track record for predicting an upcoming recession over more cycles than any of the others.”

In a further indication of the worsening economic outlook, the yield on 30-year US Treasury bonds dropped below 2 percent, for the first time ever, reaching its lowest level on records going back to the 1970s.

The historically unprecedented conditions now prevailing in financial markets—the result of the pumping out of trillions of dollars by the world’s central banks in response to the global financial crisis...
of 2008—is indicated by the latest data on negative yielding debt.

Bonds with a negative yield, meaning that investors would make a loss if they held them to maturity, have risen to $16 trillion, after passing the $15 trillion mark just 10 days ago. At the end of last year the value of bonds with negative yield was $8 trillion, meaning that it has doubled in just eight months.

And the central banks are preparing to pump still more money into financial markets. The US Federal Reserve is set to cut its base rate by at least 0.25 percentage points in September and possibly more, while the European Central Bank (ECB) is set to make a major move on monetary policy when it meets next month.

It will be a large-scale operation as indicated in remarks by Olli Rehn, the governor of Finland’s central bank and a member of the ECB’s governing council, in an interview with the Wall Street Journal yesterday. “It is important that we come up with a significant and impactful policy package in September,” he said. “When you’re working with financial markets, it’s often better to overshoot than undershoot and better to have a very strong package of policy measures than to tinker.”

The measures under consideration include a further cut in the ECB key interest rate, already sitting at minus 0.4 percent, and a resumption of its asset purchasing program after the ECB had previously decided to phase it out. Rehn pointed to a series of risks, including an unstable political situation in Italy, an economic slowdown in China, uncertainties caused by the US–China trade conflict and the prospect of a hard Brexit as justification for the ECB move.

But any move on monetary policy will do nothing to boost global growth. The increased supply of cheap cash will simply be used for speculative financial operations.

When the central banks initiated their so-called “unconventional” measures in the wake of the global financial crisis, the claim was that this would provide a boost to the economy and lead eventually to a “normalisation” of monetary policy. That program has been thrown aside. Easy money has done nothing to promote economic expansion but has been the chief means of boosting financial markets. So addicted have they now become to the continued flow of cheap cash that any move to cut it off threatens to set off a new crisis.

At the same time, growth in key areas of the world is slowing, with major economies on the brink of recession or already entering one.

A report on CNN Business noted this week that “five big economies are at risk of recession” and it would not “take much to push them over the edge.”

The British economy contracted in the second quarter as did Germany’s, the world’s fourth largest, which has been described as “teetering on the edge of recession.”

Growth is “flat lining” in Italy, Mexico has narrowly avoided a recession, defined as two consecutive quarters of contraction, and “data suggest that Brazil slipped into recession in the second quarter,” the CNN report said.

There are also indications of a downturn in the US, with business investment on the decline, coupled with a fall in industrial production, which dropped by 0.2 percent in July from the previous month.

All the countries on the edge of recession are members of the G20 group of the world’s major economies.

Argentina, another G20 member, could well be added to the list following this week’s plunge in share markets and the precipitous fall in the currency after the deepening opposition to austerity measures saw “market friendly” President Mauricio Macri take a battering in primary presidential elections over the weekend. The result led to a sell-off on Wall Street earlier in the week because it was taken as indication of the growing movement of the international working class against the global financial oligarchy.

The gyrations in financial markets and the growing signs of recession—threatening to set in motion a crisis even more severe than that of 2008—pose vital political issues before the working class in every country.

The global financial oligarchy has only one response to the mounting crisis: to step up its drive to put value back into its vast holdings of financial assets by intensifying its offensive against the working class, carried out with the force of the capitalist state.

This means that whatever form the struggles of the working class initially emerge—the fight for jobs, against austerity measures, the defence of wages and social conditions—they can only go forward on the basis of a unified international struggle directed to the conquest of political power in order to implement a socialist program for the reconstruction of the global economy in the interests of the world’s producers of wealth.

(Nick Beams is a long-time Australian socialist activist.)
Once upon a time, in 1947 India made a famous tryst with destiny. Although, for many it’s just a 72-year period but for me, a member of minority within a minority, it’s a long, long time. One can debate, whether to call us the minority or the second largest majority. Still, I don’t care, because during these 72 years, we have become habitual of these debates and controversies.

So, what India has attained during these 72 years in general and for minorities in particular? To start with achievements, surely, a miraculous Constitution, growth despite all the odds and a united territory despite all the conflicts should top all the achievements. Constitution may not have resulted in equality, security and inclusion that was envisioned by the Constituent Assembly, still it makes sense. It is the only thing in India that provides a ray of hope to millions. The millions who are constantly subject to scrutiny, subject to persecution on the basis of religion or caste, find solace in this book. This book still gives them a belief that someday they will get justice, they will be treated equal and they will live with dignity.

India’s growth story, although dimmed during recent times, is an amazing narration for the coming generations. Despite the corrupt system, communal divide, farmer distress, disruptions from neighbouring countries and political anarchy, India has still managed to expand its middle class to a great extent. Challenges remain and poverty prevails, but hope remains for some good days, without any fixed frame.

With all the inequality, corrupt practices, suppression of certain classes, political domination of the majority, exclusive policies and attempts to centralise power, if country is still united, it’s really a miracle. This shows the belief of the masses in the system. A considerable amount of credit should also go to the Constitution.

For last 72 years, democracy and democratic institutions have flourished in the nation. With the inception of Panchayati raj system, roots of democracy have entangled the entire society. It has led to the political socialisation of masses, who believe ballot is a better option than bullet when it comes to issues like equality and empowerment.

While the model of democracy being followed in the country has led to many failures, it has also led to many problems. It has failed to bridge the divide between the mighty and the downtrodden, between the rich and the poor, between the majority and the minority and between the privileged and the deprived. Once again, I return to the narrative of minority within a minority.

One man one vote policy shatters the notion of equality that is offered in a democratic system. It may be feasible in monotonous, homogeneous and non-diversified states but for a country like India it is a total failure. It creates political imbalance. In this scenario, people like me who lack numbers in terms of community fail to get a minimum representation in decision making. Pandering to to majority sentiments, political parties, even the so-called secular ones, are refraining from our agenda.

Exclusion is not only at political level but also at social level. As if economic exclusion, denial of political space and say in the system wasn’t enough, the rise in hate crimes and violence has led to further alienation. So where should the minorities go or what should they do now? Once again, their only solace is the constitution. To uphold the principles of the Constitution, the democratic system needs reforms.

There are two ways ahead. Either we turn to proportional representation system of electorate, where social groups are ensured minimum representation. If that isn’t possible, then at least we must adopt a different electoral system, where candidates must be asked to garner minimum 50% vote to ensure their win. They will then be forced to include various groups in their plans. Although communal polarisation can fail this plan, still there are chances that groups with smaller number may be approached by those in power.

To conclude, I can say that we as Indians have lived with much of positivity after 1947 but there remain many insufficiencies. We haven’t attained what we had promised in our famous tryst with destiny. India’s pluralism is in danger, so is its diversity. The more we hear of one nation, one election, one language, one party and one religion, the more we feel threatened. As a minority within minority, I feel these threats more than anyone.

(The writer is a journalist.)
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Aristotle

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(We are printing this warning delivered by Fidel Castro in a speech to the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio Di Janeiro in the context of the fires now engulfing the forests of Amazonia.)

Mr. UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali; Your Excellencies;

An important biological species is in danger of disappearing due to the fast and progressive destruction of its natural living conditions: humanity.

We have become aware of this problem when it is almost too late to stop it.

It is necessary to point out that consumer societies are fundamentally responsible for the brutal destruction of the environment. They arose from the old colonial powers and from imperialist policies which in turn engendered the backwardness and poverty which today afflicts the vast majority of mankind.

With only 20 percent of the world’s population, these societies consume two-thirds of the metals and three-fourths of the energy produced in the world. They have poisoned the seas and rivers, polluted the air, weakened and punctured the ozone layer, saturated the atmosphere with gases which are changing weather conditions with a catastrophic effect we are already beginning to experience.

The forests are disappearing. The deserts are expanding. Every year billons of tons of fertile soil end up in the sea. Numerous species are becoming extinct. Population pressures and poverty trigger frenzied efforts to survive even when it is at the expense of the environment. It is not possible to blame the Third World countries for this. Yesterday, they were colonies; today, they are nations exploited and pillaged by an unjust international economic order.

The solution cannot be to prevent the development of those who need it most. The reality is that anything that nowadays contributes to underdevelopment and poverty constitutes a flagrant violation of ecology. Tens of millions of men, women, and children die every year in the Third World as a result of this, more than in each of the two world wars. Unequal terms of trade, protectionism and the foreign debt assault the ecology and promote the destruction of the environment.

If we want to save mankind from this self-destruction, we have to better distribute the wealth and technologies available in the world. Less luxury and less waste by a few
countries is needed so there is less poverty and less hunger on a large part of the Earth. We do not need any more transferring to the Third World of lifestyles and consumption habits that ruin the environment.

Let human life become more rational. Let us implement a just international economic order. Let us use all the science necessary for pollution-free, sustained development. Let us pay the ecological debt, and not the foreign debt. Let hunger disappear, and not mankind.

Now that the alleged threat of communism has disappeared and there are no longer any more excuses for cold wars, arms races, and military spending, what is blocking the immediate use of these resources to promote the development of the Third World and fight the threat of the ecological destruction of the planet?

Let selfishness end. Let hegemonies end. Let insensitivity, irresponsibility, and deceit end. Tomorrow it will be too late to do what we should have done a long time ago.

Thank you.

Big Data’s Threat to Elections and Democracy

Prabir Purkayastha

The cost of the 2016 US elections was $6.5 billion if we combine the presidential and congressional elections. The Indian Parliamentary election of 2019 outspent the 2016 US 2016 election, costing about $8.6 billion. Where does all this money go, whether in India or the US? And why is the cost of elections—the motor of democracy—climbing to astronomical heights when all other welfare investments are declining? There’s an answer in the Netflix film The Great Hack that points to the marriage between big money and big data.

The Great Hack relates Cambridge Analytica’s role in Trump’s 2016 elections to a much larger issue—the threat to our democracy from global tech giants. It is not the Facebook data that Cambridge “hacked,” but the election itself. And what is at stake is not just an election, but the very future of democracy. If elections can be hacked, so can our democracy. The film poses a fundamental question for our times: Are more elections in more places going to be won by the best data “team” that money can buy?

The Indian elections of 2014 and 2019 raised similar questions. Shivam Singh’s book, How to Win an Indian Election, covers very similar ground to show that elections can indeed be hacked, using big money and big data.

The role of advertising and media consultants in elections is not new. With the growth of mass media, the methods of selling soaps and detergents also became the method to sell politics. What has been added now is the power of micro-targeting: targeting each individual based on knowing, in minute detail, what makes us tick. An average person leaves enough digital footprints to generate 5,000 data points today; these are used by big data companies to target each one of us with ads. This is what has made Google, Facebook and Amazon—and now Alibaba and WeChat as well—among the world’s ten biggest companies.

We have known much of this. What The Great Hack adds to our understanding is that a lot of these “tools” came out of the military’s psychological operations (or psyops) and cyberwar techniques. They were even classified as weapons under export control regimes. These tools are used to spread hate, disinformation and divisions—fake news, in other words—in the “enemy” ranks, or any targeted population in countries slated for regime change.

The other insight of the film is that it is not the big votes that count in an electoral victory. These votes are generally decided, and difficult to shift. What counts is a small section of votes. If these votes are turned, they can tip the election from defeat to victory. In the US elections, for instance, given the lopsided nature of the electoral college system, just 70,000 voters in three states gave Trump his victory over Hillary.

If we understand the psychological profile of a voter, or what Alexander Nix of Cambridge Analytica calls the psychometric profile, we can do two things: We
can discourage voters who would probably vote for the other side; and we can encourage the voters from “our side” to come out and vote. The film shows a successful example in Trinidad: young people of color were targeted with a “movement” message—the Do-So movement—how “cool” it is to not vote. The other side was encouraged to vote with messages about family values such as listening to parents.

In the recent Indian elections, for example, data analysis in the largest state—Uttar Pradesh (UP)—shows that the ruling right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) strongholds had a higher turnout than those of the opposition alliance—Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)—indicating the success of a similar campaign. If you are an opposition voter, you were targeted with messages about how all politicians are corrupt, and how elections serve no purpose. To the ruling BJP voters, the messaging was that patriotism demands you vote to strike a blow against “our enemies.”

Though the film focuses on Cambridge Analytica and the Trump elections, it also registers the role of global right-wing networks using big money and deeply divisive messaging. This is visible, for example, in Bolsonaro’s victory in Brazil, where a massive fake news campaign was mounted using WhatsApp, Facebook’s messaging platform.

*The Great Hack* also brings us face to face with the dystopian world that Facebook and Google have created—a social media world that divides us rather than connecting us. Early on, Facebook realised that our anxieties and our fears are far more potent as advertising tools than our “likes.” When Facebook and Google sell our anxieties, fears and hatred to advertisers, what is, arguably, the worst side of humanity explodes in the social media space.

This is also what MIT researchers found out: they discovered that fake news penetrates deeper, faster and wider than actual news.

Hate pulls in eyeballs to TV screens as well. This explains the rise of hate TV and fake TV: Fox News in the US and the gaggle of Republic/Zee/Times Now troll television channels in India. This is the transformation taking place today in the media space, particularly in all forms of electronic media—from television to social media.

The question is: What are we going to do? *The Great Hack* argues that data privacy and individual ownership of our data is the answer. But the view that data belongs to us opens up the possibility that big corporations can indeed own our data, but only after purchasing it. It does not change the fundamental business model of the big data companies.

Data as private property would still make possible for our “eyeballs” to be bought and sold like any other goods; to allow data and power to be concentrated in the hands of big tech companies. Social media giants are not neutral in this game. Their business models are built on algorithms that are not simply mathematics. They encode our prejudices and Mark Zuckerberg’s business needs in their algorithms. The swing to the global right and the rise of hate politics are coded in the gene of Google and Facebook. Copycat politics of the right transferred to liberal, democratic or left spaces is not the answer.

Seeing data as private property means missing the fact that data is not simply our individual data, but also that of our social relations, and data that belongs to communities and groups. Instead of focusing on how to keep data in our hands as commodities that belong to us, we must look at how data is common to us; how it belongs to the commons and is not a commodity. We must treat the data of our social relationships, and community data, as something that cannot be bought and sold.

Next, how do we safeguard our elections? Our democracy? The answer has always been to limit the role of money in elections. Big data requires big money. Hiring an election analytics company with access to big data requires big bucks. Limiting the role of money in elections is an essential part of any campaign to ensure the future of democracy, including our elections.

It is not enough to limit the role of money in elections. We also need to build grassroots activism, using social media not for clicktivism but for building movements; and strengthen democratic media and platforms—all of them, not just the digital ones.

People can be manipulated by fear and hatred for a short time, but not for long, and certainly not forever. They will come back to the real issues, issues that bind us instead of dividing us. Getting past hate to real people and their issues is the battle for the future of our democracy.

*(Prabir Purkayastha is an activist for science and the Free Software movement.)*
India Is Creating Its Own West Bank in Kashmir

Mihir Sharma

Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government in India often claims that its actions are unprecedented—that no government in India’s history has been bold enough to do what it does. Most of the time this is, to put it mildly, an exaggeration. But on Monday, they certainly went far beyond what any previous Indian government has done about the troubled state of Jammu & Kashmir. And that’s a big, big problem.

After a tense and terse build-up—during which a major pilgrimage was canceled, the Kashmir Valley was flooded with soldiers and Kashmiri politicians were arrested—Modi’s right-hand man, Home Minister Amit Shah, announced a set of Kashmir-related legal changes in Parliament. In essence they scrap the special status promised to Jammu & Kashmir when it became part of India seven decades ago; divide the state into two; and reduce the power of elected state politicians to pass laws and control the local police.

Jammu & Kashmir will no longer have the rights and privileges of a state of the Indian Union, but instead be a Union Territory, with its laws requiring the assent and permission of the government in New Delhi.

Perhaps these changes will not be upheld by India’s Supreme Court. But, if they are, they would indeed be unprecedented. No Indian government has ever seriously wanted to disturb the delicate legal balance that underlies New Delhi’s claim to the Valley. Moreover, there is no doubt they will inflame separatist sentiment in Kashmir. Its residents are already simmering with anger at decades of repression and a constant military presence in their homes and villages. Now, in their eyes, their sole claim to autonomy and identity has been taken away.

What will these changes mean for Kashmir’s future, and India’s? If implemented fully, one big thing will change: Previous, only those from Kashmir could own land there; now the Valley could be flooded with settlers from outside. India has never played the demographic card—used its overwhelming numbers elsewhere to render native Kashmiris’ demands moot, the way that Beijing has by urging Han Chinese to migrate to Tibet and Xinjiang.

Whether Kashmir will end up looking like those restive, semi-autonomous provinces, or more like the West Bank—with armed settlers living in highly protected colonies amid a larger, disenfranchised population subject to arbitrary justice—is not clear at the moment. Those are, however, the most likely options.

Neither would be in any way a positive for India. Whatever else, this country still aspires to be a liberal democracy respected worldwide, and it won’t be if it creates a Xinjiang or a West Bank in Kashmir, rendering people second-class citizens or putting them in camps. Nor do India’s people and economy have the resources to deal with a sustained, angry insurgency.

Worse, many other restive parts of India—with shrinking populations, as opposed to the growing ones in Modi’s heartland of the north and west—will be given fresh reason to fear this demographic bludgeon. Already various states are designing laws meant to deny employment to “outsiders.” The prospect of large-scale settlement would enrage sub-nationalists elsewhere in India, hardly a desirable outcome from New Delhi’s point of view.

The reasons that Modi’s government has done this have, therefore, nothing to do with India’s national interest. It’s all about pushing forward his Bharatiya Janata Party’s deeply rooted ideals of Hindu majoritarianism. Kashmir is India’s only Muslim-majority state and its autonomy is offensive to the BJP and its ideological fellow-travelers. Israel—which they see not as a multi-ethnic democracy, but as a militant religio-nationalist state that knows how to treat Muslims—has always been their ideal.

It’s also a simple electoral calculation: whenever there is tension between Hindus and Muslims, the BJP does better in elections. The economy is visibly struggling and, like other populist-authoritarians, Modi may well see this as a good moment to double down on majoritarian identity politics.

The tragedy for Kashmir and India is that there is likely to be no real pushback against this decision. Modi’s parliamentary majority in this year’s general elections was large enough to have cowed the political opposition in New Delhi. The media has been muzzled or bought off, and independent institutions have had their wings clipped. The Kashmiris’ most popular leaders are far from sympathetic spokesmen: those who are not corrupt, compromised or dynasts are largely al-Qaeda-loving...
Islamist fundamentalists.
Nor will there be any real pressure from abroad, at least to begin with. Donald Trump loves authoritarians more than liberal democrats anyway. And has anybody stepped up for Xinjiang? No, instead the world has cravenly kowtowed to Beijing. Then why should Modi worry that anyone will isolate India if it treats Kashmir similarly?
The only people who might object are those who recognise the road that this takes India down—one which undermines its Constitution, strains its union and brutalises its people. But those voices are few and stifled in India today.

(Mihir Sharma is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist. He was a columnist for the Indian Express and the Business Standard.)

Kashmir: The Worst Conflict Area In The World

Binu Mathew

It won’t be an exaggeration to say Kashmir is the worst conflict area in the world. Look anywhere else in the world where there are conflicts, there is no communication crack down. From Gaza to West Papua, from Hong Kong to the Yellow Vests in France ... the world knows what’s happening there. However in Jammu and Kashmir of India, we don’t know what’s happening there, since there is a complete clamp down on all communication systems.

Since the beginning of Countercurrents in 2002 I have covered many conflicts in different parts of the world, beginning with Iraq war. None as worse as this one in terms of communication crack down.

On August 5, 2019 the Indian government abrogated Articles 370 and 35A, that gave special status to Jammu and Kashmir in the Indian union and dissolved the state and bifurcated it into two Union Territories. It is 25 days since then. Jammu and Kashmir is incomunicado. According to some media reports which are sneaking in, provisions are running out. Essential medicines are also running out.

A young doctor who wanted to communicate to the world the plight of Kashmiris who are in urgent need of medicines was whisked away by police minutes after he spoke out about the health crisis facing Kashmir because of the three-week-old government clampdown.

The Telegraph reported:
Omar Salim, a urologist at the Government Medical College, had appeared at Srinagar’s press enclave to speak to the media, wearing a doctor’s apron. He held a placard that said he was making a “request and not a protest”.

He had barely spoken for 10 minutes when the police arrived and whisked him away to an unknown location, making it clear the authorities would not tolerate any questioning of their actions.

Efforts to find out where the doctor had been taken were thwarted by the information blockade. Government spokesperson Rohit Kansal, the only official interface between the government and journalists, skipped the evening media briefing the second day running.

Omar had said the information blockade and the travel curbs were endangering the lives of patients, particularly those who needed dialysis or chemotherapy.

He said he did not know whether the restrictions had caused any deaths but he did know patients who
had had to postpone their treatment. “I have a patient who required chemotherapy on August 6. He came to us on August 24 but could not obtain the chemotherapy medicine,” Omar said.

“Another patient whose chemotherapy drug has to be obtained from Delhi was unable to place an order for the drug. His chemotherapy has been postponed indefinitely.”

Omar added: “There are patients who require three dialysis sessions every week but are coming only once a week. There are patients registered under insurance schemes who have to pay out of their own pockets (for every dialysis) costing Rs 1,500 to Rs 1,800. It’s not a small sum for someone earning less than Rs 10,000.”

Omar said many patients are unable to make it to hospitals or to buy medicines because of the cash crunch at the banks.

“Most important, we have 15 lakh patients registered under the Ayushman Bharat scheme. We are the number one state in India in terms of the scheme’s penetration. None of the beneficiaries are able to come and claim the benefits because there is no Internet and the card system is defunct,” he said.

“(People registered with) many other health insurance schemes, like those for textile industry labourers, cannot claim the benefit because of the lack of access.”

Omar urged the government to restore the landline connections at all the hospitals and clinical establishments to avoid “disadvantage to the patients”.

The government had suspended all mobile, Internet and landline connectivity, although many landline connections have been restored in recent days.

“If patients don’t receive dialysis, they will die. If cancer patients don’t receive chemotherapy, they will die. Those patients who can’t be operated on can die,” he said.

Due to the communication breakdown, all the news papers and websites in the Kashmir valley have suspended publication.

Irfan Malik, a correspondent with the Greater Kashmir newspaper was apprehended by security forces on August 14 night but was released by officials after signing a bond.

In a shocking act, India’s Media watch dog, the Press Council of India (PCI) moved the Supreme Court supporting the Centre and Jammu and Kashmir government’s decision to impose restrictions on communication in the state following the abrogation of Article 370. The council, a statutory body led by a former Supreme Court judge and meant to preserve freedom of the Press in the democracy, said the basic journalistic code of conduct framed by it required the media to indulge in self-regulation while reporting on subjects that may harm State interests.

The council, headed by Justice (retired) C.K. Prasad, has filed an application in the Supreme Court seeking to intervene in a writ petition filed by Anuradha Bhasin, executive editor of Kashmir Times. Ms. Bhasin had challenged the state of prolonged and intense media restrictions in Jammu and Kashmir after the Centre blunted Article 370 and scrapped the special rights and privileges enjoyed by the people of Jammu and Kashmir since 1954.

In Jammu and Kashmir three former Chief Ministers, 40 former ministers are under house arrest. More than 4000 people are detained including leaders of Chamber of Commerce.

On 18th August, Deccan Chronicle headlined, “Forces deploy 1 million to guard every inch of Kashmir valley”. The article said,

Close to 9.5 lakh personnel from the Army, paramilitary and special forces besides Indian Air Force are guarding every inch of Kashmir Valley amid heightened tensions between India and Pakistan post the scrapping of Article 370 for Jammu and Kashmir.

While majority of forces were stationed in the Valley, the Centre, over the last month has deployed over 1.75 lakh additional personnel— which is unprecedented in the history of Jammu and Kashmir.

According to 2011 census, Jammu and Kashmir population is 12.5 million. Which means, a soldier for every 12 citizen of the troubled Kashmir.

On 24th of this month, opposition leaders under the leadership of Rahul Gandhi went to Srinagar to find out the situation in the valley. They were detained in the Srinagar airport and were sent back to Delhi.

The Hong Kong protest is into its 19th week. Millions are marching in the streets. There is no communication crackdown or unlawful force on the protesters. France’s Yellow Vest protest is into its 40th week. There also there is no communication crackdown. Even in Gaza, even when the heaviest bombardment was going on there, was no communication crackdown. Why is it in Kashmir?

There are reports that the Israeli army is training Indian soldiers in counter terrorism. It seems that Israeli army has come to a stage that it has to learn lessons from Indian army. By the way, India is the largest democracy in the world!

(Binu Mathew is the Editor of Countercurrents.org.)
Challenges for India's Future

E.P. Menon

There are four major challenges in front of the country right now:

1. Agricultural: During the last two decades, more than three lakh farmers have committed suicide. Why? Everyone knows that agriculture and industry are the backbones of any society's development. Independent India has given great importance to both, but during the last two decades, due to the Opening Up policy of the government, agriculture has been pushed into the background in favour of the industrial tycoons to build up their private empires. Meanwhile, farmers have sunk deeper and deeper into debt. While both the central and state governments have given lip-service for relieving the farmers from their debt traps, in practice very little has been done. So, the only option for the affected people is suicide. This challenge needs urgent attention.

2. Democratic: These days two simple questions are being asked by thinking people everywhere: a) Do we really have a democracy? b) If so, who benefits from our democracy? Responding to these questions, it can be said: Our democracy has become a Functioning Anarchy. Maximum benefits from this democracy have been harvested by notorious tycoons like Vijay Mallya, Nirav Modi, the Adanis and Ambanis etc. Who will make them more responsible for the country? Among our newly elected law-makers in the Parliament 43 % are criminals!! What kind of law will they make and for whom? Such questions will remain ‘blowing in the wind’ for ever, if our new generation of people, under the age of 30, are not prepared to Rebel Against the Existing System. "Educate, organise, agitate" is the answer already at our disposal.

3. Cultural: Our competitive traders of spirituality, religiosity, karma and moksha etc. are never tired of trumpeting about our Great Cultural Heritage. But no one questions seriously about the fact: Why Are We Indians Perpetually Living In Mental Slavery? Like for example our slavery to the English language.

4. Technological: Of course, science and technology are most important necessity for the advance of human culture and civilization, if we are prepared and capable of utilizing them in the interest of all, rationally and humanistically. This is not happening in India. Instead of promoting and allowing our own inherent youthful talent to the maximum, we are allowing foreign high-tech empires to establish their shops and capture the enormous market available to them. When our Prime Minister called for "Make in India", and a few days later the then Governor of RBI added to the slogan by saying: "Make for India", why did not a single leader or thinker come forward to add: “Make by Indians”?

While we are waiting for another Gandhi to appear on the scene, global manufacturers of Mobile Phones are enjoying their maximum harvest from the vast human market called India. Yet, we will continue to chant on the 15th of August : "Mera Bharat Mahan".

(E.P. Menon is an eminent Gandhian activist.)

Reclaiming a Socialist Vision

Michael A. Lebowitz

As the capitalist crisis deepens and movements against capitalist globalisation build up across the world, many people are now talking about capitalism and describing themselves as anticapitalist. Great! But what do they mean? That capital's international institutions are bad because they usurp the right of citizens to make democratic decisions? That financial speculation detracts from real, productive investment that creates real jobs? That the drive for profits on the part of transnational corporations has led them to ally with and strengthen authoritarian regimes that deny human rights? That neoliberal policies are producing a race to the bottom in terms of wages, working conditions, and environmental standards? These are all important to oppose—but in and by themselves these are objections to specific policies and practices of capitalism rather than to capitalism as such.

Don't we need a vision of an
alternative to capitalism? No one would deny that there are some examples of capitalism that are better than others—largely as the result of the struggles of workers and peoples' movements. Whether those examples have been the result of unique historical circumstances, whether by their very nature they cannot be generalised to the whole world, or whether they are sustainable (especially in the context of global capitalism in a world of uneven development), is not the central question.

Rather, we need to ask—is that all there is? Is there no alternative to an economic system that relies upon the propertylessness of the masses of people to compel them to work to produce profits for those who own capital? Is there no alternative to a system in which the foundations of human wealth, human beings and nature, are treated as mere means for the generation of private monetary wealth, means often destroyed in the process? No alternative to a system whose very logic is to divide and separate people, to preclude the possibilities for human solidarity?

Many people say, simply, there is no alternative. And, because there is none, the best we can do is try to make improvements here and there in capitalism. The belief that the only real alternative is capitalism with a human face owes much to the two great failures of the twentieth century: (1) the experiences in those underdeveloped countries which strove for rapid industrialisation through a hierarchical system they called socialist (with which few people in the more developed world can identify); and (2) the failure of social democratic governments (some calling themselves socialist) in that developed part of the world to do any more than tinker with capitalism as an economic system.

Why should we accept, though, that these examples exhaust the potential for alternatives to capitalism? From the beginning of capitalism, people have seen it as a system destructive of human values and have looked to alternatives that would make our common humanity the core of social and economic relations. Not only in the utopias and visions of the nineteenth century, but also in the experiments of the twentieth century, there are glimpses and real examples that point to an alternative logic to that of capital, a logic based upon human beings. But, that's not all—in the daily struggles against the logic of capital, that alternative logic is present (even if only implicit). We need to begin to reclaim and build that alternative vision—and, to make what is implicit in those struggles explicit. Once we do that, the limitations of anticapitalism by itself become clear.

**Early Visions**

Think about utopia—about the island of Utopia, to be exact. Thomas More's *Utopia* was written in sixteenth century England, when medieval peasants were losing their traditional access to the land as the result of land being enclosed for sheep pasture. The mythical alternative More sketches is a society where land is held in common, where all are expected to do their fair share of work and where the products of labor are distributed to all in accordance with their needs without money and without exchange. How can there be justice and prosperity, More asks, "when possessions are private, where money is the measure of all things?"

Such themes of common property, co-operation, equality and the rejection of exchange relations accompanied many criticisms of capitalism as it developed in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Western Europe. They were, in particular, part of the rejection of the changes that capitalism was bringing to rural society. Growing inequality and competition and the desire to profit at the expense of others were identified as the product of private property and the source of a disintegration of existing social links. The proposal of alternatives, though, was not simply seen as the attempt to restore a pre-capitalist (idealised) past. Capitalism, with its competition and rivalry, was seen as both irrational and inferior to a society based upon direct human cooperation.

Many of those who rejected capitalism, accordingly, argued for the importance of creating experiments that could demonstrate that a cooperative society based upon common ownership of the means of production would be superior to capitalism. The large amounts of land available in North America as the result of European conquest and settlement, in fact, permitted the establishment in the nineteenth century of a number of utopian communities embodying these principles and seen as a way of revealing to all that there were viable alternatives to capitalism. Similarly, the creation of cooperative workplaces in manufacturing also was advocated as a means of demonstrating the advantages of association and cooperation over the rivalry characteristic of capitalism. This latter development, though, reflected the further development of capitalism and a new and growing aspect of the opposition to capitalism—the rejection of its effects upon workers in industry,
both those displaced by capitalist industry and those employed by it.

Increasingly in the nineteenth century (especially in England, where capitalism was most advanced), the opposition to capitalism became a workers' opposition, focusing upon the exploitation of workers. Labour, it was argued, was the source of all wealth in society; so, how was it that workers grew poor on their wages while their masters grew rich? Clearly, part of the workers' product was taken by those who employed them. While some argued, then, that workers instead should work for themselves in cooperative workshops (established either by themselves or by the state as social workshops) and should compete against capitalist firms, this was a position firmly rejected by the most important and influential socialist theorist of the nineteenth century, Karl Marx.

True, for Marx the cooperative factories that were established demonstrated that the subordination of workers to capital could be superseded by an association of free and equal producers. However, by themselves, those co-ops would remain "dwarfish" and would never transform capitalist society. What was necessary "to convert social production into one large and harmonious system of free and co-operative labour," Marx argued, was to change society as a whole—to transfer the existing means of production from the capitalists and landlords to the producers themselves. In no sense, though, did Marx entirely reject the goals of his predecessors. The utopians had constructed (and propagandised around) "fantastic pictures and plans of a new society"; however, he argued that "only the means" of getting there are different: "the real conditions of the movement are no longer clouded in utopian fables."

So, what were those goals . . . and how were the means of getting there different?

The Goals and Means of Early Socialists

At the core of the goals of socialists was the creation of a society that would allow for the full development of human potential and capacity. The goal, as Henri Saint-Simon argued, is "to afford to all members of society the greatest possible opportunity for the development of their faculties." Similarly, real freedom, Louis Blanc proposed, is "the POWER given men to develop and exercise their faculties." And, given that everyone "must have the power to develop and exercise his faculties in order to really be free, . . . society owes every one of its members both instruction, without which the human mind cannot grow, and the instruments of labour, without which human activity cannot achieve its fullest development." This same theme was set out clearly by Friedrich Engels in the question and answer format of an early draft of the Communist Manifesto. Engels asks, "What is the aim of the Communists?" He answers, "To organise society in such a way that every member of it can develop and use all his capabilities and powers in complete freedom and without thereby infringing the basic conditions of this society." In the final version of the Manifesto (written by Marx), this goal was represented as "an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."

A less explicit statement, but there can be no question that the full development of human potential was at the very heart of Marx's conception of an alternative society—just as the stunting of that potential and the tendency to reduce human beings to beasts of burden and things was at the core of his rejection of capitalism. From his earliest writings, Marx stressed the potential for the development of rich human beings with rich human needs, the potential for producing human beings as rich as possible in needs and capabilities. What, indeed, is wealth, he asked, "other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces . . . ?"

The prize was the "development of the rich individuality which is as all-sided in its production as in its consumption." Thus, the growth of human wealth is "the absolute working-out of his creative potentialities," the "development of all human powers as such the end in itself." Within capitalism, however, the goal of capital is definitely not the development of that potential. Rather, as Marx wrote in Capital, the worker exists to satisfy the capitalist's need to increase the value of his capital "as opposed to the inverse situation in which objective wealth is there to satisfy the worker's own need for development."

In the society of associated producers that Marx envisioned, the all-sided development of people would be based upon "the subordination of their communal, social productivity as their social wealth." Here, increased productivity would not come at the expense of workers but would translate both into the satisfaction of needs and also the possibility of free time—which "corresponds to the artistic, scientific, etc. development of the individuals in the time set free, and with the means created, for all of them." It would be "time for the
full development of the individual, which in turn reacts back on the productive power of labour as itself the greatest productive power." All the springs of co-operative wealth would flow more abundantly, and the products of this society of freely associated producers would be human beings able to develop their full potential in a human society.

So, how did Marx's conception of the means of going beyond capitalism differ from those of his predecessors? As we have seen, for so many socialists of the nineteenth century, the way to create the new society was to extract people from capitalism and to demonstrate that a non-capitalist alternative was a superior form of social and economic arrangement; and, those who argued this often looked to philanthropists or the state to provide the funds for these new demonstration projects. For Marx, such proposals reflected a time when the horrors of capitalism were apparent but when capitalism had not yet developed sufficiently to reveal "the real conditions of the movement."

Look to what working people are doing, Marx argued. Through their own struggles to satisfy their needs (which, for Marx, reflect all aspects of their existence as human beings within society and nature), they reveal that the battle for a new society is conducted by struggling from within capitalism rather than by looking outside. In those struggles workers come to recognise their common interests, they come to understand the necessity to join together against capital. It was not simply, though, the formation of a bloc opposed to capital which emerges out of these struggles. Marx consistently stressed that the very process of struggle was a process of producing people in an altered way; in struggling for their needs, "they acquire a new need—the need for society—and what appears as a means becomes an end." They transform themselves into subjects capable of altering their world.

This is what Marx identified as "revolutionary practice"—"the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and human activity or self-change." Marx's message to workers, he noted at one point, was that you have to go through years of struggle "not only in order to bring about a change in society but also to change yourselves." Over twenty years later, too, he wrote that workers know that "they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men." In short, the means of achieving that new society was inseparable from the process of struggling for it—only in motion could people rid themselves of "all the muck of ages."

Socialism, for this reason, could never be delivered to people from above. It is the work of the working class itself, Marx argued. And, that applied as well to the kind of democratic institutions that workers need to bring about the new society. No state standing over and above society (and, indeed, crushing it like a boa constrictor—the way Marx described the French state) could be the basis for that simultaneous changing of circumstances and self-change. Only by rejecting hierarchy and converting the state "from an organ standing above society into one completely subordinate to it," could the state be that of "the popular masses themselves, forming their own force instead of the organised force of their suppression." Only that "self-government of the producers" could be the form of state by which people emancipate themselves and create the basis for a socialist society.

**Reclaiming and Renewing a Socialist Vision**

Certainly, the process of reclaiming a socialist vision involves the necessity to come to terms with the experiences of the twentieth century—with the two great failures of the twentieth century. But that process needs to begin someplace. And, where better than by recognising, as Marx clearly did, that people develop through their activity and that a new society is inseparable from the new sides they take on in the struggle to satisfy their needs? How better than to return to a conception of socialism as a society in which the full development of human potential is paramount?

If we proceed explicitly from such a vision, then anticapitalism is obviously part of that struggle. Who could imagine that the development of those rich human beings (rich because they are all-sided in their capacities and needs) is compatible with a society in which human beings and nature are mere means for the expansion of capital? At the same time, though, this vision of socialism clearly goes well beyond anticapitalism as such and points to the limitations of a focus upon anticapitalist struggle alone. Who these days could possibly think that the full development of human potential is compatible with patriarchy, racism, imperialism, or hierarchy (to name just a few sources of oppression)? In the various struggles of people for human dignity and social justice, a vision of an alternative, socialist society has always been latent. Let us reclaim and renew that vision.

*(Michael A. Lebowitz is professor emeritus of economics at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada.)*
The following is an excerpt from Narendra Dabholkar’s book, “Please Think: Practical Lessons in Developing a Scientific Temper”, translated by Jai Vipra. Dr Dabholkar’s death anniversary was on August 20.

It was once believed that, with technology changing the face of the world, superstition would die a quiet death. However, that has not happened. People today, whether rich or poor, old or young, are even proud of their lack of scientific temper.

Many people are still living in the clutches of superstition. They spend hours at crematoriums, waiting for a crow to signal freedom for a loved one’s soul. They see omens everywhere, from the breaking of glass to the falling of stones. Why do prime ministers and presidents pay their respects to a fraudulent godman? Why do people toss perfectly good food into sacrificial fires? Why do they still oppose widow remarriage in the name of caste? What does this downfall of scientific temper and reason tell us?

People fall prey to superstition because they are in constant need of external support. It is natural for the exploited to turn to the deceptive aid or solace of superstition. Yet, the end of superstition is not guaranteed by the end of misery, because we also turn to superstition to fulfil our greed. This makes it a never-ending affliction. Hubris, and the fact that people have never considered the scientific merit of their rituals, blinds them to the futility of superstitious beliefs. They convince themselves with the usual maxim: ‘There must be something to it.’

The history of all scientific inquiry is that of attempting to understand what we previously couldn’t. Early man watched nature, astounded. He was incapable of comprehending phenomena such as roaring thunder, blinding lightning, pouring rain, vicious forest fires and devastating storms. These were formidable powers, and human well-being appeared to depend on appeasing these powers. This is why the ‘five elements’ were given so much importance in our history. Man was, in a sense, the weakest creature on earth as he battled the elements. He lacked the ability to fly, to survive underwater and in extreme cold. He lacked the strength of the rhinoceros and the agility of the deer. Yet he became the de facto ruler of the world—how?

While other creatures adjust to nature, man lords over it, because knowledge is exclusive to humans. Our brains, which developed along with our opposable thumbs, allowed us to grab things, manipulate them and fashion them into tools. We gained these abilities over thousands of generations. Not only did man acquire knowledge, he also transferred it to subsequent generations through language, making use of his evolved larynx and oral cavity.

Man is faced with thousands of questions in his quest for knowledge: Why are the seas and sky blue? Where do butterflies get their colours from? What causes high and low tides? How many stars can we count with the naked eye? Why does the sun appear larger during sunrise and sunset? Why do fireflies glow at night? Why do mosquitoes hum? What are stainless steel and plastic? The love for knowledge is born of curiosity, and quelling curiosity makes humans happy.

Science, simply, is the practice of knowledge, the search for knowledge. The word ‘science’ is derived from the Latin scientia, derived from scire, which means ‘to know’. The origins of scientific thinking and practice can be found in human intelligence and the practical know-how and skills that are transferred from one generation to the next as civilisation grows.

Building scientific temper and dispelling superstition involves improving one’s ability to make sense of what one experiences. Making sense of experience does not mean understanding experience totally, but untangling our intertwined and often muddied experiences to understand their essence. For instance, if we throw a stone and a feather from the same height, the stone falls faster than the feather. However, if we remove the wind from the equation, both will fall at the same pace. The exceptional ability to understand this is present in very few people. But the knowledge that is limited to a talented few today becomes common knowledge tomorrow. This is the value of scientific thinking.

There are some skills which are unique to humans: digging into our
vast experience and making sense of it, representing these insights mathematically and using these formulae to acquire new knowledge. With the help of these tools, knowledge can be disseminated. And scientific temper is of fundamental importance to the acquisition and transfer of knowledge.

The Parliament of India passed the Scientific Policy Resolution in March 1958, a document inspired by the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. These were some of the salient parts:

**Science has led to the growth and diffusion of culture to an extent never possible before. It has ... provided new tools of thought and has extended man's mental horizon. It has thus influenced even the basic values of life, and given to civilization a new vitality and a new dynamism. It is only through the scientific approach and method and the use of scientific knowledge that reasonable material and cultural amenities and services can be provided for every member of the community.**

In 1975, an Indira Gandhi-led Parliament amended the Constitution to add the fundamental duties of Indian citizens, and made development of ‘scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform’ a fundamental duty. In 1987, Rajiv Gandhi’s education policy laid great emphasis on the development of scientific temper.

However, it is important to be aware that science is not magic. To say that all questions will be answered by science is to replace God with science. Only people can solve problems. Scientific thinking shows us the appropriate way to solve them. Apart from this, we must remember that making science popular and inculcating scientific temper are separate challenges. For instance, it is beneficial to increase the use of solar energy in our daily lives, but inaugurating the installation of solar energy equipment with rituals using lemons or by cracking open a coconut is inimical to scientific temper. However, making science popular can also be a way to inculcate scientific temper....

Here are some characteristics of scientific temper:

1. **Believing something simply because someone with authority has said it, or because it has been written in a book, is wrong. The ultimate test of truth is observable proof or examination.** Adishankaracharya pointed out that we cannot believe fire is cool no matter who says it, in any number of books. In Europe, this is the principal difference between medieval thinking and modern scientific thinking. For medieval philosophers, the Bible, the writings of priests and even the views of Aristotle were beyond dispute. These people and these books, with their logic and arguments, had drawn impermeable intellectual borders. One could not cross these borders even in the pursuit of truth. The real tussle between religion and science was that of the primacy of words and books versus the primacy of observation and examination. This method of knowing was accessible to anyone who was prepared to perform the necessary observations and experiments. This new method had so much success that religion soon had to struggle for ground against science.

2. **The world is governed by certain rules, and its existence is not due to any external power. The questions of the universe can be answered by analysing the elements present in it, and man is capable of such analysis. Galileo’s telescope and subsequent discoveries not only added to knowledge, but changed our conception of the world. Instead of trying to solve the ultimate question, science began to solve many smaller questions more and more accurately. Man had long believed that there were rules governing the world, but it took Galileo’s work and scientific temper to understand that these rules were material, not spiritual.**

3. **The earth is not the centre of the universe. The world was not created for man; indeed, there is no reason for the world to have any purpose at all. Everything happens due to factors internal—and not external—to the universe.**

4. **Superior knowledge is gained through consistent thought and intelligence, not through revelations. One disadvantage of a society that believes in revealed knowledge is that its intellectuals stop valuing scientific and objective ways of acquiring knowledge. Another effect is inimical to democracy; it creates two classes—those who are knowledgeable and those who aren’t. As revealed knowledge is not accessible to everyone, the have-nots are kept subordinate to the haves, for knowledge becomes the prerogative of the privileged.**

5. **Unknown powers cannot make anything happen. If there is
even a single exception to what ought to be scientific truth, the whole edifice collapses like a house of cards. A ring appearing in Satya Sai Baba’s hand is an unscientific incident because there is overwhelming evidence to the contrary, backed by knowledge. Godmen like Satya Sai Baba will have to furnish explanations for these powers.

6. Science is public. Scientific truth is available to all. Anyone who is curious about this truth can test it. Scientific temper is opposed to dogmatism. Dogma is personal; it is inaccessible and untestable.

7. Science is always humble. It never lays claim to the final word. It is religion that asserts, ‘I have understood it all, I have figured the universe out, now do as I say.’ Science believes in testing objects and incidents, and searching tirelessly for solutions to unsolved problems. Scientists are not to be praised for being right; they are to be praised for trying to state principles rigorously and thoroughly. Science remains objective even while it extends or overturns the work of its own giants. For instance, Einstein could finish Newton’s unfinished work or disprove it; Newton does not object to this. If, tomorrow, someone else points out the limitations in the work of both Einstein and Newton, it does not mean they are insulted. Anyone is permitted to test their propositions. All scientific theories are open to challenge. No matter how much progress is made in the realm of science, there are always new questions to answer, new horizons to chase.

(Narendra Dabholkar was a rationalist, author and president of the Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti, Maharashtra. He was murdered on 20 August 2013, allegedly by Hindu fundamentalists. Jai Vipra works on research and advocacy in technology policy, and is currently based in Delhi.)

**Top 1% up $21 Trillion. Bottom 50% down $900 Billion.**

**Matt Bruenig**

Recently, the Federal Reserve of the USA released a new data series called the Distributive Financial Accounts, which provide quarterly estimates of the distribution of wealth in America. The series goes back to 1989, and runs to the fourth quarter of 2018.

The insights of this new data series are many, but for this post here I want to highlight a single eye-popping statistic.

In 2018, whereas the top 1 percent owned nearly $30 trillion of assets, the bottom half owned less than nothing, meaning they have more debts than they have assets. This is a result of the economic policies followed in the US for the past 30 years, because of which the top 1 percent massively grew their net worth while the bottom half saw a slight decline in its net worth. Between 1989 and 2018, the top 1 percent increased its total net worth by $21 trillion. The bottom 50 percent actually saw its net worth decrease by $900 billion over the same period.

(Matt Bruenig is an American lawyer, blogger and policy analyst and founder of the People's Policy Project, a crowdfunded think tank that focuses on socialist and social democratic economic ideas.)

**Chart: USA, Total Wealth of the Top 1% and Bottom 50%, 1989–2018**
Tagore’s Call for Rakhi Bond Between Hindus and Muslims

Deepanjan Ghosh

Everything is different in Kolkata. While the rest of the country fasts for Navratri, Kolkata has its own celebration for Durga Puja. When the rest of the country cheers for Dussehra, in Kolkata there are tears for Bijoya Dashami. On Diwali, Kolkata has a unique festival called Kali Puja, and for Holi, Dol Jatra. Little surprise then that there should be an alternate story for Raksha Bandhan as well.

It began in 1905, the year British India’s Viceroy and Governor-General Lord Curzon announced the partition of Bengal. Back then, Bengal consisted of the present-day states of West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha and Assam as well as what is now known as Bangladesh. This created a province that was the size of France but had a population several times greater. The administration of a province so large was proving difficult with the eastern half in particular, so the government announced that it had decided to partition the province into two.

Assam, along with the districts of Dacca, Mymensingh, Faridpur, Backergunge, Tippera, Noakhali, Chittagong, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Rajashahi, Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Bogra, Pabna and Malda would form the new province of East Bengal & Assam. But while administrative efficiency was the stated reason, the Bengalis smelt a rat—the eastern half of Bengal was predominantly Muslim, while the western half was predominantly Hindu, and this was considered an extension of the old “divide and rule” principle deployed by the British in India. The Bengalis wanted none of it.

The resistance to the partition of Bengal was explosive and all-pervasive. The Indian National Congress announced the Swadeshi movement, exhorting the masses to boycott all foreign goods, thus hitting the colonial government where it hurt the most. The mass burning of foreign clothes became a regular affair. But the protest, like everything else in Bengal, took on a unique character under the leadership of the greatest of all Bengali icons—Rabindranath Tagore.

Tagore declared the day of the partition, October 16, to be a day of national mourning—no food would be cooked in Bengali homes that day. To signify the bond between Bengali Hindus and Muslims, Tagore chose the rakhi, the sacred thread tied to a brother’s wrist by his sister in exchange for his protection. Traditionally, the sister would pray for the brother to live a long life, as he pledged to protect her as long as she was alive. Instead, Tagore wanted Hindus and Muslims to tie rakhis for one another, creating a lifelong bond of protection that no one could break.

Tagore began his day on October 16 with a dip in the Ganga. From the banks, a procession accompanied him as he walked through the streets tying rakhis on the wrists of all those he met. The enthusiastic poet carried an abundant number of rakhis, but those accompanying him felt he had taken things too far when he wanted to step inside a mosque to the south of his house, to tie rakhis on the wrists of the maulvis inside. Tagore was never one to be deterred—luckily for him, the maulvis had no objections either and the procession carried on.

A massive crowd had gathered on both sides of the street. Those accompanying Tagore were singing a song he had written specially for the occasion, a prayer to God to keep Bengal safe and united. From the rooftops, women sprinkled puffed rice and blew conch shells at the procession.

That afternoon, the foundation stone for Federation Hall was laid—a grand edifice symbolising the unity of the two Bengals. Barrister Ananda Mohan Bose was supposed to preside over the meeting, but he was elderly and sick, so it was Tagore that read out his speech. From there began the second procession of the day, from Federation Hall to the magnificent Basu Bati, home of Pasupati and Nandalal Basu in Bagbazar. The National Fund was announced here, and contributions were sought from members of the public. The fund would sponsor deserving students and finance Bengali entrepreneurs’ trips to England for scientific and technical training. With this, the Bengalis hoped, their reliance on foreign imports could be reduced over time, as more and more things would begin to be produced at home.

Although the protests did have their desired effect, ultimately keeping Bengal united would prove impossible. In 1912, Bihar, Assam and Odishia were separated from Bengal. This time the partition was on linguistic grounds. Thirty-five years later, with the bloodbath of Direct Action Day, the dream of a
united Bengal would finally come to an end.

The structures associated with the movement still stand. Federation Hall is now the Federation Hall Society and it continues to serve the people of Kolkata. Basu Bati is a forgotten ruin, rotting away for a decade thanks to apathy. But for those who migrated from the east in Bengal, yearning for the lost homeland still lingers, as do memories of this other rakhi.

( totalitarian)

We Are Facing a Global Emergency in the Amazon

Called "the lungs of the Earth", the Amazon rainforest and its lush trees make roughly 20% of the oxygen on Earth. But the Amazon is presently on fire. In the about 20 days since they were discovered, the fires have consumed at least 74,000 ha of tropical rain forest. The skies of Sao Paolo, Brazil are black; the smoke is already trespassing the border to Argentina and may have reached Buenos Aires. NASA reports that about 3.2 million square kilometers of South America are covered by smoke.

The flames are massive and are devastating the jungle at a rapid pace. According to the Brazilian National Institute for Space Research (INPE), the fires increased by 83%—almost double—from what they were last year, and, not coincidentally, at least 68% of protected areas have been affected. The Brazilian Space Research spotted 72,000 fires, of which 9,000 were found in the last week alone. The Amazon is home to 34 million people, including over 350 indigenous groups.

As the Amazon burns, it drastically contributes to the climate crisis—both from the carbon released by the forest fires and from the loss of trees' ability to absorb carbon in the future. Amazonia comprises one of the world’s largest rainforests, also known as Mother Earth’s lungs. A healthy Amazon is critical to the survival of not only the local and about 400 indigenous groups that call it home but to our entire planet.

It's a heartbreaking global emergency that requires immediate action.

Now that the world is finally paying attention to the Amazon Basin, it's important to also understand that it is the pro-big business and anti-environmental position of Brazilian President Bolsonaro, which erroneously frames forest protections and human rights as impediments to Brazil's economic growth, that is directly responsible for these fires. Since Bolsonaro gained power, there has been rapid deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon. These recent fires were intentionally set by farmers who, responding to calls from Bolsonaro to develop the region, wanted to clear their land so it could be used for agriculture. As Bolsonaro put it, "the Amazon is open for business."

Illegally clearing land with fire is a horrible, corporate-driven practice that is taking place across the globe. Thus, at this very time when forest fires are burning down Amazonia, even larger jungle fires are burning down the Central African rainforest, which is another important oxygen-generating lung of the world. In just two days, August 22 and 23, NASA recorded more than 6,900 fires in Angola and about 3,400 in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), about 5 times as many as in the same two days in the Brazilian Amazon region. These fires are hardly being reported in the Western media. It is very much
possible that the same globalised corporations interested in Brazil’s natural resources underlaying the Amazon forests, are also interested in the enormous reserves of minerals and hydrocarbon resources of Central Africa, and so have got the governments of DRC and Angola to let the jungle burn.

The Amazon is burning, the Arctic is burning, and the list of scorched lands seems to continuously grow: Alaska, Greenland, Siberia, across Europe, Indonesia and across Central Africa.

These are indeed the worst of times. But, as we face the real threats to life and to global civilisation posed by accelerating climate change, a global climate change movement is simultaneously emerging. This is a movement encompassing thousands of local groups across the world. It is also accompanied by climate action from above—such as the emergence of a Green New Deal advanced by Alexandria Ocasio Cortez followed by aggressive climate plans by Jay Inslee and Bernie Sanders. But of course, these plans will only be realised when this is accompanied by a determined non-violent grassroots movement from below. A global climate movement’s global demands will only be as effective as the strength of power from below manifested through non-cooperation and non-violent action in the streets and voter action at the polls.

The Amazon Is on Fire—Indigenous Rights Can Help Put It Out

Naomi Klein

It was an epic case of projection. Lashing out at the attacks on his Amazon-incinerating policies, Brazil’s President Jair Bolsonaro accused French President Emmanuel Macron of having a “colonial mindset.”

The not even vaguely funny joke is that it is Bolsonaro who has unleashed a wave of unmasked colonial violence inside his country. This is a politician who came to power railing against indigenous people, casting their land rights as an unacceptable barrier to development in the Amazon, where cultures intrinsically linked to the rainforest have consistently resisted mega projects and the expanding frontier of agribusiness. “If I become president there will not be a centimeter more of indigenous land,” he said, while ominously declaring that “we’re going to give a rifle and a carry permit to every farmer.”

Much as Trump’s relentless anti-immigrant rhetoric has emboldened white nationalists to commit real-world hate crimes, Christian Poirier of Amazon Watch explains that in Brazil, “Farmers and ranchers understand the president’s message as a license to commit arson with wanton impunity, in order to aggressively expand their operations into the rainforest.” According to Brazil’s National Institute for Space Research, deforestation in the Amazon this July went up by a staggering 278 percent compared to the same month last year (the institute’s director was promptly fired after sharing these and other inconvenient findings).

Such a powerful sense of impunity has permeated the region that ranchers have held “fire days,” coordinating when they set land ablaze, and attacks on indigenous communities have seen an alarming escalation. This atmosphere of lawlessness, moreover, surrounds Bolsonaro’s entire administration. Many Brazilians consider the 2018 presidential elections to have been stolen from Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, by far the most popular politician in the country. Da Silva couldn’t run because he was locked up after a corruption trial that has since been revealed to have been rife with collusion and irregularities, a process presided over by the judge who went on to become Bolsonaro’s own justice minister.

The arsonists of the Amazon...
are driven by many factors—chief among them the quest for profits from beef, soy and lumber. But beneath them all is the very thing Bolsonaro accuses his critics of possessing: the “colonial mindset.”

By no means unique to Brazil’s landed oligarchy, this mindset is grounded in the belief that European-descended settlers have a manifest destiny to profit from an ever-expanding frontier; when indigenous people stand in the way, they must be removed, by any means necessary. Bolsonaro summarised this brutal belief system in stark terms two decades ago: “It’s a shame that the Brazilian cavalry hasn’t been as efficient as the Americans, who exterminated the Indians.”

This sense of divine entitlement to other people’s land in the name of progress is driving the arson in the Amazon—and it is driving the planetary-scale arson that has created the global climate emergency as well.

Put simply, a great deal of the coal, oil and gas that we must leave in the ground if we want a habitable climate lies under land to which indigenous people have an ancestral and legal claim. The willingness by governments around the globe to violate those international protected rights with impunity is a central reason why our planet is in a climate emergency.

This is not just about Bolsonaro. Recall that one of Trump’s first acts as president was to sign executive orders pushing through the Dakota Access and Keystone XL pipelines, two fossil fuel projects fiercely opposed by indigenous people in their path. And now there’s Trump’s new obsession with purchasing Greenland, an indigenous-controlled territory alluring to his administration mainly because melting ice linked to climate breakdown is freeing up trade routes and newly accessible stores of fossil fuels. From within his own colonial mindset, Trump feels it’s his right to grab the island, much like everything else he feels entitled to grab.

The violation of indigenous rights, in other words, is central to the violation of our collective right to a liveable planet. The flip side of this is that a revolution in respect for indigenous rights and knowledge could be the key to ushering in a new age of ecological equilibrium. Not only would it mean that huge amounts of dangerous carbon would be kept in the ground, it would also vastly increase our chances of drawing down carbon from the atmosphere and storing it in well cared-for forests, wetlands and other dense vegetation.

There is a growing body of scientific research showing that lands under indigenous control are far better protected (and therefore better at storing carbon) than those managed by settler governments and corporations. Of course, indigenous leaders have been telling us about this link between their rights and the planet’s health for centuries, including the late Secwepemc intellectual and organiser Arthur Manuel (particularly in his posthumously published book, “The Reconciliation Manifesto”). Now we are hearing this message directly from the people who make their home in our planet’s burning lungs. “We feel the climate changing and the world needs the forest,” Handerch Wakana Mura, an Amazonian tribal leader, told a reporter.

Earlier this year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and Land, which stressed the importance of strengthening indigenous and community land rights as a key climate change solution. A broad coalition of Indigenous organisations greeted the findings with a statement that began, “Finally, the world’s top scientists recognise what we have always known ... We have cared for our lands and forests—and the biodiversity they contain—for generations. With the right support we can continue to do so for generations to come.”

Colonialism is setting the world on fire. Taking leadership from the people who have been resisting its violence for centuries, while protecting non-extractive ways of life, is our best hope of putting out the flames.

(Naomi Klein is Senior Correspondent at The Intercept and the inaugural Gloria Steinem Chair of Media, Culture and Feminist Studies at Rutgers University.)

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Aristotle

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This Climate Strike Is Part of the Disruption We Need

Bill McKibben

Business as usual is what’s doing us in.

We live on a planet that finds itself rather suddenly in the midst of an enormous physical crisis. Because we burn so much coal and gas and oil, the atmosphere of our world is changing rapidly, and that atmospheric change is producing record heat. July was the hottest month we’ve ever recorded. Scientists predict with confidence that we stand on the edge of the sixth great extinction event of the last billion years. People are dying in large numbers and being left homeless; millions are already on the move because they have no choice.

And yet we continue on with our usual patterns. We get up each morning and do pretty much what we did the day before. It’s not like the last time we were in an existential crisis, when Americans signed up for the Army and crossed the Atlantic to face down fascism and when the people back home signed up for new jobs and changed their daily lives.

That’s why it’s such good news that the climate movement has a new tactic. Pioneered last August by Greta Thunberg of Sweden, it involves disrupting business as usual. It began, of course, in schools: Within months, millions of young people around the world were striking for days at a time from their classes. Their logic was impeccable: If the institutions of our planet can’t be bothered to prepare for a world we can live in, why must we spend years preparing ourselves? If you break the social contract, why are we bound by it?

And now those young people have asked the rest of us to join in. After the last great school strike in May, they asked adults to take part next time. The date is September 20, and the location is absolutely everywhere. Big trade unions in South Africa and Germany are telling workers to take the day off. Ben and Jerry’s is closing down its headquarters (stock up in advance), and if you want to buy Lush cosmetics, you’re going to be out of luck. The largest rally will likely be in New York City, where the U.N. General Assembly begins debating climate change that week—but there will be gatherings in every state and every country. It will almost certainly be the biggest day of climate action in the planet’s history. (If you want to be a part—
and you do want to be a part—go to globalclimatestrike.net.)

It’s not a “strike” in the traditional sense, of course—no one is demanding better wages. But we are demanding better conditions. In the most literal sense, the world isn’t working as it should (studies say that increased heat and humidity have already reduced human work capacity as much as 10%, a figure that will double by midcentury). And what we’re saying is, disrupting business as usual is the way to get there.

This strike will not be the last such action. And activists are flooding into the electoral battles now underway and taking on the financial community, too. It’s starting to add up: The polling shows that for young Americans, climate change is far and away the most important issue. But it can’t be just young people. It needs to be all of us—especially, perhaps, those of us who have been placidly operating on a business-as-usual basis for most of our lives, who have rarely faced truly serious disruptions in our careers and our plans. Our job is precisely to disrupt business as usual. When the planet leaves its comfort zone, we need to do the same. See you on the streets on Sept. 20!

(Bill McKibben is the Schumann Distinguished Scholar at Middlebury College and co-founder of 350.org.)

I saw Greta Thunberg for the first time in Poland at the end of last year. It was during the early days of the Katowice UNclimate negotiations. She was sitting in a makeshift TV studio, having her pigtails re-tied. I was in a hurry, chasing too many stories down at once, and paid little attention to this 15-year-old girl.

Of course, I’d heard of Greta by that point. I’d received several emails inviting me to press conferences where she was speaking, but I hadn’t taken the bait.

I had recently written about the Juliana v United States litigation, where a group of young people sued the government for failing to protect them against climate change, and profiled the Zero Hour campaign led by 16-year-old Seattleite Jamie Margolin. I assumed Greta was the next star of climate youth activism. What I didn’t realise was that she would catalyse a shift in how climate activism works altogether.

Parliament

Climate activism isn’t new, but the last year has seen a resurgence in attention devoted to the subject. For many campaigners, who have grown weary of watching their warnings fall on deaf ears, it has felt like hope has arrived at last.

Greta’s rise to fame was swift. Most people already know the story. She began striking outside the Swedish Parliament in August 2018, which garnered a certain amount of interest from journalists and fellow activists – in November, she gave a talk at TedxStockholm. But it was her explosive speech at the UN talks in Katowice that catapulted her into the limelight.

“We have not come here to beg world leaders to care. You have ignored us in the past and you will ignore us again,” she said. “We have run out of excuses and we are running out of time. We have come here to let you know that change is coming, whether you like it or not. The real power belongs to the people.”

At the same time as Greta was standing outside Parliament by herself, then without the eyes of the world on her, another group was travelling around the UK, testing the waters for another new movement. Between March and October 2018, they held around 60 discussions across the country. These events were called Heading for Extinction. Then, on the last day of October, the group declared a rebellion:

“Humanity finds itself embroiled in an event unprecedented in its history,” reads their Declaration. “We, in alignment with our consciences and our reasoning, declare ourselves in rebellion against our Government and the corrupted, inept institutions that threaten our future.”

In the following months, these two movements exploded into the mainstream. In April 2019, Extinction Rebellion forced London to a standstill with a ten day protest, with more than 1,100 people arrested. More than a million pupils participated in a Greta-inspired school strike in March, and many have continued to strike weekly as part of the #FridaysForFuture movement.

People involved in both Extinction Rebellion and the school strikes put the startling success of the movements down to one factor in particular: they have given individuals the power to act.

The Rise and Rise of the Global Climate Movement

Sophie Yeo
School
With Extinction Rebellion, this wasn’t an accident. With the concentrated media attention that it receives today, people tend to forget that the movement stemmed from extensive outreach, research and experimentation, says Liam Geary Baulch, who has been involved since the early days of the movement.

“We really grew this through talking to people and training people in person, not just from media attention or Facebook. People really need to sit in a room with each other and feel the grief of the climate emergency.”

Its tactics have instilled in people the idea that they, personally, can force politicians to listen. Baulch says, “What we’ve done is say, look, all of us can make a difference. Some of us can do that through making creative artwork or feeding people on the streets. We can all be part of this and do it together, and that’s really powerful.”

The school strikes movement has also provided an outlet to people who had previously struggled to get seriously involved in climate activism, partly because it overcame the most severe time constraint: school.

Activist
“It’s very difficult to get involved when you’re young,” says Izzy Warren, a 15-year-old based in London who has been striking since January. “You can’t travel around as much, which is why we’ve put such an emphasis on decentralisation. We’ve been trying to make sure that it’s accessible to everyone.”

Warren has been involved in climate activism since she was eight, she says, but didn’t feel like she was taken seriously until this year.

“I always got the sympathy voice because people were like, ‘Oh, it’s the young person talking,’ but no one took my view seriously. I was always overshadowed by the adults in the room. We don’t have the same political and economic power that adults have.”

Tindra Jällhage Said is striking outside the Swedish Parliament when I speak to her on the phone. The 14-year-old has been stood alongside Greta since the beginning, and has watched the movement grow. Today, there’s just a small group, and it’s a strike only in name, given it’s the school holidays.

“I’d been frustrated about how no one did anything, no one really acted,” she says. When she saw pictures of Greta on social media, she saw the chance to do something herself. “When there’s a lot of youth together, it can be a lot easier and less scary than if you go to another activist event, where there can be a lot of adults.”

The viral nature of the movement, where young people can broadcast their concerns to millions, highlights the potency of a concoction both timeless and modern: the anger of youth and the organising power of social media.

“We have the most to lose out of all the generations, so when we see those older generations who are responsible for causing the problem not doing anything, knowing they’re not going to be the ones to experience it, that makes us really angry,” says Warren. “It’s that anger that motivates us.”

When Greta told the UN that “real power belongs to the people”, she couldn’t have known the extent to which that sentiment would define the next year of climate activism. What we don’t know yet is whether it’s enough. Enough power. Enough people.

(Sophie is an environmental journalist.)

UN Report: Warming Oceans ‘Poised to Unleash Misery’ Worldwide

Jessica Corbett

A draft United Nations report warns “the same oceans that nourished human evolution are poised to unleash misery on a global scale unless the carbon pollution destabilizing Earth’s marine environment is brought to heel,” according to Agence France-Presse, which reported on the 900-page scientific assessment on August 29.

The forthcoming report from a UN body that assesses science related to the human-caused planetary emergency is due to be released to the public on September 25, after diplomats and experts meet in Monaco to approve the final Summary for Policymakers.

AFP, which obtained a draft of the UN assessment, reported:

Destructive changes already set in motion could see a steady decline in fish stocks, a hundred-fold or more increase in the damages caused by superstorms, and hundreds of millions of people displaced by rising seas, according to the
Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) “special report” on oceans and Earth’s frozen zones, known as the cryosphere.

As the 21st century unfolds, melting glaciers will first give too much and then too little to billions who depend on them for fresh water, it finds.

Without deep cuts to manmade emissions, at least 30 percent of the northern hemisphere’s surface permafrost could melt by century’s end, unleashing billions of tonnes of carbon and accelerating global warming even more.

The Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate will follow the IPCC’s recent reports about what the world would look like with 1.5°C of warming above pre-industrial levels—the lower target of the global Paris climate agreement—and the need for transformative changes to land use to address both planetary heating and hunger.

Detailing some of the impacts of rising oceans due to warming, based on the IPCC draft, AFP continued:

By 2050, many low-lying megacities and small island nations will experience “extreme sea level events” every year, even under the most optimistic emissions reduction scenarios, the report concludes.

By 2100, “annual flood damages are expected to increase by two to three orders of magnitude,” or 100 to 1,000 fold, the draft summary for policymakers says.

Even if the world manages to cap global warming at 2°C, the global ocean waterline will rise enough to displace more than a quarter of a billion people.

In an op-ed published on August 29 by Reuters, Greenpeace International executive director Jennifer Morgan declared that “tackling the climate emergency and protecting our oceans go hand-in-hand,” noting that “the oceans naturally take in huge amounts of carbon dioxide and are a key defense against the worsening impacts of climate change.”

Morgan called on world leaders who will be attending the UN summit convened by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in September to discuss the worsening climate crisis to “commit to adopting a strong Global Ocean Treaty in 2020.” She wrote:

The scope of this new global agreement could be huge: almost half of the planet. The High Seas, oceans beyond borders, cover more space on our planet than all continents combined. Sadly, today these international waters are being ruthlessly exploited. In addition to climate change, pressures from overfishing, deep sea mining exploration, oil drilling, and plastic pollution are pushing our oceans to the verge of collapse. Only around 1 percent of the global seas are properly protected. There is no effective legal instrument that allows the creation of ocean sanctuaries—areas off-limits to harmful human activities—on international waters.

“Scientists are clear that we need to protect at least 30 percent of our global oceans by 2030 if we are to safeguard wildlife and to help mitigate the impacts of climate change,” Morgan added. “But that will only happen if an ambitious ocean treaty is adopted fast and opens the door to creating effective ocean sanctuaries in international waters.”

(Garcia Corbett is a staff writer for Common Dreams, a non-profit newsportal in USA.)

Gandhian Model of Economy and the Post Globalisation Scenario

Sandeep Pandey

On 20th August, 2019 Indian Express e-paper carried an unusual advertisement by the Northern India Textiles Mills Association about Indian Spinning Industry facing a huge crisis. The spinning mills are incurring huge losses, they are not in a position to buy Indian cotton, livelihood of 10 crores people, directly or indirectly, dependent on textile industry and a larger number of farmers who produce cotton are in jeopardy. Another advertisement which appeared earlier on 1st August in The Economic Times on behalf of Indian Tea Association talks about tea industry in crisis. Because of increasing losses to Tea Gardens, livelihood of over 10 lakhs workers is threatened. The 21st August edition of Outlook magazine reports that Parle Products Private Limited, the largest biscuit manufacturer in the country, may slash the jobs of 10 thousand employees if the government doesn’t reduce Goods and Services Tax.

On the other hand, after Narendra Modi has become Prime Minister for the second time with a thumping majority, the government is on a hundred day spree, and has announced so-called big-bang economic reforms as part of which
public assets belonging to Public Sectors Units or even government departments like Ordnance Factories have either been put up for sale or corporatisation. The government has set a target of mopping up Rs 90,000 crore through this process under the euphemism of 'asset monetisation'. Last year it exceeded its target of Rs 80,000 crore, a proof of how aggressively it is selling public assets to private or other government companies, to meet its fiscal deficit.

Are these healthy signs for a country's economy? A crisis is looming large, even though the government is pretending that everything is hunky-dory. The PM has a vision of making India a $5 trillion economy by 2025. In his previous term as PM, his high profile skill development programme meant for generating employment ended up with offering 10% reservation in jobs to economically weaker sections among the general category of population just before the elections.

Mahatma Gandhi had a completely different view of the economy. He clarified that he was not opposed to machinery per se but was against the craze of machinery as labour saving contraptions. The culmination of labour saving process is that thousands become unemployed. Gandhi said he wanted to save time and labour not for a fraction of mankind but for all. He wanted concentration of wealth not in hands of few but in the hands of all. He believed that the real reason behind the labour saving argument is greed for more profit. Mahatma Gandhi kept human beings at the centre of his economic thinking. He believed that machines should not atrophy the limbs of human beings.

According to his own admission, he did make intelligent exceptions. For example, he thought that the sewing machine was a useful device. Similarly, he was for a machine which could straighten crooked spindles, even though spindles themselves would be made by the blacksmiths in his scheme of things. When questioned as to where would he draw the line, he said where they would cease to help the individual and encroach upon the individuality. He didn't believe that rapidity of motor cars was needed as it was not the primary wants of human beings.

Gandhi thought that machinery had impoverished India and was symbolic of sin because the workers had become slaves and mill owners had become immorally rich at the expense of workers. He had the conviction that poor could fight the British but the rich would always support them. When asked whether the mills should be closed down, he said that would be a difficult decision but they should definitely not expand. It is interesting to note that in the above mentioned present crisis faced by tea industry, the Indian Tea Association has urged the government to ban expansion of tea areas to contain over-supply for 5 years.

In the context of the question about what we should do with all the industrial products around us, Mahatma Gandhi advised to follow the policy of Swadeshi and promote use of articles that were used before modern products arrived in the market. He admitted that it may not be possible for all human beings to give up all machine made things at once but they could find out what they could give up and gradually cease to use it. He also advocated that we should not wait for others to give up and should take the initiative. A good recent example is that of Greta Thunberg, the child climate change activist from Sweden who spearheads an ongoing movement called 'Flight Shame and Train Brag', where she, her mother (opera singer Malena Ernman) and a number of other European citizens have stopped flying and started travelling by trains as there is less carbon emission in the latter as compared to the former. There is a significant spike in rail travel and drop in air travel in Sweden because of this movement.

Similarly, a Lucknow based health activist Bobby Ramakant has given up ownership and driving of the car, preferring to walk, cycle and use public transport. Bengaluru based activist Gurumoorthy Mathrbootham has given up domestic flying and uses trains instead. We could find examples like these individuals around us who have taken an initiative to reduce their dependence on machines.

It appears that the ultimate challenge to the modern paradigm of development based on industrialisation will come from the climate change crisis.

But the most astonishing validation of Gandhian thinking was when National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was introduced in this country in 2006, which was later renamed as MNREGA prefixing Mahatma Gandhi's name to it, which banned machines and contractors, both anathema to Gandhi, in the interest of workers. The basic argument of this scheme, conceptualised by the famous Belgian-origin Indian economist Jean Dreze, was that if providing employment to masses was the objective, then machines would have to be kept out of the work to be offered under MNREGA.

(Sandeep Pandey is a social activist and Magsaysay Award recipient.)
What Next For Those Left Out of the NRC?

Teesta Setalvad

The National Register of Citizens (NRC) is a process that is complex and not so easy to understand. So far, it has been unique to Assam. It was a consensual process arrived at after the tumultuous years that preceded the Assam Accord, when aggression, strife and violence marred a politics that was driven by real or imagined fears of the outsider.

Today, forty-one years later, in a much-changed India where an ultra-right government is firmly in the political saddle, the discourse has been twisted cleverly now to mean ‘foreigner’ and ‘infiltrator’. It is these peculiar and seemingly parochial preconditions that have to be factored in to understand how and why a wide consensus developed around the process of a ‘free and fair’ NRC. Terms like ‘genuine Indian citizens’ have now emerged to form an integral part of the wider humanitarian discourse within Assam. (Setalvad, Telegraph, July 22, 2019)

The process of finalisation of the NRC has been closely monitored by the SC since 2009. It actively began since 2013. On August 31, under this monitoring, the NRC Coordinator declared the final list. What lies ahead for the 19,06,657 persons excluded? What is likely to be their plight in the coming months and what of their fate eventually?

At a hearing on July 23, 2019 this court monitored process was thrown open to groups working on the ground, for ‘suggestions.’ The Court, in its wisdom did not interfere with a flawed conclusion arrived at by the NRC Coordinator, Prateek Hajela. In a deeply problematic order, he had suggested the exclusions of countless persons born in India prior to June 30, 1987 on the ground that one parent of such person is either a “doubtful voter (DV)”, or a “declared foreigner (DF)”, or a “person whose claim for citizenship is pending before a Foreigner’s Tribunal (PFT)”. This was clearly violative of Section 3(1)(a) of the Indian Citizenship Act, 1955.

These are persons who have lived in the country for several decades, and now, thanks to this, risk being declared stateless because of a deeply flawed process. Section 3(1)(a) of the Citizenship Act, 1955 mandates that every person born in India between Republic Day 1950 and June 30, 1987 shall be a citizen of India by birth, yet the Coordinator, and thereafter, even the Supreme Court decreed that it would ‘exclude’ such persons despite the existence of Section 3. (Thus lakhs of persons born in this category, that is between 1950–1987, have been today excluded simply because one parent of such a person is either a “doubtful voter” or a declared foreigner” or a person whose claim is pending before a Foreigners Tribunal. This order was passed by the Supreme Court on August 13. The matter will now be finally decided by a Constitution Bench).

Initial reports suggest that, among 40–60 per cent of those excluded include those from such an above mentioned category whom the latest directives of the SC had signed a death knell to.

Appeals

Appeals of all the 19 lakh excluded will now have to be filed under the stipulated 120 days before the Foreigners Tribunals (FTs) set up for the persons. To file such an appeal, each person will need to access a certified copy of the exclusion order and list of documents submitted by her or him to the NRC. Will the deadline of 120 days start ticking after these documents are accessed as is just and fair? Clarifications are awaited.

Details of the modalities and nitty-gritties of filing the appeals are eagerly awaited. Of special concern will be the issue of areas of jurisdiction. Of particular concern is where a victim of exclusion will have to go, which district of jurisdiction, and to which Foreigner Tribunal, to file her or his appeal. Through the NRC process, and the claims and corrections process, marginalised and unlettered sections of the population have been subject to inhuman procedural hassles, not least being sent to Nagrik Seva Kendras, sometimes 200–400 kilometres away! It took repeated complaints to the Supreme Court to get this issue somewhat clarified through an order of April 10, 2019. However, even during the ‘re-verification process’ this torture continued.

Discussions are rife in Assam about how de-centralised the locations of these FTs will be given the vast distances in the state. Already the state government is trying to overtly centralise the process by locating these tribunals in ‘six zonal areas’ of the state. All these logistical issues will remain
crucial in the accessibility to justice for all those excluded.

**Background**

The background to this humanitarian crisis is complex. In Assam, there has been, apart from the NRC process, the ‘D’ voter process initiated by the Election Commission of India (ECI) in the mid-1990s. In 1997, more than 3 lakh people were marked as “doubtful voters” overnight, without even the pretence of any prior investigation whatsoever. (This is violative of judgments of both the Supreme Court of India and the Guwahati High Court, most especially Sarbananda Sonowal, 2007, Moslem Mondal, 2012 where fair investigation is emphasised as a pre-requisite for anyone being served such a notice). Some more ‘D Voters’ were added in later years. A study shows that a majority of those declared “doubtful voters” were women, some newly-wed. Some have subsequently been able to prove their citizenship, others not. However, many people marked as “doubtful voters” are still disenfranchised and have, to date, not received any notice from Foreigners Tribunal to prove their citizenship. The children of such persons, following the SC Order of August 13, 2019 (and in apparent violation of Section 3(1) (a) of the Citizenship Act, 1955), have now been excluded from the final NRC list.

**What next?**

As I have said above, all those excluded from the NRC list have to appear before the Foreigners Tribunals. These Tribunals have already been in existence dealing with those cases of persons declared ‘D’ voters (by the Election Commission) or those ‘referral cases by the Assam Border Police’ who are ‘suspected foreigners’. We reported that, on July 19, 2019, in reply to an un-starred question No-3804, the minister of state of home affairs stated in the floor of Parliament that up to 31 March this year, 1.17 lakh people have been declared foreigners by the tribunal, 63,959 people have been declared foreigners by an ex parte order. Those who contested the case claimed themselves to be Indian, very often people are declared foreigners because of minor anomalies or variations in names, age and place of residence in documents. Any contradictory statement or not proving documents as per evidence law could cost them their citizenship.

Given the high human stakes involved and the balance of power against the marginalised and unlettered, it is crucial that these tribunals function transparently, following acceptable and standardised processes of allowing appeals and evidence, precluding existing complaints of the sheer arbitrariness in their dealings. Open, fair and judicious trial is the fundamental guarantor of every citizen living under the rule of law, apart from being a fundamental right guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution. India’s claim to these fundamentals will, once again be put to test in every case before the Foreigners Tribunal given that citizenship is the very basic of rights and to be arbitrarily being declared ‘non-Indian’ is akin to a ‘civil death’.

**Exclusion, then Detention and Deportation?**

In July this year, CJP undertook a rather depressing task. We compiled a list of citizenship and NRC related deaths in Assam: 60 people who had lost their lives and whose deaths are connected to citizenship related issues. Today the number is higher. While some committed suicide due to frustration, anxiety and helplessness related to the NRC, some reportedly took their own lives fearing the deadly detention camps.

Although those excluded from the final NRC will not be detained immediately, the Sword of Damocles will be an ever-present peril. Once declared as “foreigner” by a Tribunal—whose functioning(s) have hitherto been marked by arbitrary and ad hoc functioning— he or she may be detained in such camps, with an intent to deport. There are already around 1,100 detainees in six detention centres across Assam. Reports of pathetic conditions abound. As of now, Assam has six detention camps. These operate out of makeshift facilities in prison compounds located in Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Silchar, Jorhat, Tezpur and Dibrugarh. There are also reports that new facilities have been planned in other parts of the state.

The government has admitted to 25 deaths within these camps between 2013 and now. Our film, Behind Shadows—Tales of Injustice from Assam's Detention Camps makes for chilling viewing and the fear of detention has driven women and men to despair, and even death in the state. Only last year, on May 10, 2018, the SC has directed the release of those detenues who have completed more than three years in detention. While this order has rightly put an end to indefinite detention, questions around the initial three years of arbitrary confinement remain.
On the contentious deportation issue, there is little clarity. The state of Assam in its affidavit before the Supreme Court in on-going matters filed in February 2019 admitted to only four declared foreigners being deported since 2013! On a recent visit to Dhaka, external affairs minister S. Jaishankar has even said that the NRC is India’s internal problem. To date, India has not spoken to Bangladesh about deporting “declared foreigners”.

Under these unclear political circumstances, will the option be indefinite detention? A person declared “foreigner” has of course the right to appeal, to the higher courts, also an onerous and resource consuming process. Detained, she or he is denied a dignified life, and also a dignified death.

At least 15 lakh plus cases will now be heard by Foreigners Tribunals (3,70,000 did not file for registration before the NRC). The number is high and the limitation of 120 days may seem inappropriate and need extension. What is needed foremost is some clarity and commitment on the status of such persons who will be compelled to undergo a legal process, not just at the initial stage, in Foreigners Tribunal through their appeals, but also in subsequent appellate forums like the High Court and the Supreme Court.

Will the state ensure their basic rights remain intact until then? Will political expediency not snatch these away as the media glare dies down?

The spectre of statelessness is what haunts the populace. Denied the right to a nationality by a state, stateless persons are particularly vulnerable to abuse. We have seen this with the Rohingyas. India has not signed either of these international proclamations that bind the signatory country to norms and procedure: the 1954 Convention on Status of Stateless Persons nor the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. However, as judgements of the higher courts have so far asserted, Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution apply to both citizens and non-citizens in India.

Two judgements are worthy of mention. In *NHRC vs. State of Arunachal Pradesh, 1996*, the Supreme Court has held that rights under Article 21 are as much available to non-citizens as to citizens, and to those whose citizenship is unknown. Or else, stateless persons are at the risk of being deprived of access to basic rights, including access to education, health care, employment, the right to buy or sell property, open bank accounts, or even get married. In 1981, in *Francis Coralie vs The Admn, Union Territory of Delhi*, the Supreme Court has held that it is the fundamental right of everyone in this country to live with human dignity, free from exploitation.

Our Constitutional foundations and the fundamental freedoms guaranteed under Article 14 and 21 should be the guiding principles to mitigate the NRC and citizenship-related crisis affecting Assam, hereafter. The institutions created and the measures put in place to redress grievances of the 15 lakh plus excluded must pass this litmus test. Turmoil, trauma and a vicious targeting have dogged an otherwise consensual process for over four years in the state while the wounds have festered for decades. It is time the process forward is constructive and provides some healing.

*(Teesta Setalvad is secretary of Citizens for Justice and Peace – an organisation that has stood for the defence of rights and dignity of the voiceless and most marginalised sections of Indian society.)*

**Goodbye Citizenship, Hello 'Statizenship'**

**Arjun Appadurai**

The age of citizenship is nearing its close.

The idea of citizenship was linked, in its Latin derivation, to the city (civitas), civility (civilis) and to other related words which implied urbanity, civic norms and hospitality. In the age of liberal democracy, born from the constitutions of France and the United States in the late 18th century, citizenship as an idea anchored the rights of citizens to participate freely, fully and equally in political life.

The developments of the subsequent centuries saw the birth of the idea of representation, of elections and of political parties, all seen as ways to further express the rights of citizens in large countries. The problem was that in this view, the city was the boundary of citizenship and in modern times this boundary morphed into the boundary of the modern nation-state. As Michel Foucault showed, the era of the nation-state was also the era of censuses, territorial sovereignty, panoptical incarceration and a general rise in governmentality, by which he meant the penetration of state power into every aspect of human life.

Still, the original idea of citizenship retained a kind of spectral life, as it became the legal basis of
national identity (as formalised in the universality of passports, for example). In the course of the last three decades, we have witnessed the rise of extreme nationalism, and national citizenship was no longer sufficient as a credible basis for belonging in the political community.

Citizenship was no longer sufficient. The nation-state now needs what I call ‘statizens’.

**What is a statizen?**

Here, India is the pioneer, notably with the National Register of Citizens mechanism in Assam, which already seems to have become an example for other states in India. The violence of the NRC policy has many dimensions, which include anti-Muslim violence, anti-migrant policies, extraordinarily cruelty towards marginal populations, impossible demands for proof of citizenship and efforts to consolidate Hindutva control of all regions which adjoin other (Muslim) nations.

The dimension which concerns me here is the new centrality of bureaucratic documentation as the sole and over-riding criterion of citizenship.

The statizen is one who belongs because he has been granted a state-certified document. All his or her rights flow from that fact alone. There is a complex history here. We could go back to the census and its workings in colonial India as well as to various forms of registration for property, security or social benefits, both during colonial rule and after Independence in 1947. But throughout the century and a half of this prior history, state documentation was seen as proof of an identity which had other roots, whether territorial, familial, religious or natural.

This extra-state source of citizenship has been withering for some time in India and the decisive moment of its demise was the success of the Aadhaar card. Many activists protested against the Aadhaar card on the grounds that it would become a basis for controlling dissent and identifying political enemies rather than serving as a tool for social entitlement. They were not wrong.

The real innovation of Aadhaar was not its bio-metric infrastructure but its success in defining a state-issued document as the basis of all of life—voting, rations, loans, taxation and more. Aadhaar was the midwife of the birth of the statizen in India.

The NRC policy is simply a weaponisation of the logic behind Aadhaar. And it will surely spread to other states. The new forms of documentation mark a troubling new moment in the rise of statism over nationalism.

When the nation-state was born as a political form, the state was seen as the guarantor and bureaucratic tool for ensuring the proper allocation of rights, protections and freedoms to national citizens, but nationality was the justification for state power. Now, a little more than two centuries after the birth of the nation-state, the state and its powers have become the primary source of value, normativity and legitimacy, and the nation is a flexible concept which is a secondary attribute of citizens.

Thus, extreme nationalism is simply the alibi and trojan horse for something far more dangerous, which is extreme statism. And extreme statism requires a population of statizens, that is, inhabitants whose very right to life (as well as to liberty, dignity and well-being) depends on their documented status as statizens.

It is true that the first victims of this process are the poor, the marginal, the displaced, the occupied and the minor. But we—erstwhile bourgeois citizens—are next in line. All of us will have to endure the price of being turned from citizens into statizens. And the price for some of us will be exclusion, expulsion or extermination.

This is not a minor or incremental change. It is a potentially major change in the logic of political sovereignty in India and elsewhere. It is a tectonic shift which explains what has puzzled many of us in trying to account for the global shift to right-wing populist authoritarian regimes.

Nationalism—white, brown or yellow—is no longer an end but a means, a means to the democratic installation of anti-democratic regimes. Right wing rulers win elections, but their aim is not so much ethno-national purity as the absolute power of states to define affiliation, belonging and legal existence. The electoral blocs which voted for Modi, Trump, Erdoğan, Bolsonaro and many other dictators, may have been motivated by racism, anti-globalism, fear of economic displacement or the like, but they were electoral fodder for a bigger project which is the eclipse of the nation by the state.

The process of making the state sacred is not without precedent. The Soviet Union and Mao’s China are major examples of state-defined nationalism, in which ideas about the ethnic uniqueness of Han Chinese or of ethnic Russians were not an end but a means to establish the overarching power of the state.

Going further back in time, many of the great empires of the world, such as the Roman, the Ottoman, the Mughal and the British were also not
about ethnos but about the sacrality of the ruling royal house.

But today’s statizens are the undesirables of failed democracies, of modern nation-states that have opted to drop the idea of “the people”, the “demos” or the “citizery” in favour of the counted, documented, loyal and certified supporters of the state. In India, they can be Hindu or Muslim, Dalit or Brahmin, Kashmiri or Adivasi, as long as they line up with ruling regime. This is the sole requirement of a statizen.

Some of us have long recognised the need for a fundamental change in the universal acceptance of the architecture of the nation-state. Our hopes have been fulfilled but in a horrible way.

The sacrality of the nation is about to be democratically eclipsed by the sacrality of the state.

States will now define who belongs to them, they will war among each other for global resources, they will make cynical alliances, they will manipulate global capitalist possibilities—for resources, for technologies, for markets and for profits, all to advance themselves.

And since authoritarian populism is the best way to assure compliant statizens, it is likely to be the hegemonic ideology of the coming decades.

India is committed to this new religion of the state, but it is not alone in this. Everywhere we see the transformation of the state into a new political form, which claims monopoly of both political means and moral ends.

Statizens will provide the “democratic” army of this new form.

(Arjun Appadurai teaches in New York and Berlin and has published widely on globalisation and South Asia.)

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Hardly the Brick and Mortar of a Revival

Jayati Ghosh

There is no longer any room for doubt on the parlous state of the Indian economy. The automobile industry, seen as a bellwether of activity in the post-liberalisation years, is in crisis, as automakers, parts manufacturers and dealers have laid off about 350,000 workers since April this year, with more job cuts likely. While this could still reflect falling demand only from higher income groups, recently, Parle Products, once the world’s largest selling biscuit brand, announced that it may have to lay off up to 10,000 workers (around a tenth of its workforce). The company blamed falling sales due to the Goods and Services Tax (GST) that led to higher prices of the cheapest small packets of biscuits at a time of extreme price sensitivity because of reduced livelihood, especially among rural consumers.

Home budgets under strain

Sales in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector as a whole grew at only 10% in the April–June quarter of this year, less than nominal GDP growth. The slowdown in sales is across food and non-food items, with the biggest reductions in salty snacks and biscuits, spices, soaps and packaged tea. These represent the more discretionary element of consumer spending even among the poor—the items more likely to be cut down when household budgets are under strain.

Economists with the government who finally recognised that there is a problem have blamed the current situation on the “financial stress” inherited from the United Progressive Alliance government more than five years ago, which is apparently preventing investment because “no one trusts anyone else”. But this isolates only one factor in the current slowdown: the undoubted mess in the credit system, reflecting both the overhang of bad debts of banks (worse today than in 2014) and the erosion of non-banks after the collapse of the aggressive lender, Infrastructure Leasing & Financial Services Limited.

This is a factor, but this explanation completely misses the demand side of the story. It is clear beyond doubt now that the slowdown in mass consumption, combined with falling and then subdued rates of investment over several years, have led to what is undeniably a crisis of inadequate effective demand in the economy.

This scenario has been unfolding for a while because of a medium-term trajectory in which the fruits of growth went disproportionately to a small elite of big capital and rich individuals without translating into broader economic improvement. The increasing inequality associated with jobless growth meant that mass consumption demand did not rise as expected with rapid GDP growth.

Impact of demonetisation and GST

The hugely damaging impact of demonetisation in November 2016 was further accentuated by the poor implementation of the GST barely seven months later. These badly managed policy measures served as body blows to informal economic activity, causing major declines in
employment and output. At first, they did not affect formal enterprises so much as they gained at the cost of informal ones. But the resulting loss in livelihoods and wage incomes eventually had an effect on demand for formal sector output, which has worsened over time because there have been no counterbalancing moves by the government. Total employment actually declined by more than 15 million workers between 2011–12 and 2017–18, even as unemployment rates reached their highest levels in nearly half a century.

This operated in addition to a medium-term trend of wage suppression, something that was even celebrated by the late former Finance Minister Arun Jaitley as a means of combating inflation. Rural wages have been stagnant or declining in the recent period. Meanwhile, the continuing crisis of cultivation has obviously affected the purchasing power of the farming community. Urban wage incomes are also apparently not keeping pace with inflation, even as informal activity and “start-ups” in urban areas have faltered.

The government could have countered this adverse impact of declining employment and consumption demand, which in turn reduced the profit expectations of producers in formal enterprises, by providing a fiscal stimulus. It did not do so. Instead, it kept assuming or hoping that using optical measures—manipulating “Ease of Doing Business” indicators and offering further incentives to foreign capital to attract more inflows, however volatile—would somehow attract investment into the economy that would counteract all the negative impulses.

Private investors simply kept demanding more fiscal and regulatory concessions even as they continued to sit on investment plans as they waited for overall demand improvement. More recent complaints of the private corporate sector have been about oppressive tax collection methods of a government desperate to meet its revenue targets. But these along with the greater difficulties of accessing loans from both banks and non-banks are irritants that would have been tolerated in a buoyant economy. They have become serious issues now because of the wider stagnation.

**Supply-side approach**

In this context, the finance minister’s recent announcements of measures to boost the flagging economy are not a case of “too little too late”; rather, they completely miss the point. They do nothing to address the issue of inadequate demand generation or the underlying tendencies of wage suppression and low employment growth. Instead, they once again reveal a supply-side approach to the problem, which is unlikely to yield much benefit.

Even these measures are mostly cosmetic or affect only a small segment of the economy, not enough to cause any real change in economic direction. The capital infusion of Rs 70,000 crore into public sector banks had already been announced in the Budget; frontloading this inadequate amount is not going to rev up an economy if those whom banks are willing to lend to are hesitant to invest. Giving in to demands of foreign portfolio investors with regard to taxation likewise does nothing to increase domestic demand; it simply provides some solace to the stock market. The middle classes repaying home loans may see a minor benefit if banks actually do pass on lower interest rates, but this too will not provide a major boost to the economy. The decision of the government to buy more cars to shore up the automobile industry is bizarre in the extreme, because it undermines the medium-term strategy of shifting to electric vehicles as soon as possible.

What could the finance minister have done instead? If the immediate problem is lack of demand, the immediate response should be to increase it—ideally in ways that provide the desired basis for future economic growth.

**Rural focus**

Rural distress is real and deeper and greater than the much-hyped distress of angel investors and high net worth individuals; so a massive increase in rural public expenditure, including in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme to provide public works as well as in social spending would provide immediate relief. The multiplier effects of such spending would generate more employment, incomes, consumption and, therefore, investment over time—as well as more tax revenues for the government. There is also both scope and need for increases in “green” public investment for a sustainable future.

But to seize this crisis as an opportunity for progressive change would require more visionary economic policy making, something that this government has been sadly lacking in.

So does the massive transfer of the Reserve Bank of India’s surplus amounting to Rs 1.76 lakh crore suggests that this is the government’s
game plan? Unfortunately, because of the mess in public finances, all that this is likely to do is fill the massive gap left by inadequate tax collection, thereby letting the finance minister off in the current fiscal year from another embarrassing situation of budgetary discrepancies. The proposed Budget was not particularly expansionary and did not provide for more spending in the areas required. So this stopgap measure may provide more fiscal space than before, without really addressing the basic problem.

(Jayati Ghosh is a professor of economics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.)

‘Nationalist’ BJP Govt Invites Foreign Takeover, Offers Cheap Indian Labour!

Subodh Varma

It is ironical that the Narendra Modi government, which never tires of reminding everybody about their nationalism and patriotism, is actually following an economic policy of selling off the country’s national resources to foreign companies. It recently announced measures of easing foreign direct investment (FDI) in coal mining and associated infrastructure, contract manufacturing, single brand retail and digital media.

The easing of foreign investment in coal mining will open the way to big multinational mining conglomerates (BHP, Rio Tinto, etc.) to not only extract coal but also export it abroad, retaining the profits. It will destroy the public sector enterprise Coal India Ltd. which could have very well done the job itself and helped the country by keeping the earnings within the country. Similarly, by allowing FDI in contract manufacturing, it will allow giant companies like Apple to use India’s cheap labour and overheads to manufacture their overpriced devices and sell them abroad at super profits. Easing FDI in single brand retail will mean global companies like Ikea (furniture maker) and H&M (clothing) will start functioning and capturing Indian markets, destroying domestic makers. Even the weak norms for local sourcing have now been removed.

Earlier, during its first term, the Modi government had eased FDI norms in a slew of sectors, including non-banking financial services, defence, construction development, insurance, pension, asset reconstruction companies, broadcasting, civil aviation, pharmaceuticals, trading, plantation crops, satellites, etc.

The Prime Minister once defended this policy of allowing foreign capital to take over economic activity in India as based on his definition of FDI as “First Develop India”. He meant that foreign capital inflows will generate jobs and thus the country will develop. But the record inflow of foreign capital in the past 5+ years has seen less than 28% invested in productive activities with most of it going into stocks and low employment entities like financial services and information technology.

Earlier, the government had given tax concessions to foreign investors in the stock markets too, along with other concessions, supposedly to spur investment and growth. In fact, it appears that the Modi government is using the current economic slump to push through economic policies that will dangerously undermine India’s economy.

But there is a larger game that is being played out here. To understand this, let us look at some of the other policies and legislations adopted by the Modi government recently.

Disinvestment

It is a wonder that selling strategic industrial assets to private sector is described as “nationalist” and “patriotic” by the Modi government. Already having set a record of selling off public sector enterprises through piecemeal disinvestment of Rs 2 lakh crore, the government has declared that it will now go for decisive privatisation of CPSUs through multi-pronged routes. Already sale of major PSUs in steel, pharmaceutical, engineering and other sectors have taken place. Now, on the selling block are some of the best performing public sector companies including IOC, NTPC, Powergrid, Oil India, GAIL, NALCO, BPCL, EIL, BEML etc. A target of divesting Rs 1 lakh crore worth of public sector units has been set this year, which has been described as “suicidal” by leading trade unions. Many other units or sectors are being corporatised, which is just a first, covert step to ultimate privatisation. These include units in
railways and even defence sector (ordnance factories).

The problem with such reckless privatisation is not just that it will lead to job losses or more onerous conditions of work for the lakhs of workers. That will happen, of course. But the larger issue is that what were once national assets, whose functioning ensured our country’s self-reliance and economic sovereignty, will now be private property. In future, the private owners may decide to sell off their holdings to foreign players also. So, it is not too far-fetched to see a future where key industries will be controlled by big foreign conglomerates, who will determine—blackmail and arm-twist—the country to ensure their profits.

Forcing Cheap Labour

There is another element to this “nationalist” and “patriotic” outlook that is even more lethal. The labourers who work to produce wealth are being forced to become slaves with a pittance given for their wages and curbs on their rights. This has been wrought through changes in labour laws like the recently passed Code on Wages, and the pending Code on Occupational Safety, Health & Working Conditions Bill. In the name of merging several distinct labour laws and making them simpler and more harmonised, these new laws ensure that working hours will no longer be statutorily fixed and that wages will not be determined by needs.

Such was the euphoria of the Modi government after its recent victory in the general elections that the Labour Minister announced that the national floor level minimum wage would be just Rs 178 per day, a mere Rs 2 more than what was fixed in 2016! This wage level is almost one third of the minimum recommended by the accepted formula used for decades, based on minimum requirements of food clothing, shelter and other necessities. Since the new law on wages has no place for considering needs of workers, the Modi government has effectively given a free hand to industrialists to push down wages as much as possible. The 45-year high of unemployment has already created an army of unemployed which helps in keeping the wage levels to a minimum.

This third element of shackling workers and extracting the maximum out of their labour at the lowest cost is the great “advantage” Modi government is offering investors and industrialists, both domestic and foreign. Does the defence of country and slogans like “India First!” not include the people of the country?

Taken together, it is obvious that the present government is single-mindedly pursuing a path of enslavement. But it is cloaked in rhetoric of “nationalism” and “patriotism”. This may fool many people but very soon the reality of this enslavement is sure to dawn on people.

(Subodh Varma is a senior journalist.)

Public Sector Banks Cheated in Modi Years

Prudhviraj Rupawat

One phenomenon common to the years of the Narendra Modi government and the current economic slowdown is bank frauds. According to the Reserve Bank of India’s annual report 2018–19, the total amount involved in bank frauds was to the tune of Rs 71,542.93 crore in 2018–19 as compared to Rs 41,167.04 crore in 2017–18, a substantial 73.8% rise. The figure was Rs 10,170.81 crore in 2013–14, the year before the Bharatiya Janata party came to power, which has now increased by seven times.

Consider the year-wise number of such frauds. Banks reported 6,801 cases of frauds in 2018–19, 5,916 cases in 2017–18, 5,076 cases in 2016–17, 4,693 cases in 2015–16, 4,639 cases in 2014–15 and 4,306 cases in 2013–14. This massive and continuous rise in the number of such fraudulent cases signifies not only the inefficiency curtailing the banking sector but also the government’s oversight towards such offences.

As per the RBI, among bank groups, Public Sector Banks (PSBs), which constitute the largest market share in bank lending, have accounted for the bulk of frauds, which is 90.2% of the total amount involved in bank frauds reported in 2018–19, followed by private sector banks (7.7%) and foreign banks (1.3%). In terms of the number of frauds, share of PSBs is 55.4%, private banks 30.7% share, and foreign banks 11.2%.

The role of government is significant in understanding why PSBs have been falling for bank frauds. One reason frequently highlighted by analysts has been that
the PSBs fall to the pressure of the governments (both state and central) when it comes to disbursal of loans. This in turn has contributed to both the rise of non-performing assets (NPAs) and bank frauds.

Furthermore, the RBI stated that the average lag between the date of occurrence and its detection by banks was 22 months. However, the average gap for large frauds, Rs 100 crore and above, amounting to Rs 52,200 crore reported during 2018–19, was 55 months.

Alongside the bank frauds, a look at how the banks have written-off NPAs while giving free hand to wilful defaulters is pertinent in understanding how the banking sector has worsened during the Modi years at the cost of public money.

Between 2014 to 2018, Modi’s first term, banks have written off bad loans (NPAs) worth a mind-boggling Rs 5.56 lakh crore, as per the RBI’s response to an RTI. This is about four-fifths of the total amount written off (Rs 7 lakh crore) between 2008 to 2018. ‘Write off’ means that the unreturned bank loans are put in the category of uncollectible debt. For instance, while the total amount of NPAs was Rs 10.3 lakh crore at the end of March 2018, it came down to Rs 9.34 lakh crore a year after as banks wrote off a record Rs 2.54 lakh crore of bad loans in 2018–19.

The rise in wilful defaulters and their sudden disappearance whenever their fraud comes to light has also affected the banking sector in Modi years. The total number of wilful defaulters increased by 60% to 8,582 at the end of March 2019, compared to 5,349 in 2015, as per data provided by the finance ministry in the last Parliament session. While these wilful defaulters owe a total amount of Rs 1.55 lakh crore to banks, the government claimed that about Rs 7,600 crore has been recovered from them or their entities so far.

The above numbers reveal not only the loot of public money but the lack of accountability on the part of both the government and the RBI as well.

(Prudhviraj Rupawat is a journalist with Newsclick.)

Activist Medha Patkar
Ends Hunger Strike After 9 Days

Narmada Bachao Andolan leader Medha Patkar ended her fast on the ninth day on September 2 night after receiving assurances from the Madhya Pradesh government about steps being taken to meet her demands. Patkar’s health had deteriorated by the eighth day of her indefinite hunger strike to demand rehabilitation of thousands of people displaced by floods in areas around the Sardar Sarovar Dam.

Patkar had launched the “Narmada Chunauti Satyagraha” at Chhota Barda in Barwani district on August 25, and was joined by eight villagers four days later. On Monday, Chief Minister Kamal Nath sent former Chief Secretary S.C. Behar to hold discussions with Patkar at the site of the protest.

Behar conveyed Nath’s concern to Patkar, and informed her about efforts made by the state government to lower the water level in the Sardar Sarovar Dam. Behar then offered her lemon juice to end the fast. Six other persons also ended their fast after the discussions, the state government said.

The leaders of the Narmada Bachao Andolan will now hold discussions with the Narmada Valley Development Authority on September 9.

Patkar had demanded that the sluice gates of the dam be opened since rising backwater had flooded areas around Barwani. She had also sought rehabilitation of people displaced because of the reservoir’s construction.

The Narmada Bachao Andolan wanted the government to halt the Narmada Control Authority’s directive to fill the dam to its optimum level of 138.68 metres, and instead maintain it at 122 metres. Patkar had claimed that 192 villages and one town would be submerged at that level, affecting 32,000 families.

Earlier, the Chief Minister, requesting Medha Patkar to break her fast, mentioned in his statement that the Sardar Sarovar is an inter-state project, with Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Gujarat as the party states. Therefore, decisions cannot be taken by any one state alone.. The chief minister said the state government would try its best to open the sluice gates of the dam and halt the filling of the dam to its full level. He also assured that displaced persons’ rights will be protected; measures for their rehabilitation and compensation will be awarded to all the eligible families after receiving the amount from Gujarat, the other concerned state.

(Courtesy: Sc il.in, Two Circle)
Letter to Editor

Declare 2020–30 as Save the Earth Decade

Bharat Dogra

Towards the end of 2018 a special report of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warned humanity that it has only 12 years (up to 2030) to check climate change within limits necessary to protect life-sustaining conditions on earth. Hence the decade 2020–30 will be of critical importance for checking this most important environmental problem before it reaches a stage of tipping point. What is more, around the same time a number of other serious environmental problems are also reaching critical levels.

Apart from environmental problems, from the point of view of accumulation of highly destructive weapons, the world is reaching a most serious stage. The world has around 14,500 nuclear weapons at present. Three great military powers, the USA, Russia and China have all invested heavily in recent years in modernisation of nuclear weapons. Due to a complex of factors, the threats of accidental use of nuclear weapons and of terrorists gaining access to nuclear weapons have increased.

A relatively new threat is the fast emergence of robot weapons (AI or autonomous weapons).

Combining all these and some other factors, it is clear that there is a very real threat to the essential life-sustaining conditions of planet earth today of a kind that never existed before. The solutions to this crisis should be found within a framework of justice, peace and democracy. The existing efforts for justice, peace and democracy should be increased and adapted to include a focus on life-sustaining conditions of our planet.

At all levels there is a clear need for worldwide declaration of decade 2020–30 as 'Decade for Saving Earth'.

(Bharat Dogra is a freelance journalist, author, researcher, activist.)

Press Release

Statement in Support of Kumar Prashant

Battini Rao, Convenor,
People’s Alliance for Democracy and Secularism

People’s Alliance for Democracy and Secularism (PADS) expresses its concern over the two FIRS being filed in Odisha (Kandhmal and Katak) against Shri Kumar Prashant, president of Gandhi Peace Foundation, allegedly for hurting sentiments of local RSS members, spreading lies about RSS and instigating people against the actions taken by the Union Government in Kashmir.

Instead of proving Kumar Prashant wrong by publishing or speaking their refutation of his views, the RSS have taken recourse to court. The role of RSS, Hindu Mahasabha and Muslim League during our India's independence movement is well documented and is still being debated. Historical controversies cannot be resolved or put to rest in courts of law. They are academic and political matters. The RSS leadership must be well aware of this fact but it has chosen to take recourse to intimidation and threats to suppress a democratically expressed opinion by Kumar Prashant.

This is nothing other than an attempt to police public opinion by threats. It is an example of the totalitarian habit of mind of the RSS.

On this matter we are in solidarity with Kumar Prashant. We have trust in our judiciary and are confident that the Kandhmal and Katak courts will do justice to the veteran Gandhian. We also expect of the Naveen Patnaik government that it would intervene and prevent the Odisha Police from taking any unlawful action against him.

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A Hundred Years of Amrita Pritam

Nirupama Dutt

A drop of your love had blended in So I drank the entire bitterness of life ...

Born in pre-partition Punjab and schooled in Punjabi, Amrita Pritam’s words stand witness to the upheavals of the 20th century wherein she was born. Destined to be a poet, the main concerns of her writing were love, freedom, justice and togetherness.

She brought Punjabi the glory it had never received before, as far as modern writing in the language goes.

Although she wrote in a regional language, Pritam enjoyed an iconic presence that was not just pan-Indian but international. She authored 100 books in different genres—poetry, fiction, essays, biographies, memoirs—as well as a famous autobiography titled The Revenue Stamp (Raseedi Ticket, 1976).

She also edited a Punjabi literary journal called Nagmani for 36 years. Immensely popular, she nurtured two generations of writers, including well-known names like Gurdial Singh, Dalip Kaur Tiwana and Shiv Kumar Batalvi.

The daughter of Nand Sadhu (Cartar Singh Hitkari) and schoolteacher Raj Bibi, a Khatri Sikh couple, Pritam was born with a verse in her heart as her father was a spiritual poet in both the oral and written traditions.

At the age of eight, she helped her father compose poetry. She was only 11 when her mother died. Poetry and daydreams became companions to the lonely child. Tutored by her father in rhyme and metre, she came out with her first book of poetry, Amrit Lehran (Waves of Nectar), written in the spiritual tradition, at age 13.

However, it was at 16—with Thandiyan Kirnan (Cool Rays)—that she received critical acclaim and became the first modern poet of Punjab, eventually being considered a pillar of Punjabi poetry. After that, there was no looking back.

As 2019 heralds her centenary celebrations, we remember the poem that immortalised her, the first dirge to partition by a Punjabi poet writing in any language: Ajj Akhan Waris Shah nu (‘Waris Shah, I Call out to You Today’). She wrote it during a train journey from Delhi to Dehradun in 1948, as a 28-year-old refugee from Lahore:

Today Waris Shah I call out to you To speak out from the graves Rise today and open a new page Of the immortal book of love A daughter of Punjab once wept And you wrote many a dirge A million daughters weep today and look up at you for solace Rise o beloved of the aggrieved just look at your Punjab Today corpses haunt the woods Chenab river overflows with blood Someone has mixed poison In the Five Rivers of Punjab ...

Pritam recounted those times in her autobiography: “The most gruesome accounts of marauding invaders in all mythologies and chronicles put together will not, I believe, compare with the blood curling horrors of this historic year.”

As a first, she wrote openly about her life, including the smoking of cigarettes—a religious taboo among the Sikh orthodoxy:
There was a pain
I smoked it silently like a cigarette
And a few poems I flicked off
Like ashes from a cigarette …

Through her writing and her life, Pritam paved the way for freedom and choice for young writers, especially girls. As she battled illness towards the end of her life, a precious gift came her way. A few Pakistani writers collected three green chadars (sheets) from the tombs of Sufi poets Waris Shah, Bulleh Shah and Sultan Bahu from across the border and presented her with the line: “You are the Waris (heir) of our Waris!” Such was the love she inspired.

She often said of her poetry: “I have just returned what I learned from the saints, sufis and fakirs of the land of the five rivers!”

This would be followed by a line from one of her poems: Maan suche
Ishq da hai, hunar da dava nahi (‘I cherish my chaste dedication and make no claims to the craft”).

Main Tainu Phir Milangi (‘I Will Meet You Yet Again’), dedicated to her partner Imroz, today enjoys an iconic status next only to her ode to Waris Shah:
I will meet you yet again
How and where
I know not
Perhaps I will become a
Figment of your imagination

And maybe spreading myself
In a mysterious line
On your canvas
I will keep gazing at you.
...

When the body perishes
All perishes
But the threads of memory
Are woven of enduring atoms
I will pick these particles
Weave the threads
And I will meet you yet again.

(Nirupama Dutt is a poet, journalist and translator based in Chandigarh. She received the Punjabi Akademi Award for her book of poems Ik Nadi Sanwali Jahi.)

Remembering M.M. Kalburgi
Huchangi Prasad
Translated by Aniruddha Nagaraj and Ali Ahsan

[Four years ago, academic and activist M.M. Kalburgi was gunned down at his residence in Dharwad by two people linked to Sanatan Sanstha, a Hindutva outfit. Kalburgi was a vocal critic of idol worship and superstition, which often got him locking horns with Hindutva groups like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), which made Kalburgi the target of their campaign during the years following up to his assassination on 30th August, 2015.

Here is a impassioned poem written (originally in Kannada) as a tribute to Kalburgi and to the countless other pens that will not be put down, by poet-activist Huchangi Prasad.]

You cowards—
firing at us who wield pens.
You murderers—
celebrating the cold-hearted killing of innocents.

Let the sparrows
build nests
at your gunpoints.
Your guns may have wounded us.
But we are not just bodies,
Mute bodies.
We are children of the earth,
our mother gives us life with every letter,
strength with every word.
Look, this is not blood we shed
but ink, fresh and indelible,
writing the history of truth.
Every drop of blood now reborn
into a thousand truths.

Listen—I know, you Great Devotees!
I know the sword that chopped Shambuka's head.
I know who demanded Eklavya's thumb.
I know the truth: I know that sword.
I know you who became a gun
to kill me.
Listen—lies are not termites
eating away at truth.
Guns cannot destroy it either.
But these pens, these countless pens,
How they grow, tall, strong,
like a gigantic tree of many truths.

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(Huchangi Prasad is a writer and activist. He currently teaches at the Government First Grade College, Davanagere, Karnataka.)
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“We are, what we repeatedly do, Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

Aristotle

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No One to Save Us But Ourselves

Eoghan Ó Ceannabháin

The 2018 report from the International Panel on Climate Change gave us 12 years to cut global emissions in half, propelling the issue of Climate Emergency into the public eye in a manner hitherto unprecedented. The consequences of ongoing environmental disaster had been apparent for some time, particularly in parts of the global south, but the IPCC report has proved to be a catalyst for movements like Extinction Rebellion and the School Strikes for Climate, which have further forced environmental issues into mainstream discourse.

But almost a year after the report was issued, the question must be asked: What have the world’s governments done to confront the imminent catastrophe we are facing? What drastic action has been taken? Who has taken the lead on this?

And the stark answer is: absolutely nothing. None of the major industrialised countries are anywhere close to meeting their targets for emission reductions. Rather, global emissions are rising instead of falling. While millions of ordinary people all over the world have been galvanised, and are demanding action to deal with the Climate Emergency, we’ve seen nothing from the world’s leaders which would even slightly mitigate against the disaster.

There have been two distinct kinds of strategies taken to politically manage the situation without fundamentally tackling the environmental crisis itself. The first is the hard right response epitomised by Donald Trump in the United States and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil: double down on the destructive policies that brought us to the brink in the first place, deny the existence of climate change or minimise the role of human activity in bringing it about, target minorities, close borders and energise a hard right base.

This strategy naturally presents an immediate threat to much of life on this planet. The activities of loggers and Brazilian agribusiness in the Amazon rainforest are causing deforestation at an astonishing rate, with an area the size of a football pitch being cleared every minute. Penalties for illegal logging and burning have been significantly reduced by the Bolsonaro government. This amounts to an invitation to lay waste to the lungs of the planet which produce 20% of the world’s oxygen. Bolsonaro is
unapologetically forging ahead with this policy, denying that deforestation is taking place, stating that “the Amazon is ours” and claiming that he is “fulfilling a mission from God”.

The profits of climate crisis

In the United States, meanwhile, Trump’s decision to pull out of the Paris Climate Agreement in June 2017 made clear that any pretence of dealing with the Climate Emergency was to be abandoned. Instead, the Trump administration strategy has been to engage in an extreme form of disaster capitalism—seeking business opportunities wherever they arise out of the catastrophe.

In May of this year, for example, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that the melting of the Arctic sea ice was “opening new passageways and new opportunities for trade.” He went on to mention the possibilities for oil and gas exploration as well as exploiting the “abundance of uranium, rare earth minerals, gold, diamonds, and millions of square miles of untapped resources, fisheries galore”.

The intended course is clear for the world’s far right leaders—continue the hyper extraction of the planet’s natural resources and deny that the destruction is taking place, while profiting directly from it; ramp up racism and xenophobia, build walls and fences and let the refugees die at the gates; let the planet burn, for the rich live on the hill and will to use the wealth we have created to protect themselves. In fact, security agencies like Pinkerton, the descendents of the old strike-breaking mob, are now offering protection packages to the world’s elites to guard against the dangers of societal breakdown caused by environmental catastrophe.

The far right strategy is chilling. But what is the alternative provided by the liberal wing of the world’s ruling class?

Liberal failings

The second alternative is more subtle. It involves endorsing the science and putting on a facade that the situation is being taken seriously, and in some cases even declaring a Climate Emergency, as has been done in Ireland and the UK. The public is reassured that this is a priority and that drastic steps are being taken to reduce the nation’s emissions.

When we look at what is actually being done, it becomes apparent that the measures taken are totally inadequate and that the train is speeding up rather than slowing down.

In the case of the Republic of Ireland, a licence to drill off the coast of Kerry was granted mere days after the declaration of a Climate Emergency. The government has undemocratically blocked People Before Profit’s Climate Emergency Measures Bill which would ban any new fossil fuel exploration licences. They continue to support the building of Shannon LNG (Liquified Natural Gas Terminal) which will bring in fracked gas from North America and lock us into a fossil fuel future for decades to come. The Irish government’s Climate Action Plan set out pitiful targets of 2% reductions in emissions every year until 2030—targets that they won’t even meet because they intend to expand the national dairy herd and double electricity usage during this time.

Moreover, the latest PR exercise by Leo Varadkar’s government is to declare they will be planting 440 million trees over the next 20 years to offset our carbon emissions. However, on inspection, one finds that 70% of these will be conifers, such as sitka spruce, which are highly inefficient in sequestering carbon and are a disaster for biodiversity. They are the preferred choice because they grow quickly and therefore can be harvested sooner and sold—the move is therefore primarily about profit-making, not protecting the environment.

To add insult to injury, Minister for Transport Shane Ross has recently taken to trolling the nation with his new electric car, urging the public to dig deep and follow his lead, goading other TDs for not making the switch. Much was made of the fact that one of Ross’ PR stunts involved pretending to charge his new purchase at a charging station that was not yet operational, but what was missing from the mainstream discourse was any discussion of the government’s ludicrous plan to put nearly 1 million electric vehicles on the road by 2030.

The reality is that even if this were possible and affordable, it is simply not a sustainable method for lowering transport emissions. The amount of raw materials involved in constructing these cars would be enormous, as well as the energy required to run them. Yet when it comes to the major investment in public transport required to get people out of their cars, Ross and his Fine Gael colleagues are sitting on their hands.

Around the world, liberal inaction on the Climate Emergency is similar. There is a refusal to accept the kind of overhaul of the economic system required to put a halt to the 6th mass extinction. Instead, the establishment kicks the can down
the road and seeks a technocratic fix that will not challenge the status quo.

Too late for tech

This attitude is embodied in the assumption that carbon capture technologies which sequester carbon from the atmosphere will be developed in time to avoid tipping points that trigger runaway global warming. The idea that these technologies may be used in the near future is being promoted by fossil fuel companies wishing to protect their profits. It was revealed recently that these same companies such as Shell and BP are actually planning for a 4°C rise in global temperatures—much above the 1.5°C warming which scientists say may prevent the very worst of the catastrophe.

The reality of carbon capture technology is that it does not exist and is highly unlikely to be developed on the scale required before the time is up, yet many of the predictive models used by the IPCC account for the technology being developed and mitigating against global warming. This is one of the reasons that the report actually now appears to be quite conservative in its outlook—the evidence suggests that warming is happening significantly faster than predicted.

There is, of course, a proven way to sequester carbon from the atmosphere through the use of broadleaf trees, but the action required to protect the world’s existing rainforests and to plant more broadleaf trees on the necessary scale is simply not happening.

A dangerous dynamic has also developed between the two wings of the global elites. The liberal elites attempt to garner public favour by placing themselves in opposition to the likes of Trump and Bolsonaro.

After the unprecedented fires in the Amazon rainforest, French president Emmanuel Macron tweeted “our house is burning” and called for the issue to be discussed at the upcoming G7 summit. There was no mention of the fact that Macron is supporting the EU–Mercosur deal which incentivises Brazilian agribusiness to clear the land in order to farm beef that will be sold to Europe.

Likewise, Canada’s Justin Trudeau pitched in to tweet “We need to #ActForTheAmazon & act for our planet” with no mention how he has allowed the dirtiest kind of fracking to go ahead in the Alberta Tar Sands and has repeatedly railroaded pipelines through indigenous peoples’ land.

While the existence of the far right climate deniers grants an opportunity for Liberal pearl clutching, the hypocrisy of the centrists is ammunition for the far right. Bolsonaro responded to Macron and Trudeau by pointing out their own states’ failure to protect the environment. In addition, the carbon taxes frequently promoted by many of the world’s governments are pounced upon by the far right, many of whom claim climate change is a hoax to get people to pay more taxes. There is a real danger that this strategy could promote climate change skepticism at a crucial period when the movements to take on the status quo urgently need to be built.

If the far right are determined to drive us off the edge of a cliff and the political centre is engaged in a window dressing exercise, what is the hope, then, for humanity and the planet?

Mass movements for change

The reality is that there are no saviours to swoop in at the 11th hour. The political establishment has proven over the last 30 years that it is utterly incapable of tackling this crisis. The only hope we have is to build up the power of mass movements of ordinary people, workers, school kids and parents that can challenge the establishment and implement the kind of system that runs sustainably, equally, and looks after people’s needs.

In this, the upcoming Global Climate Strike on 20 September is a crucial milestone. A strong showing globally from school students and workers united could prove to be an important springboard for the global environmental movement—a movement that has promise, but that urgently needs to grow and become more organised if we are to be successful.

The only ones who can save us from climate breakdown are ourselves.

(Eoghan Ó Céannabháin is an Irish socialist activist.)
Janata Weekly Launches Janata Blog

Dear Readers,

We receive several articles every week from all over India and the world. Several of these articles are very good, and which we like our readers to read, but we are unable to print them in Janata Weekly, mainly due to lack of space. Therefore, from this issue onwards, Janata Weekly is launching an online Janata Blog, where we would be uploading some of these articles. We will be uploading around 5-8 articles in a week. We would like to mention here that while we will be glancing through the articles before we upload them on the blog, it will not be possible for us to edit them the way we edit the articles being printed, due to lack of time. Please excuse us for this.

G.G. Parikh, Neeraj Jain

The Systemic Crisis of World Capitalism

Prabhat Patnaik

The hallmark of a systemic, as distinct from a cyclical or sporadic, crisis of capitalism is that every effort to resolve the crisis within the broad confines of the system, defined in terms of its prevailing class configuration, only worsens the crisis. It is in this sense that neoliberal capitalism has now entered a systemic crisis. It cannot be resolved by mere tinkering; and attempts to go beyond mere tinkering, for instance by introducing protectionism without transcending the broad framework of neoliberal globalisation, ie without overcoming the hegemony of international finance capital which is the moving force behind this globalisation, as Trump is doing in the US, will only worsen the crisis.

The symptoms of the crisis are well-known. The 2008 crisis had been followed by the pursuit of a “cheap money policy” in the US and elsewhere, so that the interest rates were brought down to almost zero. This just barely managed to provide some temporary breathing space to world capitalism; but now again it is faced with a looming recession. In the US, business investment is on the decline and industrial output in July was 0.2 per cent lower than in the previous month. The British economy contracted during the second quarter of this year, as did Germany. The picture is much the same everywhere else, such as Italy, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina and India. Even China is witnessing a slowing down of its growth rate as a consequence of the world recession.

The response of policy-makers everywhere to this emerging recession is to move once again for a cut in interest rates. The European Central Bank which has already pushed its key interest rate to the negative region, is planning to further lower it. In India, interest rates have already been cut. The idea behind such interest rate cuts is not so much that lower rates would cause larger investment; rather that lower rates would cause asset price “bubbles”, which would boost aggregate demand through larger expenditure by those who feel wealthier because of such asset price “bubbles”.

Why this should be the typical response of policy-makers everywhere should be clarified. In the immediate post-Second World War period, ie, before neoliberal globalisation had got going, government expenditure could be increased to boost aggregate demand whenever there was a threat of recession. Governments could raise fiscal deficits if necessary, since capital controls were in place and there was no danger of any capital flight in the event of a rise in fiscal deficit.

This had been the world visualised by John Maynard Keynes, the noted economist who had been one of the architects of the post-war capitalist economic order. He had been opposed to internationalisation of finance (“finance above all must be national” he had said), on the grounds that such internationalisation undermined the capacity of the nation-State to raise employment by making it a prisoner of finance which was always opposed to larger government expenditure for this purpose. As a defender of the capitalist system, Keynes had feared that unless the nation-State
could raise employment sufficiently, capitalism could not survive the socialist threat.

But with massive accumulations of finance with metropolitan banks, because of continuously large US current account deficits on the balance of payments during this period, and also, at a later date, because of large deposits of revenues earned from the oil price hikes of the 1970s by the OPEC producers, there was enormous pressure from finance capital for a lifting of capital controls. It wanted the whole globe to be opened up for finance to move around at will, and ultimately succeeded. The hegemony of international finance capital thus got established, which also meant a withdrawal of the nation-State from its role of keeping up the level of employment through fiscal intervention. The only way of boosting aggregate demand under the regime of neoliberal capitalism that came into existence therefore was through stimulating asset-price “bubbles”; and interest rate policy was used for this purpose.

But unlike government expenditure which can be regulated at will, a “bubble” cannot be made to appear at will. For a while, in the nineties (the “dot-com bubble” in the United States) and the early years of this century (the “housing bubble” in the US), this way of stimulating aggregate demand appeared to work. This trade war, which was started by the US as a way of getting out of the crisis, is now accentuating the crisis for the global economy, because it undermines whatever little incentive to invest there was among the capitalists of the world. Far from stimulating a new asset-price bubble, which was the original intention behind lowering interest rates, it has the effect of causing a collapse in stock markets across the world. The Wall Street for instance witnessed the biggest fall of the year on August 14; and in response markets all over the world also registered falls.

If government expenditures could be increased within each country then the need for such “beggar-thy-neighbour” policies would not arise. Even if some protectionism is resorted to for ensuring that the demand increase caused by government expenditure does not “leak out” abroad, this need not lead to any reduction in imports from other countries since the market itself would be increasing. But in the absence of increased government expenditure which international finance capital is opposed to (because of which most countries have enacted laws restricting the size of the fiscal deficit), beggar-thy-
neighbour policies remain one of the few possible options for a country to follow; this however worsens the crisis for all.

This is precisely the hall-mark of a systemic crisis. As long as the hegemony of international finance capital continues, and countries remain caught in the vortex of global financial flows, not only will the crisis continue, but every effort to overcome the crisis through whatever means are available within the system, will only aggravate the crisis. Overcoming the hegemony of international finance capital requires, however, that within each country the working people are mobilised around an alternative agenda.

(The author is Professor Emeritus, Centre for Economic Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.)

Why were several prominent parliamentarians from the Opposition parties denied entry into the Kashmir Valley? So that they don’t get to hear human cries; those appeals to be set free from their cage, from the clampdown, from the barbarity unleashed on hapless residents of the Valley. Together with that, these parliamentarians don’t even get to know the whereabouts of their political colleagues in the Valley, who have either been formally arrested or are placed under house arrest.

To add to the prevailing mess, only the Right-wing politicians are being allowed to enter the Valley. As expected, this is being done so that they may mouth the well-scripted speeches that have been drafted in the corridors of power in New Delhi. The strain of these is that ‘all is well’ and ‘under control’ and that ‘normalcy’ is back—that all is okay in the Valley.

Does the government think that in this day and age it can get away by using such tactics? If all is indeed as well in the Valley as the Centre and the Governor, Satya Pal Malik, claim, then let all of us see for ourselves how very genuine are those sarkari claims. The truth is that the Governor lives in a fortified Raj Bhavan where even birds don’t seem to chirp from fear, what to say of the people in Kashmir, who may not even dare approach the Governor to tell him about the hellish conditions imposed on them.

Needless to say, the Governor has not been spotted walking on the streets, the roads, the lanes or alleys of Srinagar city to see for himself what the ground realities are.

What pellet guns could not achieve is now being done by attacking the very survival of the Kashmiris of the Valley. The Kashmiri is surviving without connectivity, without work, without money to run a household, without medical, educational and healthcare facilities—without a future.

Right from the nineties, I have reported on the aftermath of the violence on Kashmiris. They have never really seen a single stretch of peace. This in itself has left a deep and lasting impact on them. The leading medical professionals of the Valley have been all through vocal on this. One of them is the Srinagar-based Dr. Mushtaq A Margoob, who is an internationally recognised expert on disaster psychiatry.

I had first interviewed him in 2002, followed by another interview less than a decade ago. In fact, whenever a severe crisis erupted in the Valley, I would ask him for observations and comments. Here is what he said to me in 2010, after one such bout of disturbances, “J&K has faced continuous mass trauma for more than two decades now. The amount of emotional distress caused by the perpetual state of uncertainty, insecurity and moment-to-moment living is hard to imagine.”

He also told me that the prevailing violent conditions had heightened the suffering of the people and resulted in a phenomenal increase in mental disorders. This is also clearly reflected in a series of Margoob’s published studies. “More than 58% of the adult population has experienced or witnessed traumatic
life events,” he told me. The disabling disorder of post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD was prevalent at the time in more than 7% of the population, and depression in more than 19%.

Women and children are the worst affected. Children between the ages of 5 and 12 who lived in orphanages had a higher than 40% prevalence of PTSD, 25% were depressed and more than 12% suffered from conversion disorder.

This is the picture of a Kashmir that has today become one of the world’s worst sites for the abuse of medicinal opium. As Margoob told me, “More than 3.8% of the population abuses opioids. Mostly, this abuse is to induce sleep or to get momentary relief from their continuous and agonising psychological pain and suffering.”

In a man-made disaster, in which any harm is deliberately inflicted, it can lead to a shift in societal conventions and processes. There can be an increased sense of rage and feelings of entitlement to revenge can arise, especially when one is mourning loss. There can be a reversal of the feelings of helplessness and humiliation. Under such circumstances, even the fully grown up adult’s brain automatically shifts operation, so to speak, from highly evolved reality-based action processes to instinctual or emotion-based reactions. A fight or flight course of action may be taken by people under such circumstances.

Since the young brain of non-adults is yet to fully develop psychological mechanisms, children and adolescents are more vulnerable to emotional actions and reactions. When they assume that they are getting pushed against the wall they get dominated by their emotions and stop caring for the consequences.

The result is that youngsters identify with the group rather than with their individuality and they can get heavily involved in activities that essentially were non-existent in their society earlier.

This is how the young have been and continue to be affected in Kashmir. Today’s generation of young Kashmiris who live in the Valley reflect this psychological condition in more ways than one. The recent developments, in which they have taken to defy law and order, can well be a manifestation of the ever-increasing levels of frustration and anger among this ‘trauma generation’. This generation has hardly seen a moment of complete peace or tranquillity from time of their birth.

It is difficult not to empathise with these traumatised children, who seem to have lost forever their carefree innocence. Their lives have been scarred by experiences so horrifying that they will never emerge from despair without help. In the words of Margoob, “The haunting demons of memory wreak frightful vengeance on their frail psyche. Trapped as they are in the whirlpool of relived experience; bewildered and frightened; they are agonisingly alone in their pain.”

Today, the Kashmir Valley has among the highest numbers of half-widows, women whose husbands were picked up security agencies, never to be seen thereafter. It follows that the Valley has thousands of ‘missing men’ too, whose parents have set up an Association of Parents of the Disappeared Persons, APDP.

I have met many such grieving parents, trying to locate these missing men. Many I have met sold their land and their homes in the hopes to find their sons lodged in prisons across the country and have failed to find them.

Now, reports say that a large number of Kashmiris have been sent to jails out of the state to prisons in Uttar Pradesh. This in itself is a blow for Kashmiris for it can be nearly impossible for families to travel out of the Valley. There is also a fear that they may get attacked by brigades of Right wing goons, and denied accommodation in guest houses and hotels. Not to be overlooked are the weather conditions (of Uttar Pradesh) that could naturally harm the health of Kashmiri prisoners: the State is hitting them in one more way.

That is why Valley Kashmiris are summing up the hellish conditions that have been heaped upon them by the government in this one Hindustani word that applies to tyranny: ‘Zulm!’

(Humra Quraishi is a columnist and commentator in Gurgaon.)
Pash: Life and Works of a Revolutionary Poet

Manan Kapoor

Avtar Singh Sandhu, popularly known by his nom de plume, Pash, was arguably the most influential political Punjabi poet of the 20th century. His works include Loh-Katha (Iron Tale, 1970), Uddian Bazan Magar (Following the Flying Hawks, 1973), Saade Samiyan Vich (In Our Times, 1978), and the posthumously published collection Khilre Hoye Varkey (Scattered Pages, 1989).

Pash was born in the village of Talwandi Salem in Jalandhar, Punjab, on September 9, 1950, when the region was still recovering from the aftermath of partition. It can be said that poetry was in his genes as his father, Sohan Singh Sandhu, who was in the Indian Army, wrote poetry as a hobby. A product of his time and the active Naxalite movement around him, Pash’s poetry always had political overtones akin to the verses of poets such as Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Bertolt Brecht, Yiannis Ritsos and Mahmoud Darwish. This was evident right from his first poetry collection—which he published at the young age of 20—up until those written during his last days.

In fact, he gained the reputation of a rebel following the publication of his first collection, Loh-Katha. When the owner of a brick kiln in the nearby town of Nakodar was killed by self-proclaimed Naxalites, Pash was arrested since he knew them. Tejwant Singh Gill, author of Makers of Indian Literature—Pash (1999) writes, “Any strike announced or agitation launched signalled his arrest.” After the initial arrest in May 1970, he was arrested again during a student unrest in 1972, during a railway employees’ country-wide strike in 1974, and “for an unspecified time during the Emergency.” These arrests had a deep impact on his ideology and writing. Reflecting on the time spent in jail, he wrote in his poem Haath (Hands, 1973),

No one can snatch from me
The play of these hands.
Inside or outside my pockets,
In handcuffs or on the trigger of a rifle,
Hands remain hands
And have their own dharma.

Pash was an avid reader of the German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht. As a result, he questioned traditions, religious extremism, violence, and social and political structures. He grew up amid the Naxalite movement, and at a time when inequalities and feudalism were being questioned in the region. Ashutosh Sharma, in a 2017 National Herald article, writes that Pash was known for his “scathing criticism of state oppression, religious fundamentalism, feudalism, landlordism, unethical industrialists, corrupt traders and politicians.”

After his release from jail, he came across the works of Russian revolutionaries, Marxist theorists and Soviet politician Leon Trotsky. In Pash: The Poet and Man, Gill writes, “Trotsky renewed Pash’s view of revolutionary poetry. It was now Pablo Neruda with his autochthonous poetry who embodied for him the image of a revolutionary poet.” He was deeply influenced by the writings of Maxim Gorky as well. Inspired by Gorky’s Russian novel Mother, he decided to call himself Pash, after the working-class character Pasha.

Pash was not only a pen name, but also an idea he believed was separate from who he was—an idea that reverberated with the idea of revolution. In his poem Taithon Bina (Without You, 1978), he wrote,

Without you Avtar Singh Sandhu is Pash,
And that is nothing else besides.

By time he turned 22, he had started editing the literary magazines, Siarh (The Plow Line) and Rohle Baan (Raging Arrows)—both Left-leaning publications. In Siarh, he had several times opposed religious fanaticism and separatist ideology, condemning the attempts to divide the nation again on the basis of religion. In his poem, Do te Do Tinn (Two and Two Make Three, 1970), he wrote,

The declaration of accepting demands
is made by dropping bombs.
That loving your own people could mean
spying for the ‘enemy nation.’
And the reward for the greatest treachery
could be the highest seat.
If all this you believe
then two and two make three
and the present can be a mythical past.

In 1986, he moved to America after he received death threats from pro-Khalistan militants. However, that did not stop him from expressing his views against religious fanaticism and the idea of creation of another nation-state. While he was in the US, he brought out a journal called Anti-1947, where
he criticised the Sikh extremist violence during the 1980s. He came back to Punjab for a brief period to renew his visa. On March 23, 1988, he was gunned down by militants en route to New Delhi. Even though it has been more than three decades since his death, his ideas, and his fierce and fearless poems continue to be read and recited. Today, his most famous poem, Sab Ton Khatarnak (The Most Dangerous Thing, 1989), has become a poem of resistance and protest that is recited time and again to remind one what the ‘most dangerous thing’ is.

Being looted of one’s labour is not the worst thing.
Nor is police torture.
Even betrayal out of greed
And arrest without warning
Are not the most terrible.
To be frightened into silence is bad
But not really dangerous.
To be drowned in the noise of corruption
Even when one knows one is right is no doubt bad.
Reading in the feeble light of a glow worm
Going through life with a frown are also no doubt bad.
But they are not the worst.
Most harmful to oneself is to reduce life to passivity
To lack intensity of desire
To bear everything
To become a creature of routine.
Most dangerous of all is the death of our dreams.

(The author is writer and copy editor with Sahapedia.org, an open encyclopedic resource on the arts, cultures and histories of India. All poems have been translated by Tejwant Singh Gill.)

Dear Kannan Gopinathan, I quit Zoho for the same reason. Where do we go from here?

Saravana Raja

Put me back in the middle of the sea,
Let me struggle, learn & find a new shore.

Dear Kannan Gopinathan
Couple of days ago, I stumbled upon a news article that spoke about you resigning from the Indian Administrative Service. The reason for your resignation is something Bhakts and to-be-Bhakts might find really hard to digest.

As you say in an interview, “If you ask me what you were doing, when one of the world’s largest democracies announced a ban on the entire state, and even violated the fundamental rights of the people, I should at least be able to reply that I resigned my job.”

Well, that’s not how typical Babulog (Bureaucrats) talk. It sounds so different and now everyone may understand why you chose to go “strangely” unnoticed while doing flood relief work in Kerala.

Undoubtedly, you are different. You’ve got something called conscience, a rarity today, something we hardly see anywhere, be it in newspapers, 24/7 media, or even with the opposition parties who play safely in their self-imposed limitations.

Allow me to share my experience with “freedom of expression”, that led me to quit Zoho, a popular software product company from India, exactly on this day, a year ago.

To start with, I have to take the example of James Damore who got fired from Google in July 2017 for an intranet post (basically right-wing views), commonly referred to as Google Memo.

Sridhar Vembu, CEO of Zoho, wrote a long intranet post in defense of James who got fired from Google in July 2017 for an intranet post (basically right-wing views), commonly referred to as Google Memo.

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I was reading the blog post just like any other employee. Though I strongly differed with James Damore, I felt Sridhar was right about his freedom of speech. I had little idea then that I will face a Zoho Memo or an ideological echo chamber moment, a year later.

Let me jump straight to August 2018, by when I had spent a decade in Zoho. I wrote an intranet blog post about the role of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in the Indian freedom struggle, in the context of Independence day. It talked about how RSS is usurping every platform with jingoism while history has a different say on how patriotic they really were.

As expected, there were some strong responses from right-wing supporters but Sridhar’s reply came like a bolt out of the blue. He said my post “crossed an important line to spread historical falsehood and calumny”. My post had references to two articles, one by Shamsul Islam and the other by Pavan Kulkarni. Both authors are well-known for their thorough research, but yes, may not be pleasing to everyone.

He went further and said, “You cannot just say anything here in the name of free speech… Go build your own platform to spread your values… I will not fire you, but I do have strong disagreement with you. Though I strongly differed with James Damore, but whoa, this time it was in a totally reverse direction. The untenable part was how he forcibly tried to contextualise it with company values. I responded with my decision to quit since I agreed with one aspect of his comment, that we should hold our values more dear than money.

Now, why write all this to you and thereby to the entire world?

What I faced in a relatively small, private company is what you are facing in a far more bigger plane of Indian politics. The essence is the same. As you say, we are witnessing “our own voice being taken away from us”.

History will have very strong words to use on what’s happening in Kashmir, beyond all the PR exercises being conducted for days and days. I try to think and recollect of whatever happened and is happening in the past month while writing this to you.

How Indian Medical Association and even veterinary association pounced upon The Lancet, an internationally reputed medical journal, for raising its concerns on fear and uncertainty around Kashmir’s future…

How Press Council of India which is supposed to safeguard the freedom of press intervened in a SC petition to back media restrictions in Jammu and Kashmir…

How Ladakh MP Jamyang Tsering Namgyal was given continuous spotlight while the protesting PDP MPs were mentioned in a passing manner…

How the leaders of Kashmir are under house arrest for all these days defying all human rights declarations and how the UN gets satisfied with namesake press releases…

How the silence of the higher judiciary is so deafening?

How BJP MLAs and MPs celebrated the “victory” by asking Indian men to marry Kashmiri girls, how “patriotism pop” genre songs mushroomed, and how even our school, college, and even cake baking WhatsApp groups were filled with messages of “masterstroke”, “surgical strike” etc.,

How Shehla Rashid was heckled on Twitter by Bhakts and the Army for sharing what’s really happening in Kashmir and continuously gets mobbed by the media…

How a Kashmiri doctor Dr. Omar got whisked away for simply requesting that the blockade be lifted as it was leading to a healthcare crisis…

How Kavitha Krishnan and other activists were not allowed to screen the fact-finding video titled “Kashmir Caged” in the Press Club of India…

How countless stories of pain and despair suffered by women, children and old people, get mixed with countless everyday stories of much less importance and fight their way to get our little attention…

In such a really really toxic scenario, I must say, I salute you from the bottom of my heart, Kannan, for what you have done! You have shown exemplary moral courage!

I did what I did and am doing what I can against the all-pervasive unprecedented jingoism, like you and many others. We are only part of the inevitable chain reaction against hegemony.

When you think of people like Sanjiv Bhatt and many such tireless souls, both in the past and the present, we realise it neither began with us nor it will end with us. Now, where do we go from here? King’s legendary words might help:

Let us realise that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. Let us realise that William Cullen Bryant is right:

“Truth, crushed to earth, will rise again.”
Letter to Editor

In Honor of Jatindra Nath Dass

Bharat Dogra

It was 90 years ago that Jatindra Nath Das sacrificed his life for improving the condition of political prisoners, after a 63 day fast at Lahore Central Jail. He was only 25 years of age at the time of his death on September 13, 1929.

This fast had a great impact and millions of people gathered in various parts of India to pay their last respects to Jatindra Nath Das who had participated in the revolutionary movement as well as in the Gandhi-led non-cooperation movement with great commitment.

Earlier he had fasted for the same cause at Mymensingh Jail and there also his fast had made a significant impact. Keeping in view his deep conviction and the deep impact of his initiatives on people, it will be most appropriate and a fitting tribute if his death anniversary is observed every year as Day for Justice for Political Prisoners.

(Bharat Dogra is a freelance journalist, author, researcher, activist.)

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Bernie Sander’s Radical Climate Plan

Kate Aronoff

If you tried to design a program with the aim of offending the top brass of the world’s most powerful corporations and the politicians whose careers they bankroll, you’d get something like what Bernie Sanders unveiled today in his $16.3 trillion Green New Deal platform. That’s part of the point. “We need a president who has the courage, the vision and the record to face down the greed of fossil fuel executives and the billionaire class who stand in the way of climate action,” the plan’s opening salvo states, going on to echo a famous line from Franklin Delano Roosevelt. “We need a president who welcomes their hatred.”

Sanders outlines an expansive system, building on the resolution introduced by Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Sen. Ed Markey in April, that would generate publicly owned clean energy and 20 million new jobs, end fossil fuels imports and exports, revivify the social safety net, redress historical injustices like environmental racism, and make prolific investments toward decarbonisation at home and abroad—among many, many other things. It would not only transition American society away from fossil fuels but renegotiate decades-old nostrums, championed by the right, about the respective roles of the government and the economy.

There are novel, meaty policy proposals that make Sanders’s proposal stand out from an already ambitious field: a cash-for-clunkers and financial assistance program to scale up electric vehicle usage, and plans to boost public transit ridership 65 percent by 2030; a requirement that the Congressional Budget Office work with the Environmental Protection Agency to give new legislation a “climate score,” like the budget scores it currently does out; and abiding by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to ensure the free, prior and informed consent by Indigenous peoples.

It’s also sparked controversy among energy wonks who see antinuclear provisions as antithetical to decarbonisation. The plan also rules out carbon capture and storage, which experts suggest may be necessary in the short-run to transition hard-to-decarbonise sectors—but that fossil fuel executives have also long pushed as a way to extend its life indefinitely. Carbon taxes have been a mainstay of Sanders’s climate plans, and his Green New Deal blueprint doesn’t foreclose on the option but also doesn’t emphasise it.

Running through the plan is a different and more explicit theory of change than the lofty platforms other candidates have laid out; it’s built on organising and naming enemies. Sanders promises to take on the “fossil fuel billionaires whose greed lies at the very heart of the climate crisis,” who, he argues, “have spent hundreds of millions of dollars protecting their profits at the expense of our future” and “will do whatever it takes to squeeze every last penny out of the Earth.” Outlining how the plan will be financed, it notes that he will get $3.085 trillion by making “the fossil fuel industry pay for their pollution, through litigation, fees and taxes, and eliminating federal fossil fuel subsidies.”

“Most importantly,” he says, “we must build an unprecedented grassroots movement that is powerful enough to take them on, and win.
Young people, advocates, tribes, cities and states all over this country have already begun this important work, and we will continue to follow their lead.”

It’s an approach that distinguishes Sanders’s not just from the primary field but from the last 30-plus years of mainstream climate policymaking in the United States.

The closest the US has ever come to passing comprehensive carbon reduction legislation was the doomed congressional fight over cap-and-trade legislation in 2009 and 2010. There are as many explanations for why that plan failed as there are potential Green New Deal programs, and many unfortunate factors converged to torpedo its chances. One major reason why that plan flopped? Some of its most influential advocates were more concerned about winning over corporations than convincing the public it was a good idea. The key to getting Republican support, they reasoned, was to win over the business community, taking advantage of historically strong ties between corporations and the GOP. The vehicle to do that would be a cap-and-trade program, placing a limit, or “cap,” on the total pollution companies could emit by allocating a set number of total permits. If one firm overshot, it could buy more from another or sell, or “trade,” any excess it had left over on what’s known as a carbon market.

In 2007, the US Climate Action Partnership, or USCAP, helmed by the Environmental Defense Fund, convened Beltway green organisations and Fortune 500 companies—including BP America, PG&E, Duke Energy, and Lehman Brothers—to start shepherding a plan through with allies on the Hill. Because it was thought that climate policy could be designed and passed largely behind closed doors, advocates for cap-and-trade never went out of their way to explain either what the policy meant to the general public, or—in the grips of a deepening recession—how it could improve their lives, opting instead to spread the word about what a grave threat global warming was.

The 1,000-plus-page House cap-and-trade bill, Waxman-Markey, made it through after careful vote whipping and considerable compromise. As climate writer David Roberts has pointed out, the bill itself was more expansive than many of its critics have given it credit for. But the politics driving it—reflecting broader dynamics in Washington, and within the Democratic Party in particular—hinged on a shaky premise: that Republicans and corporations were willing to negotiate in good faith on climate legislation. The tea party movement was quickly gaining momentum, and the Koch brothers spent the summer after the House vote mobilising its fossil fuel empire against moderate Republicans who had backed the bill and even some who didn’t, bolstering groups like Americans for Prosperity to gin up an anti-“crap-and-tax” revolt and pull the party far to the right. By the time a companion bill to Waxman-Markey arrived in the Senate that fall, the mood for climate action had already chilled.

Corporations, meanwhile, could easily play both sides of the climate policymaking field: watering down bills that seemed like they might pass, while funding effort to make sure they never did. In a 2015 paper, political scientist Jake Grumbach points out that several companies who joined USCAP simultaneously supported lobbying against climate action. Shell, BP and ConocoPhillips were all members of USCAP and the American Petroleum Institute, and through that helped to bolster API’s “Energy Citizen” campaign, which hosted astroturf rallies around the country in opposition to cap-and-trade, targeting senators in their districts for the summer recess. Those events were planned in coordination with the US Chamber of Commerce, of which USCAP members Chrysler, Deere, Dow Chemical, Duke Energy, GE, PepsiCo, PNM Resources and Siemens were all members.

This allowed companies to effectively weaken policy and collect positive PR in the process by appearing to support a solution to the problem. “The business stakeholders not only maximised their chances by pulling potential climate legislation closer to their interests and shaping future political terrain,” Grumbach writes. “They were simultaneously able to spend resources to shift the political debate in their favor in order to prevent the legislation from passing in the first place.” All this, of course, came after the fossil fuel industry and some of the same companies, think tanks, and business associations that battled cap-and-trade had spent two decades spreading elaborate misinformation campaigns to cast doubt on the reality of global warming, shifting the grounds of the political debate on which the cap-and-trade battle was playing out.

With Neither Republican nor corporate support moving into a Senate fight, and few people outside the Beltway excited to go to bat for it, cap-and-trade died with a whimper.

The upshot here is that Sanders’s Green New Deal plan offers an approach that couldn’t be more different than the climate push on the Hill a decade ago—and by abandoning that insiders-only strategy, it has a real shot at succeeding. As Theda Skocpol, professor of sociology at Harvard University, wrote in 2013:
The political tide can be turned over the next decade only by the creation of a climate-change politics that includes broad popular mobilisation on the center left. That is what it will take to counter the recently jelled combination of free-market elite opposition and right-wing popular mobilisation against global warming remedies. In the meantime, liberals and friendly moderates need to build a populist anti-global warming movement on their own side of the political spectrum.

If one major mistake of Waxman-Markey was its backers’ inability to articulate how that climate bill would make people’s lives easier, the Green New Deal framework operates by constantly delivering and broadcasting tangible quality of life improvements, using early victories as an opportunity to enlist more support among the many, many people needed to challenge the colossal power of the fossil fuel executives, who are going to put up a massive fight one way or another. Sanders’s Green New Deal offers voters a vision of how much better the world could be without them; its policy and its politics aren’t unrelated.

Sanders’s plan offers a battery of investments both in workers and communities already being hit hard by a decline in jobs in carbon-intensive industries like coal. His just transition provisions would provide five years of unemployment insurance, a wage guarantee, and a host of other benefits to workers, as well as $5.9 billion in funding to regional economic development agencies like the Appalachian Regional Commission. Undergirding just how substantial the transition will be, the Green New Deal will spend its first two years “very aggressively laying down a social safety net to ensure that no one is left behind,” expanding welfare state programs—like free school lunches and SNAP benefits—that have in recent decades come under attack from Democrats and Republicans both.

There are also frequent references to implementing Medicare for All and dramatically increasing union membership along the lines the Sanders team laid out in another plan this week for sectoral bargaining. Communities around the country could also receive financial assistance to take control of their private electric utilities, and the plan boldly lays out an elaborate blueprint to “end greed in our energy system” and ensure that the “renewable energy generated by the Green New Deal will be publicly owned”—a provision sure to rattle investor-owned utilities that have spent millions blocking climate measures at just about every level of government. While the government will initially collect revenue from new state-owned electric utilities, that renewable energy, the plan notes, will after 2035 be “virtually free.”

Using an old playbook, Republicans will liken any plan to curb emissions at all—be it a revenue-neutral carbon tax or a fuel efficiency standard—to socialism. Sanders’s plan doesn’t dance around the fact that the government will indeed play a more active role in the economy—or that most people’s lives will be better off for it.

Rather than inviting fossil fuel interests to the negotiating table, Sanders targets them as enemy number one. There are practical as well as political reasons not to enlist the likes of ExxonMobil in the transition to a low-carbon economy: Their core business model—to dig up and burn as much coal, oil, and gas as possible—has not changed, and is plainly incompatible with decarbonising along the timeline science is saying is necessary to avoid catastrophe. In addition to banning fracking, mountaintop removal coal mining, and extraction on public lands, Sanders plans to “prosecute and sue the fossil fuel industry for the damage it has caused,” making particular reference to revelations in the last several years that Exxon funded climate disinformation while knowing full well the damage warming posed. “These corporations and their executives should not get away with hiding the truth from the American people. They should also pay damages for the destruction they have knowingly caused,” the plan states. On this point, Sanders’s plan is more confrontational than Ocasio-Cortez and Markey’s Green New Deal resolution, which doesn’t mention fossil fuels.

For a climate fight that’s historically been shy about naming enemies—and so often cast as a collective action problem—the Green New Deal framework encourages an “us versus them” strategy not unlike that of its namesake. “I think people generally feel really terrified about the climate crisis. But we’ve also been told a lie, in part, by the fossil fuel industry that it’s all of our fault,” Evan Weber, political director for the Sunrise Movement (a youth based climate movement in the USA), says. “But that’s obviously not the real story. The real story is that a handful of billionaires and their lobbyists and politicians are the reason we’re in this mess. If we’re going to make real progress on the crisis, I think people need to be told that truth, and need to get angry about it and know that if we get these folks out of the way, we can have a better world for everyone.”

(Kate Aronoff is a Brooklyn-based journalist covering climate and US politics.)
Dismantling the Myth of Bt Cotton Success in India

Colin Todhunter

Political posturing aligned with commercial interests means that truth is becoming a casualty in the debate about genetically modified (GM) crops in India. The industry narrative surrounding Bt cotton is that it has been a great success. The current Modi-led administration is parroting this claim and argues its success must be replicated by adopting a range of GM food crops, amounting to what would be a full-scale entry of GM technology into Indian agriculture. Currently, Bt cotton is India’s only officially approved commercially cultivated GM crop.

With the aim of putting the record straight, a media event took place on 6 September in New Delhi at the Constitution Club of India during which it was declared that Bt cotton has been a costly and damaging failure. Speakers included prominent environmentalists Aruna Rodrigues and Vandana Shiva who presented a good deal of information based on official reports, research papers and documents submitted as evidence to the Supreme Court on Bt cotton.

It was argued that even the government’s own data contradicts its tale of Bt cotton success and that the consequences of irresponsibly rolling out various GM crops based on a false narrative would be disastrous for the country.

PR and broken promises

In the early 2000s, Bt cotton was being heavily promoted in India on the basis that it would cut pesticide use dramatically, boost yields and contribute to the financial well-being of farmers. However, pesticide use is back to pre-Bt levels and yields have stagnated or are falling. Moreover, some 31 countries rank above India in terms of cotton yield and of these only 10 grow GM cotton.

As will be shown, farmers now find themselves on a chemical-biotech treadmill and have to deal with an increasing number of Bt/insecticide resistant pests and rising costs of production. For many small-scale cotton farmers, this has resulted in greater levels of indebtedness and financial distress.

Failure to yield

Over 90% of cotton sown in India is now Bt. Although initially introduced to the country in 2002, its adoption was only about 12 and 38% respectively in 2005 and 2006. A good deal of data was contained in the media briefing that accompanied the event in Delhi. In it, Aruna Rodrigues and Vandana Shiva show that even then (2005–2006), average yields had already reached the current plateau of about 450–500 kg/ha. Average all-India Bt cotton yields hovered around or below 500 kg/ha during the period 2005–2018.

What is particularly revealing is that cotton production for 2018–2019 will be the lowest in a decade, down to an estimated 420.72 kg/ha, according to a press release issued in July by the Cotton Association of India.

Furthermore, Rodrigues and Shiva argued that increases in yields that may have occurred were in any case due to various factors, such as increased fertiliser use and high-yielding hybrid seeds, and not Bt technology. The data presented by them shows that cotton yield in the pre-Bt era increased significantly from its 191 kg/ha low in 2002 to 318 kg/ha in 2004–2005, registering an increase of 66% in just three years (the baseline for Bt cotton is 2005–2006 as prior to this adoption rates were not significant). The two environmentalists say this was a result of increased acreage under hybrids and a new class of insecticides.

They note that the momentum of this upward swing carried into the Bt era and had nothing to do with that technology. Their argument is that Bt cotton has failed but is being trumpeted as a success under the cover of increased fertiliser use, hybrid seed trait yield (not attributable to Bt technology), better irrigation and insecticide seed coating.

Biotech treadmill and ecological disruption

Bt technology was used in conjunction with high-yielding hybrids (as opposed to pure line varieties) and has no trait for intrinsic yield. This, Rodrigues and Shiva argue, conveniently allowed a smudging of the yield data (isolating the precise impact of hybrid yield would prove to be difficult) and also provided a ‘value-capture’ mechanism for Monsanto: the introduction of these hybrids disallows seed saving, forcing farmers to buy new expensive hybrid Bt cotton seed each year (hybridisation gives one-time vigour).
Prior to Bt cotton, the extensive use of insecticides to cope with Pink Bollworm (PBW), which is native to India, had become a problem. Spraying for PBW caused outbreaks of American Bollworm (ABW). ABW is a secondary pest that was induced by extensive insecticide use and became the target for Bt cotton.

Although Bt cotton was supposed to control both species of bollworm, PBW resistance to Bt toxin has now occurred and ABW is also developing resistance. Moreover, post-2002, new pests have also appeared, such as whitefly, jassids and mealybugs.

However, Rodrigues and Shiva note that resistance in PBW now occurs to both Monsanto’s Bollgard I and Bollgard II Bt cotton (BGI and BG II). BGI was replaced by BG II as early as 2007–8, just six years after its introduction, because PBW had developed resistance. ABW is also now developing resistance to stacked Bt toxins in BG II.

Irresponsible roll out

Hybrids are input intensive and are sown at suboptimal wide spacing. Unlike in other countries that grow Bt cotton, they are long season cottons and are thus more susceptible to pest build-up. With this in mind, Rodrigues and Shiva refer to Dr K.R. Kranthi, former director of the Central Institute for Cotton Research, who says:

“Insecticide usage is increasing each year because of resistance development in sucking pests to imidacloprid and other neonicotinoid insecticides—by 2012 insecticide usage was at 2002 levels and will continue to increase inducing further outbreaks of insecticide and Bt resistant pests.”

Bt cotton hybrids also require more human labour and perform better under irrigation. However, 66% of cotton in India is cultivated in rainfed areas, where yields depend on the timing and quantity of highly variable monsoon rains. Unreliable rains, the high costs of Bt hybrid seed, continued insecticide use and debt have placed many poor (marginal) smallholder farmers in a situation of severe financial hardship.

In fact, Professor A.P. Gutierrez argues that Bt cotton has effectively put these farmers in a corporate noose: his research has noted a link between Bt cotton, weather, yields, financial distress and farmer suicides.

Monsanto’s profiteering

Rodrigues and Shiva note that Monsanto was allowed a ‘royalty’ on Bollgard I seed without having a patent on it. Drawing on conservative estimates (by K.R. Kranthi), on average, the additional expenditure on seeds (compared to non-Bt seeds) was at least Rs 1,179 per hectare and the Indian farmer may have spent a total extra amount of Rs 14,000 crore on Bt cotton seeds during the period 2002–2018. The trait value charged (2002–2018) is around Rs 7,000 crore. This excludes royalties accruing to Mahyco–Monsanto, which were illegal on Bollgard I (first generation Bt cotton) and yet allowed by the regulators.

Overall net profit for cotton farmers was Rs 5,971/ha in 2003 (pre-Bt) but plummeted to average net losses of Rs 6,286 in 2015, while fertiliser use kg/ha exhibited a 2.2-fold increase. As Bt technology was being rolled out, costs of production were thus increasing. And these costs were increasing in the face of stagnant yields.

Why GM anyway?

At this point, it is worth broadening the scope of this article by noting that in 2010, an indefinite moratorium was placed on Bt brinjal, which would have been India’s first GM food crop. Despite the current push for a full-scale entry of GM into Indian agriculture, the moratorium is still in place: the conflicts of interest, secrecy, negligence and lack of competence inherent in the GM regulatory process that were acknowledged at that time remain unaddressed.

It would therefore be grossly irresponsible to roll out GM crops. If the experience of Bt cotton tells us anything, it would also be extremely unwise to proceed without carrying out independent health, environmental and socio-economic risk assessments.

It would also be necessary to establish that GM crops outperform non-GM crops. Presently, the evidence for this is absent. Rodrigues and Shiva cite evidence that traditional plant breeding and newer methods outperform GM agriculture at much less cost, release fewer carbon emissions and earn much greater profits for farmers.

Given this situation (the fraud of GM and its dubious track record aside), it appears that the plan to get GM into Indian agriculture is solely driven by commercial interest. Instead of drawing on proven traditional knowledge and practices to ensure food security, the strategy seems to be to place farmers on biotech-chemical treadmills for the benefit of corporate interests.

Green Revolution to ‘gene revolution’

If we look at the Green Revolution, it too was also sold
under the guise of ‘feeding the world’. But in India, according to Professor Glenn Stone, it merely led to more wheat in the diet, while food productivity per capita showed no increase or actually decreased. It has also had dire consequences for the environment, farmers, rural communities and public health.

More generally, the Green Revolution dovetailed with an international system of chemical-dependent, agro-export mono-crop farming and big infrastructure projects (dams) linked to loans, sovereign debt repayment and World Bank/IMF directives, the outcomes of which included a displacement of the peasantry, the consolidation of global agri-food oligopolies and the transformation of many countries into food deficit regions.

Often regarded as Green Revolution 2.0, the GM or ‘gene revolution’ is being touted as a plan to ‘modernise’ Indian agriculture. But it would only mean yet more displacement of peasant farmers, further corporate control and commercialisation of agriculture, transform small peasant based agriculture into industrial-scale monocrop farms incorporated into global supply chains dominated by transnational agribusiness and retail giants. It would also mean the undermining of national food security.

GM-based agriculture is the key to what would amount to a wholesale corporate capture of the agri-food sector, a sure-fire money spinner that would dwarf the amount drained from India courtesy of Monsanto’s ‘royalties’ on Bt cotton.

Agroecological solutions
This wholesale shift to industrial agriculture would have devastating impacts on the environment, rural communities, public health, local and regional food security, seed sovereignty, nutritional yield per acre, water tables, soil quality, etc. Industrial agriculture has massive health, social and environmental costs which are borne by the public and taxpayers, certainly not by the (subsidised) corporations that rake in the massive profits.

It is no surprise, therefore, that an increasing international consensus is emerging on the role of agroecology. In this respect, smallholder farmers are not to be regarded as residues from the past but as being crucial to the future.

This is not lost on Rodrigues and Shiva who note the vital importance and productivity of small farms (which outperform industrial-scale enterprises and feed most of the global population) and the advantages of agroecological farming. They refer to the recent UN FAO High Level Panel of Experts which concludes that agroecology provides greatly improved food security and nutritional, gender, environmental and yield benefits compared to industrial agriculture.

Furthermore, according to Rodrigues and Shiva, regenerative organic farming can draw down excess carbon from the atmosphere and put it in the soil, thereby reversing climate change and making agriculture climate resilient. They argue that organic systems are competitive with conventional yields and leach no toxic chemicals. As for cotton, they state that ‘desi’ species of cotton varieties are highly amenable to low-cost organic farming, providing an excellent opportunity for India to emerge as a global leader in organic cotton.

The take-home message is that if GM food crops are rolled out—based on a narrative about Bt cotton that relies more on industry spin than actual facts—it would be disastrous for India. Given the evidence, it’s a warning that should not be taken lightly.

(Colin Todhunter is an independent writer.)

Coup Against President Allende of Chile was the First 9/11

Latin Americans remember September 11 as the date in which the Chilean Army, supported by the US’ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), carried out a coup against the socialist President Salvador Allende. His death marked the beginning of the brutal dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, the general who opened a cycle of neoliberal reforms, authoritarianism and violence against the South American peoples.

At 7:30 A.M. on September 11, 1973, the democratically elected President Salvador Allende arrived at the Palacio de La Moneda in Santiago to be informed about the insubordination of the Navy in the city of Valparaiso. In the Chilean capital at that time, there was not much traffic or people in the streets; everything seemed normal.

A couple of hours later, however, the armed forces and the military police carried out a coup against the
socialist government of the Popular Party.

From the government headquarters, Allende addressed the Chileans at 9:20 A.M. through Radio Magallanes; this would be his last speech.

"I will pay for loyalty to the people with my life. And I say to them that I am certain that the seed which we have planted in the good conscience of thousands and thousands of Chileans will not be shriveled forever," said the President who was entrenched in the Palacio de La Moneda.

Two years earlier, in December 1971, while facing sabotage and intrigues from the Chilean extreme right, Allende had already anticipated what his behavior would be in extreme situations.

"I will not step back. And let them know: I will leave La Moneda when I fulfill the mandate the people gave me."

The Dirty Hands of the United States

Based on Cold War logic, Salvador Allende's democratic administration meant a direct and immediate communist threat.

To overthrow it, then US President Richard Nixon allocated millions of dollars, a fact which was confirmed decades later when declassified documents revealed the US' participation in the rise of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship, which killed more than 40,000 people at the start of its reign.

"Nixon ordered the CIA to prevent President Allende from taking over the presidency," admitted Edward Korri, who was US Ambassador to Chile from 1967 to 1970.

In an interview for the “Allende's last decision” documentary, Korri recalled that at a meeting with Nixon in Washington, the US President spoke of the Chilean socialist politician, stating "how he was going to crush Allende, while hitting his hand with his fist. He called him a son of a bitch, too."

A few years later, a CIA document dated October 1, 1973, praised the coup d'état in Chile and called it almost "perfect."

The Words that Will Never be Forgotten

For Latin Americans, September 11 is the day when Salvador Allende died. This democratic politician and physician was the first socialist to ever be elected to the presidency in Chile.

"I address, above all, the modest woman of our land, the campesina who believed in us, the worker who laboured more, the mother who knew our concern for children. I address Chilean patriotic professionals, those who days ago continued working against the sedition sponsored by professional associations, class-based associations, which also defended the advantages that a capitalist society grants to a few."

For Latin Americans to forget its 9/11 would be to forget thousands of men and women who were tortured, killed and disappeared because of the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s.

"I address the youth, those who sang and gave us their joy and their spirit of struggle. I address the man of Chile, the worker, the farmer, the intellectual, those who will be persecuted, because in our country fascism has been already present for many hours—in terrorist attacks, blowing up the bridges, cutting the railroad tracks, destroying the oil and gas pipelines, in the face of the silence of those who had the obligation to protect them. They were committed. History will judge them."

Long Live the People! Long Live the Workers!

The coup that ended the life of thousands of Chileans was led by Augusto Pinochet, the man appointed by Allende as the Army Commander in Chief just a month before the 9/11.

Under his orders the army planes dropped more than 20 bombs on the Palacio de La Moneda. President Allende asked his cabinet members to leave; they did not. They remained there until their last moments.

Shattered crystals and walls turned into rubble. Dust and fire. One bomb after another. All the noise and images of this ignominy were captured and remain as historical records.

Amid the chaos generated by the military's belligerence, Allende fulfilled his words: "I am not going to give up." While waiting for the final attack, the socialist politician continued addressing millions of citizens.

"Workers of my country, I have faith in Chile and its destiny. Other men will overcome this dark and bitter moment when treason seeks to prevail. Go forward knowing that, sooner rather than later, the great avenues will open again where free men will walk to build a better society."

"Long live Chile! Long live the people! Long live the workers! These are my last words, and I am certain that my sacrifice will not be in vain."
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Aristotle

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Global Climate Strikes to take Place in 117 Countries

Activists of All Ages, Labour Groups, Faith Leaders, Businesses and More Join Youth-Led Climate Strikes in Intergenerational Demand for Climate Action:

• With two weeks to go until the September 20th climate strikes, there are over 2,500 strikes registered globally and over 500 strikes taking place across the US.
• In the US, the Youth Climate Strike Coalition is steering the national campaign, with active support, participation and collaboration from an Adult Climate Strike Coalition, which includes leading national organisations such as 350.org, Greenpeace, SEIU and March On. Youth and adults, institutional and grassroots organisations, climate-focused and social justice groups, are coming together as a unified front to demand transformative action on climate.
• A week of escalated actions are planned in the week after the global strike, from September 23 to 29. Demonstrating that the fight for climate action is beyond one moment, these actions put a spotlight on key climate justice fights taking place throughout the United States. Actions vary from fossil fuel project shutdowns to demanding climate own halls to mass actions against fracking and fossil fuel finance.

Along with the global climate strikes, events during the week include the The Peoples’ Summit on Climate and the Rights and Human Survival—the first ever global summit on human rights and climate change, that will be hosted by leading civil society groups and the UN Human Rights Office in New York, on 18–19 September.

During Climate Week, escalated actions will happen throughout New York City and across the US during the week of September 23–29. Communities are joining youth-led climate strikes, as well as coming together to protect families, air and water from toxic fossil fuel projects, with hundreds across the country taking on the fossil fuel corporations and financiers.

The first ever widespread global blackout will also be taking place with many organisations and businesses planning to stop business as usual by shutting down their websites and redirecting them to the global climate strikes website.

The climate strikes movement
 Strike for Climate: Will It Be Socialism or Extinction?

James Chumsa and Lia Sommer

“Starting on Friday 20 September we will kickstart a week of climate action with a worldwide strike for the climate,” Greta said in a statement. Many organisations have been promoting the September general strike while local groups have been preparing actions for that week.

General strikes involve more than just mass demonstrations. Historically, general strikes have been called by unions and involved workers of an entire city or region walking off the job with the purpose of driving industry to a halt. These efforts would involve thousands of participants, including workers from several different industries and their supporters, who protested on the streets and were often met with police. Examples include the 1917 International Women’s Day textile worker’s strike in Petrograd that initiated the Russian Revolution, and the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike 100 years ago which resulted in a streetcar tipped over and several strikers shot or arrested by North West Mounted Police. General strikes have helped the working class win many gains. If properly organised, they may be an effective way to fight the fossil fuel industry and address climate change.

Socialism or Extinction

Under capitalism, everything is exploited for the purpose of economic growth and accumulation of wealth. This ever-increasing growth will never be compatible with a sustainable society because you cannot have continuous growth on a finite planet. Think of our resources in terms of a bank account. We have our main spending account that we use, but when that’s used up, when those resources are used up, we take from our savings account to cover us for the rest of the year. Our current trend of over-consumption forces us year by year to dip into this savings account of resources, which is getting smaller and smaller.

Earth Overshoot Day, the day that humans have used up the amount of resources that the planet is able to regenerate annually, is landing earlier every year. The first Earth Overshoot Day was December 29, 1970; in 2018 it was on August 1, and this year it was on July 29. That means that for 4 months of this year we are taking resources that the planet will not be able to produce for us in the future. We are currently consuming 1.7 Earth’s worth of resources every year.

Since capitalism is the cause of the current sixth mass extinction, the choice now is either socialism or extinction. There are several examples of socialist countries that are finding solutions to the ecological crisis.
In 2016 the World Wildlife Fund reported that Cuba was the only sustainable country in the world, as it manages to retain a low ecological footprint while keeping a relatively high standard of living for its citizens. Cuba adopted a low carbon approach in the 1990s, when the Soviet Union was overthrown and a major importer of fossil fuels was lost. The people had to make a dramatic transition during this Special Period, and under socialism they did.

Last year, China reached its Paris Agreement goals for reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, ahead of its 2020 deadline. The Chinese government took action to dramatically reduce the pollution from its largest companies, through a type of carbon credit system that forces polluting corporations to pay.

China has planted millions of trees, and 60,000 soldiers in the People’s Liberation Army are currently being mobilised to plant 32,400 acres more. China’s efforts to plant trees is noticeable from space – NASA has spotted large regions of green in the eastern half of the country that were not there 20 years ago.

Canada, a capitalist country, is not doing so well. While Prime Minister Justin Trudeau did declare a nationwide climate emergency on June 17, he also approved the Trans Mountain fossil fuel pipeline the next day. Trudeau has broken many of his promises to Indigenous communities, who have already been fighting the hardest to defend their natural ecosystems. Canada is far behind on reducing carbon emissions and reaching the Paris Agreement target for 2020. At the current rate it will take centuries to reach that goal, and by that time it will be far too late.

This is why it us up to the youth, the students and the next generation of leaders to clean up the mess and the mistakes that previous generations have made. We must work to dismantle capitalism, so that the Earth is no longer seen as a commodity and we can end this trend of mindless over-consumption.

We must act now.

(Courtesy: People’s Voice – Canada’s leading socialist newspaper.)

Hindi Imposition will Kill the Imagination of a Nation with a Hundred Tongues

Apoorvanand

15 years ago, when I was waiting for my class, a student came to me and congratulated me.

“What is the occasion?”, I wondered aloud.

It was not my birthday which in any case my students would not be aware of. Those were pre-Facebook days. That I was asking for the occasion was something my student could not comprehend.

“Today is Hindi Divas, Sir”, she said.

It was 14 September and all Hindi-wallas were congratulating each other. What is so special about Hindi that we should have a day marked in its name, I asked her.

“Why Sir, Hindi is our national language.”

“But it is not!” I informed her. She looked bewildered. She did not argue with me following the tradition of a good Indian shishya but I could see that she was not convinced.

It hurts the people of the so called Hindi-speaking regions when they are confronted with the constitutional fact that Hindi is not THE National language of India, that it has a more mundane role assigned by the Constitution. It has to conduct the official business of the state and that too, along with English. Time and again, Hindi nationalism tries to assert its linguistic hegemony claiming that it is backed by the numerical strength of people who use it. A democratic argument, one would say. When numbers are with Hindi, how can other languages claim equal rights?

The deliberation in the Constituent Assembly about the status of national language is very instructive. The debate was taking place in the background of the freedom movement and also in the midst of the bloodshed which accompanied the creation of the two nations, India and Pakistan. The spirit of the debate was that of negotiation and accommodation. Attempt was not to use the force of majority to carry any motion. It was therefore very thoughtful of the members of the assembly not to designate Hindi or any other language as the National language of India.

It is not that the case of Hindi was not pushed hard. But counter arguments were as formidable. Read what T.A. Ramalingam Chettiar, a Parliamentarian from the then Madras State had to say:

We have got languages which are better cultivated and which have greater literature than Hindi in our areas. If we are going to accept Hindi, it is not on account of the excellence of the language. It is merely on account of the existence of
However, the use of English for the Union (central government) would be imposed on them and the non-Hindi regions that Hindi is closer, apprehension rose again in the non-Hindi regions. The Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, as the appointed hour drew near, had to give an assurance that English would continue until the non-Hindi speakers want a change. Since then, the successive governments have maintained the status-quo.

Are the non-Hindi speaking people, who learn Hindi and use Hindi for transactional purposes being unreasonable and dishonest when they oppose the status of the national language to Hindi?

Their unease has to be understood in the context of the process of nation-making in India. The large number of parliamentary seats in the ‘Hindi areas’ mean that the majority would be defined by them. The temptation to mould the personality of other regions in the form of the Hindi speaking North India has manifested itself in many ways. The most recent attempts to change the character of Onam by seeking to introduce Vamana Jayanati and the aggressive marking of Ram Navami in West Bengal are just two of the numerous examples of this cultural project.

The idea of One nation—One people can be realised only when it is propelled by one language. But the makers of this nation were wise people. There was no cunning in their compromise. The fears of the non-Hindi states were not imaginary. A majoritarian impulse could destroy the imagination of a nation with a hundred tongues.

The Hindi-wallas often complain that in the pre-independence period there was no animosity towards Hindi—which is true to a great extent. Neither Ram Mohan Roy, nor Gandhi, or for that matter Rajaji, came from the Hindi regions. Vinoba Bhave, an innovator in Hindi, did not belong to it either. Theatre and Cine personality B.V. Karanth, himself a Kannadiga, told me about the days of his youth when Hindi Pracharaks were held in high esteem in his state and other parts of South India. One must not forget that in those days Hindi went to these areas as a friend. But once the nation state of India started taking shape, the question of cultural hegemony of a particular region assumed importance.

Hindi is presented as a unifier; but, the Constitution is silent on this. As Swapnil Tripathi has shown in his article, the Indian courts have taken differing views regarding this question. He has discussed and analysed the approach taken by different courts: “The High Courts of Bombay (Bombay Education Society v. State), Calcutta (West Bengal Board of Secondary Association v. Siliguri High School) and Madhya Pradesh (Raghavendra Prasad v. Union Bank of India) have sided with the unity argument and have made verbal observations that Hindi is the national language of India. It should be noted, however, that such remarks were made in passing, and hence are not binding.

On the other hand, the High Courts of Gujarat (Amrutlal Popatlal v. Chief Secretary), Karnataka (General Secretary, Linguistic Minorities v. State of Karnataka) and Patna (Jayakant Mishra v. State of Bihar) have sided with the diversity and the disadvantage arguments. In fact, in Amrutlal Popatlal’s case, the Court categorically rejected a petition, where a party had argued that Hindi was the national language of India.

The Courts have wisely refrained from declaring Hindi as the national language of India. But we have seen the members of the present regime raising it from time to time. After coming to power in 2014, the government surreptitiously
introduced the devanagari numerals on currency notes. Hindi was sought to be made compulsory in the three-language formula. The Vice President of the country called Hindi the national language of India. Can it be explained away as this ignorance of the Constitution or his statement of intent? In 2018, the central government through the MHRD asked all the central universities to introduce Hindi as a compulsory subject.

For a very long time, the demand to make Hindi a language of the United Nations has been raised and supported by the BJP. Other regions rightly wonder why Hindi should enjoy this privilege over them. The memory of Russification of the regions of the erstwhile Soviet Union is not only for them. In our times, we see China imposing Mandarin on the Uighur Muslims.

The present context of the renewed demand for Hindi to be accorded the status of the national language of India or the marker of its identity cannot be ignored. It is a time of hard centralism and relentless attack on all forms of federalism: One nation–One tax, One nation–One election, along with the abolition of planning commission which provided space for the concerns of the states form the background. A massive exercise of reformation of India is going on. Hindi has become the vehicle of this process of homogenisation.

I, as a practitioner of Hindi see with dismay the role that my language is playing in this conspiracy. The Hindi media is brazenly majoritarian. It deliberately keeps its people not only ignorant but keeps misinforming them. A language devoid of the will for excellence and rigour of knowledge, it has accepted the role of a carrier of the propaganda of the market and a majoritarian nationalist politics. This is definitely not what Gandhi or Rajaji or Vinoba had ever imagined.

(Apoorvanand teaches Hindi at the University of Delhi.)

The Five Best Books on Gandhi

Ramachandra Guha interviewed by Sophie Roell


Sophie Roell (SR): We’re talking about books to read about Gandhi, but it’s hard to do that without mentioning your own biography. There’s the volume that covers Gandhi’s years in South Africa, “Gandhi Before India”, and then there’s another 900+ page volume, “Gandhi: The Years That Changed the World”, covering the period from 1914 until his death in 1948. Can you tell us why he’s so important and why we need to know about him?

Ramachandra Guha (RG): We need to know about him for many reasons. One is that he is regarded as the father of the Indian nation, and India is the world’s largest democracy and its second most populous country. He is the major national figure in India, comparable to, say, Lincoln and Jefferson in the United States, De Gaulle in France, Churchill in the UK, Mao in China, Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam and so on. He was the preeminent nationalist leader of one of the world’s most important and largest countries.

But he was much more than merely a political leader. He was also a moral philosopher who gave the world a particular technique for combating injustice, namely nonviolent protest. He called this technique ‘satyagraha’, or ‘truth force’, and it has been followed and adopted in many countries across the world since his death, including in the United States.

Gandhi was also a very interesting thinker on matters of religion. He lived, and indeed died, for harmony between India’s two major religious communities, Hindus and Muslims. At a time when the world is riven with discord and disharmony between faith communities, I think Gandhi is relevant.

He lived a long life, almost 80 years, during which time he studied and worked in three countries, three continents—in the United Kingdom and South Africa as well as India. He wrote a great deal: his collected works run to 90 volumes. His autobiography was translated into more than 40 languages. An early political text he wrote, called Hind Swaraj, is still taught in universities around the world. So he was a thinker and writer as well as being an activist, which is not that common.
And he was also controversial. There were people who debated with him in India and outside it. There were people who took issue with his political views, his views on religion, his views on social reform.

He was a person who touched many aspects of social and political life in the 20th century. The issues he was grappling with are still alive with us today, not just in India, but across the world. That’s why he is so interesting and important. I wanted to write about him all my life.

**SR:** Your biography of Gandhi ... gives a much more comprehensive picture of him, but it’s also trying to give a balanced picture, I got the sense. You’re an admirer of Gandhi, but you’re also trying very hard to give the other side, is that right?

**RG:** Very much so, because the job of a scholar, and a biographer in particular, is to suppress nothing. Whatever you find that is of interest or importance must be included, even if it makes you uncomfortable or makes your story less compelling or newsworthy.

Of course, I do largely admire Gandhi—I wouldn’t want to spend so many years of my life working on someone I was ambivalent about—but I can see that in his debates with the aforementioned Ambedkar he was not always right. He could be patronising towards this younger, radical opponent of his.

I can also see the ways in which he manipulated control over the Congress Party. He was a consummate politician, and did not want his main political vehicle to slip out of his grasp. He was a political manager, in that sense. He was also not a very good husband and an absolutely disastrous father.... When it came to his personal life, his political life, and his ideological views, there were times when I was profoundly out of sympathy with Gandhi and profoundly in sympathy with those who argued with him. All this also had to be part of the story.

It’s a book that suppresses nothing and that shirks nothing. There will be some people who will read this book and come out admiring Gandhi much more, and there will be others who will have a sense of disquiet and maybe even anguish at the new things they have found out about Gandhi.

**SR:** Let’s go through the five books you’ve chosen. They’re not ranked in any particular order, but let’s start with the first one on your list, which is “My Days with Gandhi”, by his secretary and companion Nirmal Kumar Bose. This book deals with the last phase of his life. Could you tell me about it, and explain why it’s on your list of important books to read about Gandhi?

**RG:** I put this book by Nirmal Kumar Bose on my list because I wanted a firsthand account of Gandhi. Bose was a considerable scholar. He wrote books, edited a scholarly journal and taught at universities. Although he’s not that well-known outside India, he was among the country’s most influential anthropologists, writing on caste and India’s tribal regions.

He was interested in Gandhi too. He joined the freedom movement in the 1930s, went to jail, and prepared an anthology of Gandhi’s writings. Then, in the winter of 1946–7, Gandhi was in the field in Bengal trying to bring about peace. This was a time when religious rioting was particularly savage in eastern Bengal and Gandhi needed an interpreter. Bose was a Bengali speaker and Gandhi knew of him and his writings. So Bose went with him.

This was a time which, at one level, saw Gandhi at his most heroic. Here is a 77-year-old man walking through the villages of eastern Bengal. Communication is awful; there’s malaria and dysentery and all kinds of other problems. He’s trying to bring Hindus and Muslims together, undertaking these heroic experiments to promote peace....

I think the book is useful in that it provides a firsthand account of Gandhi by someone who is a scholar and a writer. Bose is not just a starry-eyed naïve disciple, but someone who is himself a thinker and has an analytical mind. He wants to probe deeply into his subject’s moods and anxieties.

**SR:** It’s also a picture of Gandhi at a point in his life when he’s a bit isolated and disillusioned because the country is going in the direction of Partition, isn’t it?

**RG:** Yes, that’s also very important. Gandhi struggled his whole life to keep a united India. From his time in South Africa onwards, he promoted Hindu–Muslim harmony. He was a Hindu himself, a deep believer and also deeply immersed in Hindu traditions. But in South Africa, his closest associates were Muslims.

In India, he tried to bring about a compact between these two large and sometimes disputatious communities. Ultimately, he failed—because Partition happened and Hindus and Muslims turned on each other. It was an effort of will, at his age, to compose himself, get himself back on track and then undertake this foot march through eastern Bengal....

Some people may feel Bose’s book is rather clinical and scholarly, but it’s an actual firsthand account and that’s its value.
**SR:** Let’s turn to the next book you’ve chosen, which is “A Week with Gandhi” by Louis Fischer. He was an American journalist who visited Gandhi at his ashram in 1942. Tell me more.

**RG:** Louis Fischer wrote more than one book on Gandhi. He also wrote a biography of Gandhi called *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, which was published after Gandhi’s death. That book was the basis for Attenborough’s film. I didn’t want that book; I wanted something else by Fischer. This book is set in 1942, again, a time of great political turmoil and anxiety. The Second World War was on.

The British had their backs to the wall. This is a time—1939, 1940, 1941—when the Americans hadn’t yet entered the war, and the British were fighting alone. Even the Soviets didn’t enter until 1941.

Gandhi and the Congress were confronted with a terrible dilemma. On the one hand, for all his political differences with Imperial rule, Gandhi had enormous personal sympathy with the British people.

Gandhi was willing to abandon his doctrinal commitment to non-violence and to tell the British “Hitler is evil, he must be defeated, we will help you defeat him.” So he said to the British, “We will work with you, but you must assure us that you will grant us independence once the war is over.” This was, in my view, a very reasonable condition—because if the British were fighting for freedom, then surely that meant freedom for Indians, too?

This was rejected by the then prime minister, Winston Churchill, who was a diehard imperialist—and whose viceroy in India, Linlithgow, was as reactionary as Churchill was.

So here is Gandhi in India wondering, “What do I do? I want to help the British, but I want my people to be free.” The Americans are sympathetic to his predicament. Fischer goes to India in 1942, at a time when Gandhi is telling the British, “If you don’t assure us freedom, I will launch another countrywide protest movement against your rule.” This was to become the Quit India Movement of August 1942; Fischer visits just before that.

He goes to Gandhi’s ashram in central India.... Fischer describes Gandhi’s entourage, the men and women around him, his wife, his disciples and then he talks to Gandhi. It’s an unusually frank and open conversation. As Fischer says later on in the book, one of the joys of talking to Gandhi is that it’s not pre-scripted, it’s a conversation. You’re opening up new lines of thought, and Gandhi himself is so open and transparent and reacting so spontaneously that he sometimes says things that he’s surprised at himself.

The book conveys the essential humanity of Gandhi and his down-to-earth character. He lived in this simple village community, with bad food and no modern conveniences at all.

**SR:** One thing that comes up in this book quite a bit is Gandhi’s emphasis on spinning. He’s always trying to get people to do more spinning. Could you explain what that’s all about?

**RG:** There are three major aspects to this. One is that spinning is a way of breaking down the boundaries between mental labour and manual labour and dissolving caste distinctions. In the Indian caste system, it’s only the Shudras and the Untouchables, the fourth and fifth strata, who do manual labour. Manual labour is despised in the Indian caste system, and Gandhi wanted to say that everyone should work with their hands.

The second aspect is that Gandhi believed in economic self-reliance. A major factor in India’s underdevelopment was that its indigenous industries had been destroyed under British colonial rule. So this was a way of saying, “We will spin our own cloth and we’ll do it ourselves using decentralised methods. Each of us will spin something.”

The third aspect of it is that he is cultivating a spirit of solidarity among his fellow freedom fighters, and spinning is a way of doing that constructively and non-violently. How do fascists inculcate solidarity among the community? By marching up and down to show their enemies how menacing they can be. Consider spinning the Gandhian alternative to a fascist marchpast.

This is how you should read Gandhi’s interest in spinning. It was at once a program of social equality, of breaking down caste distinctions, of economic self-renewal and of nationalist unity: everyone will do the same thing.

**SR:** Let’s go on to the third book on your list, which is by Dennis Dalton.

**RG:** Dennis Dalton is a retired American professor who is now in his eighties. He did a PhD in England in the 1960s and later on taught at Columbia. In the 1970s and 1980s he wrote a series of pioneering articles on Gandhi. Those articles then became the basis of this book, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action*, the third of the five that I’ve recommended.

I want to say a little bit about the hallmarks of Dalton’s work and why it’s particularly important. The first thing is that it is absolutely grounded...
in primary research. Unlike other Gandhi scholars, Dalton does not restrict himself to the collected works. Dalton, while he knows Gandhi’s collected writings very well, also looks at contemporary newspapers and what they were saying about Gandhi.

He also looks at what Gandhi’s political rivals and adversaries were writing. In his book, he has a very interesting account of the Indian revolutionaries who disparaged nonviolence and thought armed struggle would be more effective and quicker in getting the British out. He talks about Ambedkar, the great low caste revolutionary who disagreed with Gandhi.

The other interesting thing about Dalton’s work—and this is very, very important—is that he looks at the evolution of Gandhi’s thought. Because a life is lived day to day. Whether Gandhi or Marx or Hobbes or Mill, any great political thinker is living his or her life day to day and adapting and changing his or her views. Those who don’t look at the evolution of a life, who don’t have a historical or chronological or developmental understanding of a life, are forced to cherry-pick. They want consistencies that don’t exist.

So I think as an account of the development of Gandhi’s political philosophy and as an analysis of Gandhi’s Indian critics—who had serious, profound and sometimes telling political disagreements with Gandhi—Dalton’s book is particularly valuable.

**SR:** Shall we talk about Gandhi’s religion next? This is a book called Gandhi’s “Religion: A Homespun Shawl”, written by a Belgian Jesuit, J.T.F. Jordens. His point is that it’s impossible to understand Gandhi without his religion.

**RG:** First, a small factual correction: the author, J.T.F. Jordens, is more accurately described as a lapsed Belgian Jesuit. He started as a Jesuit, came to India, joined a church and then left the church. He got interested in Gandhi, became a scholar and ended up a professor in Australia....

Coming to Jordens and Gandhi’s Religion: Gandhi was a person of faith, but he had a highly idiosyncratic, individual, eccentric attitude to faith. He called himself a Sanatanist Hindu—which means a devout or orthodox Hindu—but didn’t go into temples. He was a Hindu, but he radically challenged some of the prejudices of the Hindu tradition, particularly the practice of untouchability. He was a Hindu whose closest friend was an English Christian priest, C.F. Andrews. He was a Hindu whose political program was that Hindus should not oppress Muslims and Muslims must have equal rights in an independent India....

We live in a time of intellectuals disparaging religion, with an arrogant atheism on one side and religious fundamentalism on the other. Gandhi gives us a way out of this false choice. Gandhi tells us that you can be religious, that there is a wonder and mystery to life which cold-blooded rationality and science can’t completely explain.

But, at the same time, there is no one true path to God. Gandhi says, Accept your fate. You’re born a Hindu, fine. Your parents, your grandparents were Hindus for many generations. But think about what you can learn from other faiths. Cultivate friendships with Christians and Muslims and Jews and Parsis. If you see your faith in the mirror of another, you may find out its imperfections. It’s a very interesting, heterodox approach to religion....

I think Jordens’s book is the most scrupulous, fair-minded and persuasive account of why faith is so central to Gandhi and what makes Gandhi’s faith so distinctive. That is why it is on my list.

**SR:** The last book on your list is a life of his son Harilal. It’s called “Harilal Gandhi: A Life”. Some quotes from his son that appear in the book: “No attention was paid to us” and “You have spoken to us not in love, but always in anger.” It’s very sad, isn’t it? Tell me about his son and this book.

**RG:** This was a book written in Gujarati by a scholar called Chandulal Bhagubhai Dalal and translated into English by one of the preeminent Indian Gandhian scholars of the day, Tridip Suhrud, who was, for many years, the curator of Gandhi’s own personal archive in Ahmedabad. Suhrud has provided a very detailed introduction and notes, so it’s a very good edition of this biography.

**Gandhi is profoundly unsympathetic to his son’s hopes,** his desires. He is telling his son... follow me, become a social worker, give up everything for the community like I have done.... Gandhi turns increasingly angry, judgmental and frustrated at his son not doing what he wants him to do. And Harilal is broken by this. At one level he resents his father’s overbearing, authoritarian manner and at another level he craves his father’s attention. So Harilal goes to jail several times in South Africa and several times in India too because he wants his father to know that he’s as much of a patriot as anybody else.

The son tries several times to matriculate, but fails. His wife dies.
Then he tries several times to become a businessman, but all his business ventures fail. Then he becomes an alcoholic, then he becomes a lapsed alcoholic, then he goes back to the bottle again. Then, because he’s so angry with his father, he converts to Islam merely to spite Gandhi. This leads to a very anguished letter by his mother, Kasturba Gandhi. She’s very rarely in the public domain but so angry at her son’s spiteful act, that she writes in the press saying, Why are you doing this just to shame your father?

So it’s a very tragic and complicated relationship and of course it’s not unusual....

Again, it’s a factual account. It’s written by a scholar who wants to tell you the truth in an unadorned, factual, dispassionate way. But I think it’s very effective for not being overwritten or overblown or excessively hyperbolic or judgmental.

**SR:** One last question; you didn’t include Gandhi’s autobiography on this list of books. Is that because you wanted them to be books about him rather than by him or was there a more fundamental reason?

**RG:** Gandhi’s autobiography is indispensable, but it’s so well known. It’s available in hundreds of editions, and in dozens of languages. Every major publisher has published it and you can get it anywhere. I wanted readers of Five Books to get some fresher, more vivid, less-known perspectives on Gandhi.

But certainly, they should read the autobiography too. It’s now available in a new annotated edition by the scholar I mentioned, Tridip Suhrud. It’s a first rate edition brought out by Yale University Press.

(Ramachandra Guha is a historian based in Bengaluru.)

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**What the Centre Needs to Do if it Wants to Tackle the Economic Slowdown**

Amiya Kumar Bagchi

Only a few weeks ago, the central government was talking grandly about India reaching a $5-trillion economy and refusing to recognise the severe slowdown India is going through. (This is not such a grand ambition when compared with China, which is often portrayed as India’s competitor, because by 2025, China’s economy is expected to achieve a GDP of $29 trillion).

Then reality, at last, struck the proud citadels of the Prime Minister’s Office and North Block, at which point finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a slew of measures. These included retracting the only progressive feature of her budget: the additional surcharge on incomes of the super-rich, reducing the interest on housing loans for government employees, a Rs 20,000 crore stress fund for real estate and sops for exporters.

Recently, these sops have been increased further. Rs 50,000 crore has been allocated for exemptions and support for insurance of exporters. Interest rates for all housing loans have been brought down. At the same time, the government capped foreign investment in digital media at 26% and allowed 100% foreign investment for coal mining, associated infrastructure and sales of fuel.

However, so far, foreign investment has flowed into non-manufacturing sectors such as PayTM, into shopping malls, food and beverages, and so on. So it does not help the government’s ‘Make in India’ project. In fact, in the recent slowdown, the decline in manufacturing has been a leading factor. Moreover, foreign investment flows tend to hold up the exchange rate of the rupee. As ex-Prime Minister Manmohan Singh pointed out, India should allow the rupee to be devalued.

Two of the leading sectors that have been particularly hurt are the automobile sector and the fast-moving consumer goods sector. Parle, one of the leading biscuit manufacturers has laid off thousands of workers. Sales of basic goods such as atta, hair oil, soap and toothpaste have badly fallen, especially in rural areas of north Indian states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh.

Auto industry sales have reached a 19-year low. Maruti Suzuki has slashed its production continuously for the last seven or eight months. It has not responded to prodding by Central government ministers. Ashok Leyland has closed five of its factories. Tata Motors and Mahindra have also drastically slashed their sales. All this has led to the unemployment not only of direct factory workers, but also of contract workers who come from surrounding areas.

India’s employment shrank by seven million between 2013 and 2018. Open unemployment of the youth (forget about disguised unemployment) has reached 16%. As Singh also pointed out, agricultural income has fallen to a 14-year low.

GDP growth comes on the back of investment. The India’s rate of investment as a percentage of GDP...
has declined from 34 in 2010 to 29 in 2017, recovering to a little over 31 in 2018–19. As John Maynard Keynes had pointed out a long time ago, investment is basically driven by effective demand and the rate of interest only plays a minor part.

But most of the measures adopted by the current government, as well as those suggested by Manmohan Singh, focus on cheaper loans. The only part of the latter’s recommendation that is aimed at increasing effective demand is to raise rural incomes by reviving agriculture. Apart from the fact that this will require a large increase in public investment in agriculture, which had come down as a proportion of GDP under the Congress regime also, we have to remember that the major part of India’s national income is constituted by urban incomes.

What we should talk about is not just the slowdown in economic growth, but the miserable state of our human development. To take just two of the indicators of human development, India is home to the largest mass of illiterate people in the world, and in terms of the hunger index, India ranks even below some of the poorest Sub-Saharan countries. This is because India is one of the worst performers globally in terms of expenditure on both health and education.

Let us now look at the percentages of GDP spent by India and other countries. India spends 3.8% of its GDP on education, compared with—taking some countries at random—3.9% by Afghanistan, 4% by Albania, 5.3% by Australia, 5.5% by Austria, 4.2% by Burkina Faso, 12.8% by Cuba, 7.6% by Denmark and 5.5% by France. Most of India’s expenditure on education is incurred by private persons; government spending on education is just about 1.3% of GDP.

With the increasing neglect of public educational institutions, there has been a mushrooming of private institutions, increasing the burden on poorer people. The Tapas Majumdar Committee’s recommendation for spending 6% of GDP on education has never been realised.

According to World Health Organisation figures, in 2016 India spent 3.66% of its GDP on health as against 5.27% by South Africa and 8.11% by Russian Federation (two other members of BRICS). Taking other countries at random, expenditure on health as percentage of GDP was 10.2% by Afghanistan, 6.7% by Albania, 7.55% by Argentina, 9.25% by Australia, 10.44% by Austria, 11.77% by Brazil, 6.75% by Burkina Faso, 8.53% by Chile, 10.35% by Denmark, 11.54% by France and 11.14% by Germany.

It is no wonder that the life expectancy is lower in India than in practically all East and Southeast Asian countries, and lower than even that of Bangladesh, a much poorer countries. Most of the expenditure on health comes out of private pockets, the percentage rising to 90% in some northern states. In states such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu, where the public health sector is more active, the longevity is much higher than the all-India average.

Let us now turn to the area of environmental protection, including minimising the ravages of climate change. Before the advent of British rule, India had extensive forest cover, and only some desert in Rajasthan and Sind. Even there, the kings and nawabs had created special forest reserves for hunting. The British began the commercial exploitation of forests, throwing large numbers of forest-dwellers out of their habitat, and increasing the soil erosion without forest cover and leading to silting of rivers. Unfortunately, the same policies were continued by successive Indian governments, giving only nominal protection to Scheduled Tribes, the main victims of the government’s forest and mining policies.

In order to advance human development, India will have to double public expenditure on education, healthcare, special educational and health schemes for Adivasis and Dalits, ICDS and other schemes like girls’ hostels, not only under the Central government but also under states, which are responsible for most of the expenditure on social sector heads.

First, the public distribution system should be made universal as in Kerala. In education, the public sector contribution should be raised to 3% of GDP, which will take the total to about 5%. In healthcare, the public expenditure should be raised to 3% of GDP, which will take the total again to somewhere around 5% of GDP (rough calculations). In every case, the part specifically meant for women, Adivasis and Dalits should be tripled. The money meant for environmental protection should be quadrupled and the policy of attaining low carbon emissions should be monitored, wherever possible.

Where will the money come from for all these ambitious schemes? Thomas Piketty, the author of Capital in the Twentieth Century, has recommended that it come from 80% of the income of the top 1% of earners, which he thinks will not infringe on incentive for work or investment. In India, the highest marginal income tax rate is 30% for
everybody from Mukesh Ambani, Uday Kotak, Gautam Adani and K.P. Singh to a mere college professor.

I would increase the marginal income tax rate in two steps – 35% for incomes up to Rs 20 lakh and 45% for all incomes above Rs 50 lakh. That is the top marginal tax rate in the UK and Germany. In countries like Denmark, Sweden and France, the highest marginal tax rates are much higher, ranging from 60% to 75%. I would also abolish the special treatment for Hindu Undivided Families, which is invidious because families following the Dayabhaga law or families practicing other religions cannot take advantage of it, and because a major portion of high incomes escape taxation using that route.

I would raise the tax rate for domestic companies with a turnover up to Rs 250 crore from the current rate of 25% to 30%, for domestic companies with a turnover above Rs 250 crore from 30% to 35%, and for foreign companies from 40% to 45%. These changes in tax rates should be enough to finance the increased public expenditure suggested above.

What will be the implications of all these changes? The increases in public expenditure suggested will at once lead to enormous increases in employment (India has been witnessing jobless growth) in educational institutions, public hospitals and health centres, etc. Special schemes will have to be devised for aiding farmers and workers in medium and small enterprises in trade and manufacturing, which are the primary sources of employment in the non-farm sector.

(AMIYA KUMAR BAGCHI IS A DISTINGUISHED ECONOMIST)

Why Aggregate Employment in India Is Shrinking

Anamitra Roychowdhury

One of the major promises on which the 2014 elections were won was massive job creation. Even after its stunning victory in 2019, primarily fought on the national security plank, among the first things the new Narendra Modi government did was to set up a cabinet committee to create jobs. How successful has it been?

There was widespread speculation after the resignation of the chairman of the National Statistical Commission (NSC) that the employment data, showing the highest unemployment rate in 45 years, was willfully suppressed.

Finally, the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data was made public on May 31, 2019. What does it show?

Key takeaways

Preliminary analysis of PLFS data shows that the most striking news—for the first time in 45 years, ever since NSS have been conducted—is the contraction of aggregate employment by 1.2 million between 2011–12 and 2017–18 (Table 1).

Aggregate employment, which stood at 472.5 million in 2011–12, came down to 471.3 million in 2017–18. This is primarily driven by rural women losing 24.7 million jobs—other segments of the workforce however saw net addition to jobs.

The decline in the rural female workforce is not new—this has been happening for quite some time now. In the earlier period, between 2004–05 and 2011–12, the female workforce in rural areas shrank—although the magnitude of the decline was less than in the current period—by 21.8 million (Table 2).

The other big takeaway from PLFS data is the close to a fourfold slowdown in employment creation for rural males. Thus, the jobs crisis prominently visible in the previous period in rural female segment seems to have spread to the rural male segment now—as employment in the latter segment merely increased by 4.6 million in the current period, compared to 16.8 million in the previous one—engulfing the whole rural economy.

Hence, much more is needed than simple cash transfer schemes, increasing MSPs periodically or debt reliefs. Public investment in agriculture along with energising MGNREGS (to help create rural infrastructure), among others, should be on the cards.

Moreover, the pace of employment expansion for urban males also decelerated in the recent period (14.7 million) compared to the previous one (17.6 million). It is only in the urban female segment that employment growth picked up, registering 4.1 million increase compared to 2.1 million in the previous period.

Sectoral distribution

There is another way of looking at the employment debacle. It is to look at the sectoral distribution of employment. With the majority of rural persons still engaged in agriculture, a crisis in the rural economy most prominently manifests itself in agricultural employment. People in large numbers (27.1 million) deserted...
agriculture between 2011–12 and 2017–18, once again led by rural female workers (19.8 million) (Table 3).

This decline in agricultural employment is visible across every segment of the workforce, except urban males. Therefore, the much-discussed unremunerative returns from agriculture are confirmed by the latest data. People are seen to be leaving agriculture, primarily due to push factors, for there was inadequate absorption in non-agricultural sectors of the economy (25.9 million). Precisely, due to this reason—more people abandoning agriculture than the available non-agricultural jobs—aggregate employment has shrunk.

Table 3 also shows the struggles faced by the ‘Make in India’ programme and the futility of enormous money spent on imparting skills, as these were primarily targeted at boosting manufacturing employment. Overall, manufacturing employment growth turned negative (0.9 million) and benefits of ‘Skill India’ programme seem to have bypassed every section of the workforce, except urban males.

Thus, a comprehensive well-calibrated manufacturing policy focusing on the labour-intensive sectors seems to be the need of the hour. The construction sector, which is widely viewed as the employer of last resort in the previous period, barely managed to absorb 4.6 million new workers in the current period. How does this compare with the previous period?

Table 4 compares the capacity of labour absorption in key sectors of the economy over two periods. Between 2004–05 and 2011–12, the construction sector added 24 million jobs, becoming the largest sector of the economy in terms of job creation. Thus, compared to the previous period, there is more than fivefold deceleration in job growth in the construction sector. The manufacturing sector absorbed 5.3 million workers in the earlier period, while it posted negative growth in the present period mentioned above.

Slowdown in non-agricultural jobs

The alarming situation in the aggregate labour market can also be comprehended from the slowdown in non-agricultural job growth. Notice from Table 4, a larger number of people moved out of agriculture (34.4 million) between 2004–05 and 2011–12, compared to the recent period (27.1 million)—2011–12 and 2017–18.

However, aggregate employment still expanded by 14.6 million in the previous period, while in the present period, we already noted that employment shrunk by 1.2 million. This is simply because labour absorption in non-agriculture almost halved in the current period; while employment in non-agriculture expanded by 48.9 million in the previous period, presently it could only absorb 25.9 million fresh workers.

Thus, there is an urgent necessity to revive non-agricultural employment alongside supporting agriculture.

Finally, on the issue of comparability of PLFS with earlier NSS rounds. First, P.C. Mohanan, who resigned as NSC chairman, categorically mentioned: “When we [National Statistical Commission] approve a report, I am not going to give a figure which is not comparable with the other ones. Second, the concept of employment and unemployment are universally accepted. International Labour Organization prescribes the standards, we all follow it.”

Second, professor R. Ramakumar pointed out that the sampling design only changed at a later stage (second stage stratification) and there are inbuilt mechanisms to correct over/under-representation of any group.

Finally, by saying underemployment rates are not comparable with earlier rounds due to educational factors, it is implicitly argued that those looking for jobs but

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Aggregate change in employment (million)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017–18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011–12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Worker–population ratio from NSS and population projections from Census 2011
Source: PFLS 2017–18

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Comparing employment change with the earlier period (million)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017–18 over 2011–12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011–12 over 2004–05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: PFLS 2017–18
unable to find it are voluntarily unemployed. It is a cruel joke on those unable to find work, given the employment situation described above, when traditional sectors of the economy are shedding/inadequately absorbing labour and modern sectors are incapable of accommodating them (including the educated). Instead of denying the jobs crisis, it should be tackled head-on, for any government neglecting these facts does so at its own peril. (Anamitra Roychowdhury teaches economics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.)

Some days ago, Time magazine published an article with the headline: “Want to Stop Climate Change? Then It’s Time to Fall Back in Love with Nuclear Energy”. In it, the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Hans Blix, evokes the imminent threat of climate catastrophe to argue, “There are paths out of this mess. But on March 11, 2011 [the day of the Fukushima disaster], the world’s course was diverted away from one of the most important. I am talking about nuclear energy”. He continues by criticising public fears of nuclear as irrational: “Plane crashes have not stopped us from flying, because most people know it is an effective means of travelling.” Blix speaks for the global nuclear industry, which is increasingly attempting to present itself as the solution to climate change.

But plane crashes do not kill untold numbers and spread deadly poisons over huge areas of the planet. Fukushima was and still is a horrific and ongoing human and environmental catastrophe, exposing the horrendous risks to which the powerful are willing to subject people and the planet. It should be remembered every time a pro-nuclear bureaucrat or politician exploits genuine concern about climate change to promote this deadly industry. It should never be forgotten.

The Tohoku earthquake was so violent that it shifted the Earth’s axis by almost 10 centimetres and altered Japan’s coastline by more than two metres. Japanese residents immediately knew that this disaster was worse than others, with the telephone poles and cinder block walls of Tokyo swaying back and forth. The quake and subsequent tsunami killed about 16,000 people.

The world watched in apprehension as the tsunami battered nuclear power plants, among them Fukushima Daiichi. TEPCO, the energy giant operating the plant, had known that this might happen. Just four years earlier, the TEPCO-run Kashiwazaki–Kariwa nuclear plant on Japan’s north-west coast had sustained damage from a magnitude seven earthquake. TEPCO management had estimated that a tsunami up to 15.7 metres high could strike the Fukushima plant, with disastrous consequences. But they did nothing.

Then disaster struck. The force of the giant waves disabled the generators powering Fukushima’s cooling system. A failed cooling system allowed temperatures inside the reactors to skyrocket, reaching up to 2,300°C. Nuclear fuel rods, requiring intense underwater cooling, quickly melted. The uranium sludge (known as corium) ground through the floor and rendered three reactors an impenetrable wreck of magmatic steel, concrete and nuclear waste.

Hydrogen explosions indicated

### Fukushima: An Ongoing Disaster

**Jack Crawford**

Table 3: Employment change in major sectors: 2017–18 over 2011–12 (million)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major sectors</th>
<th>Rural male worker</th>
<th>Rural female worker</th>
<th>Urban male worker</th>
<th>Urban female worker</th>
<th>All workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>–7.8</td>
<td>–19.8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>–0.1</td>
<td>–27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>–0.6</td>
<td>–3.7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>–0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>–2.6</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-agricultural</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>–4.9</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>–24.7</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>–1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: PFLS 2017–18

Table 4: Comparing sectoral employment change with the earlier period (million)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time period</th>
<th>Agriculture</th>
<th>Manufacturing</th>
<th>Construction</th>
<th>Non-agricultural</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017–18 over 2011–12</td>
<td>–27.1</td>
<td>–0.9</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>–1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011–12 over 2004–05</td>
<td>–34.4</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: PFLS 2017–18
the point of no return had been reached. Toxic plumes rose from the
plant, and radioactive debris spewed out. All layers of containment were
breached, and radioactive fluids began to flow into the soil and the
sea. The first official reaction to the crisis was to lie to the public.
While the triple meltdown was in full swing, TEPCO representatives
held press conferences assuring the world that the reactors were stable,
that the fuel was being cooled and contained, that there was no risk to
human health. The company did not acknowledge that a meltdown had
taken place until the following May. In 2016, TEPCO President Naomi
Hirose admitted there had been a cover-up, describing it as “extremely
regrettable”.

The government had a state-of-the-art system for detecting and
predicting the spread of radiation in the event of a nuclear accident. Its
findings—that massive quantities of radioactive material were released
into the environment following the explosions—were likewise withheld
from the public until late April, more than a month after the disaster.
The head of the government’s Nuclear Safety Commission, Haruki
Madarame, later explained the deception: “I hesitated to make such an
announcement because it would cause social turmoil”.

International news of the disaster quickly began to contradict the
official reassurances, and the scale of the danger could no longer be denied.
Mandatory evacuation zones were ordered: first for anyone within a two
kilometre radius, then 10 kilometres, then 20. More than 160,000 people fled.
The chaotic evacuation led to thousands of deaths, particularly among the elderly whose medical
care was disrupted.

* * *

Today, towns such as Futaba, Tomioka and Okuma are nuclear
ghost towns. In them you will find a forest of metal gates, decaying
buildings, shattered glass and cars wrapped in vines. The only
human faces are mannequins in store windows, still dressed in the
fashion of 2011. Sprawled across the highway between towns are
hundreds of black bags filled with toxic dirt. They are one of the many
problems of the clean-up effort. There are about 30 million one-
tonne bags of radioactive topsoil, tree branches, grass and other waste.
There is no safe, long-term storage place for this material.

The clean-up is undermined by cost cutting. Workers are forced
to meet strict deadlines, even if it compromises safety. “There were
times when we were told to leave the contaminated topsoil and just
remove the leaves so we could get everything done on schedule”,
explained Minoru Ikeda, a former worker. “Sometimes we would look
each other as if to say: ‘What on earth are we doing here?’”

The task is mammoth. The government and TEPCO now say
that decommissioning the failed nuclear plant will take 40 years, at
a cost of ¥22 trillion (or US$200 billion). But there is significant
uncertainty about how to remove the hundreds of tonnes of molten
fuel from the reactors. “For the removal of the debris, we don’t have
accurate information or any viable methodology for that”, admitted
the plant’s manager, Akira Ono, in 2015. “We need to develop many, many
technologies.”

Beyond the plant itself, the total clean-up is likely to cost
between ¥50 trillion and ¥70 trillion (US$460–640 billion), according
to the estimates of a right wing think tank, the Japan Center for
Economic Research. Thousands of workers continue to make daily
trips between the contaminated zones and company accommodation.
Dodgy subcontractors recruit largely from Japan’s destitute, including
the homeless, migrant workers and asylum seekers. A recent Greenpeace
investigation, “On the Frontline of the Fukushima Nuclear Accident: Workers and Children”, found
evidence of hyper-exploitation and dangerous radiation exposure. In one

Scandalously, organised crime has penetrated the clean-up
operations. Those with debts to the Yakuza (Japanese organised crime)
have found themselves shoved into hazmat suits and set to work. The
subcontracting system has allowed TEPCO to turn a blind eye to such
human rights abuses.

Despite triumphant optimism from some champions of nuclear,
researchers continue to uncover unexpected and unpredictable
consequences of the Fukushima disaster. These include the discovery
of tiny, glassy beads containing extremely high concentrations
of caesium-137 (a radioactive isotope) among polluted dust and
dirt particles. These bacterium-sized particles are easily inhaled
and persistently insoluble. How they react with our bodies and the
environment is not yet clear, but scientists increasingly believe them
to be a health risk. The beads have been found as far from the disaster
site as Tokyo.

The dangers faced by those returning to Fukushima prefecture
have been a central controversy of
recent years. Compelled by economic necessity, most have returned. But as of February 2019, 52,000 remain displaced, either unwilling to return or with homes in still-prohibited zones. In a recent press tour, the government repeatedly blamed “harmful rumours” for creating fear of returning as well as the Japanese public’s unwillingness to consume Fukushima’s fish and agricultural products.

People’s mistrust of government pronouncements is justified. Prime minister Shinzo Abe, keen to move on from the crisis, intends to end evacuations by the time Japan hosts the 2020 Olympics. The international and (prior to the meltdowns) Japanese standard of acceptable exposure to radiation, one millisievert per year, has been scrapped. Across Fukushima prefecture, measurements five times that level are now deemed safe.

Some places measure as high as 20 millisieverts per year. These radiation levels are especially dangerous for children, who are far more sensitive than adults to even low levels of exposure. It will take decades before the cost of the authorities’ carelessness can be measured in increased cancer rates. The loss of happy, healthy human life of course can never be quantified.

Hans Blix concludes his pro-nuclear Time article by insisting, “Radiation is a force that can be destructive and dangerous if not used prudently, but it can also be tamed and used to our benefit.” But Fukushima is not just a story of nuclear technology being used imprudently. It is a story of capitalism acting as it is supposed to: putting profits ahead of the interests of the many. An untameable economic system cannot “tame” radiation.

And those who “benefit” from the powerful nuclear industry are the same people who crave military dominance. The politicians and officials currently fighting to rebuild Japanese nuclear capability are thinking far more about the military tensions surrounding them than tackling climate change. We don’t need to build a world full of deadly nuclear power plants to combat climate change. We need clean, renewable energy and a system that prioritises people and the planet over money and military might.

[Editor’s note: We’d like to add: The far-reaching dangers of nuclear power are further evident from two recent reports, both of which the mainstream newspapers blacked out. (i) The Japanese environmental minister announced on September 10 that Japan has no other option than to dump huge quantities of radioactive wastewater from the Fukushima Daiichi plant into the Pacific Ocean. Ever since the Fukushima disaster, for the last many years, the plant has pumped tens of thousands of tons of water to help cool its damaged reactor cores and keep them from melting. After the water is used and contaminated with radionuclides and radioactive isotopes, it is stored in tanks. Currently, more than 1 million tonnes of contaminated water is held in almost 1,000 tanks at the Fukushima Daiichi site. But now the government says that it is running out of room. (ii) Several years ago, the US Congress decided that the United States, and not private companies that operate the nuclear plants, would be responsible for storing the radioactive waste. Several nuclear plants have shut down in the United States, but the radioactive waste will need to be stored for decades, maybe even centuries. Since the government has no place of its own to store the waste, it is paying the private companies billions of dollars every year to store the spent fuel at the site.]

We're Not Fooled by the Hong Kong Protests

Kevin Zeese and Margaret Flowers

Several people around the world are confused about the protests going on in Hong Kong. Whenever the corporate media and politicians, especially people like Marco Rubio (US Republican senator), applaud a social movement, it is a red flag that the protests are not a progressive people’s movement, but serve other purposes. Is this really a democracy movement? Are workers protesting the deep inequality and exploitation there? If not, what are these protests really about?

Fortunately, a more complete narrative of what is happening in Hong Kong and how it relates to the geopolitical conflict between the United States and China is developing among independent and movement media. The following is a description of what has been learned recently.

Not a Democracy Movement, but an Anti-China Tool

What is happening in Hong Kong is not actually a people’s uprising for democracy, but a tool for anti-China rhetoric and “Great Power Conflict.” Many Hong Kong protesters are pro-capitalist and
racist in nature, referring to mainland Chinese as locusts, and are calling for the United States to intervene. Many of the same tactics employed by Venezuelan, Nicaraguan, and Ukrainian regime change operations are re-appearing in Hong Kong. For example, demonstrators have used violence as a tactic to entice police to respond with violence in order to put out a false narrative of state repression against them.

Just because there are people in the street does not make protests progressive, worker-based or for the people’s interests. Fight Back News reports how Hong Kong has been used by China as a way to attract foreign investment, but also as a way to make the Renminbi (RMB) a more powerful currency as well as to advance China’s Belt & Road initiative. These are major threats to US dominance.

Dan Cohen of the Grayzone mentions the ties between the protest movement and right-wing racist groups in the US. Isn’t it strange that pro-Trump, racist groups are supporting the protests and the protesters are using US racist symbols?

Cohen’s major focus is the capitalist ties of the Hong Kong protesters. He describes the Rubert Murdoch of Hong Kong, Jimmy Lai, the self-described “head of opposition media,” who has been spending a lot of money, millions, to build the movement and giving a lot of media time to the anti-China rhetoric. And, he shows the connections between these capitalists and the Trump administration, i.e. he has had meetings with Bolton, Pence, and Pompeo as well as with neocons in the Senate, Marco Rubio, and Tom Cotton.

The goal of the Hong Kong protests is preventing the full integration of Hong Kong into China in 2047 when the transition agreement between China and the United Kingdom is finished. The United States, the United Kingdom and billionaires in Hong Kong want it to be integrated into the western capitalist economy and fear China’s state-planned economy. If they succeed, Hong Kong will become a base of economic, military and political operations for the US at the Chinese border, a critical position for the West’s ‘Great Power Conflict’ with Russia and China.

The US is investing in an anti-China movement to make integration of Hong Kong into China difficult. China is already hedging its bets by building Shenzhen across the bay, a state-planned, market-based economy, which will become an alternative to Hong Kong and shrink Hong Kong’s importance. The people of Hong Kong will be the losers if this occurs.

**The Hong Kong Protest is Not a Working-Class Revolt**

Even though there are good reasons for workers in Hong Kong to revolt, these protests are not focused on the issues of economic insecurity, i.e. high levels of poverty, the exorbitant cost of housing, low wages, and long hours. For the last 10 years wages have been stagnant in Hong Kong while rents have increased 300 percent; it is the most expensive city in the world.

In fact, the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions is not backing the demonstrations and called on its members to reject the call for a strike on August 5 put out by the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, which is backed by the US National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

If the protesters were focused on workers rights, they would be demanding an end to, or at least reform of, the neoliberal capitalism of Hong Kong that is dominated by big financial interests and corruption. In fact, half of the seats in the legislature are set aside for business interests who vote to protect their profits and not basic needs such as housing, but there is no criticism of this by the protesters.

Hong Kong has the world’s highest rents, a widening wealth gap and a poverty rate of 20 percent. These are crisis-level problems for the vast majority of people in Hong Kong, but they have not been the focus of the protests.

Fight Back News writes: “In actuality, the protests in Hong Kong serve the interests of finance capital, both in the city itself and around the world,” and makes the important point that “Hong Kong’s working class has nothing to gain from worse relations with mainland China, much less from ‘independence’. They suffered greatly under British colonial rule—no minimum wage laws; no labour protections; barbaric legal punishments like flogging and more.”

**The Role of the United States is Evident to Anyone Who Looks**

The NED has spent millions of dollars to build this anti-China movement over the years in a place with a population of 7.3 million people, over a million fewer people than New York City. The first to report on NED involvement in the current protest was Alexander Rubinstein of Mintpress News, who wrote: “the coalition cited by Hong Kong media, including the South China Morning Post and the Hong Kong Free Press, as organizers of the anti-extradition law demonstrations is called the Civil Human Rights
Front. That organization’s website lists the NED-funded HKHRM [Human Rights Monitor], Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, the Hong Kong Journalists Association, the Civic Party, the Labour Party, and the Democratic Party as members of the coalition.” HKHRM alone received more than $1.9 million in funds from the NED between 1995 and 2013.

The Viable Opposition blogger, in How Washington is Meddling In the Affairs of Hong Kong, describes NED’s history as a regime change agent for the United States and the recent NED funding in Hong Kong, pointing to a total of $1,357,974 on grants to organizations described as promoting freedom, democracy and human rights in Hong Kong over the period from 2015 to 2018.

This is not short-term funding but a long-term commitment by the United States. NED has been doing mass funding in Hong Kong since 1996. In 2012, NED invested $460,000 through its National Democratic Institute, to build the anti-China movement (aka pro-democracy movement), particularly among university students. Two years later, the mass protests of Occupy Central occurred.

Sara Flounders points out US funding goes beyond NED, writing: “Funding from the NED, the Ford, Rockefeller, Soros and numerous other corporate foundations, Christian churches of every denomination, and generous British funding, is behind this hostile, subversive network orchestrating the Hong Kong protests.” The US-funding of NGO’s confuses political activists, media and commentators because they fund a myriad of NGO’s in Hong Kong. As a result, there are human rights, democracy, youth and other Hong Kong spokespersons whose NED funding is not disclosed when they talk in the media.

Hong Kong protesters are not always secret about their ties to the US. In 2014, Mintpress News exposed US involvement in Occupy Central. They pointed out that Martin Lee, a Hong Kong protest figure, was in bed with NED. They gave him an award and had his bio on their website. He came to Washington, DC in 2014 along with Anson Chan, another protest figure, and met with Vice President Joe Biden and Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA). Lee took part in a NED talk hosted specifically for him. In 2015, Lee and others were applauded for their leadership by Freedom House, which works hand in hand with the NED.

During the current protests, participants were meeting with Julie Eadeh, of the US Consulate at a hotel. And, when Nathan Law and Agnes Chow visited the US they met with the China-hawk Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee Rep. Eliot Engel. They also met with Vice President Pence, Secretary of State Pompeo, National Security Adviser John Bolton, and Senator Marco Rubio.

Protesters carry US and UK flags, and sing the Stars and Stripes Forever and the US national anthem, displaying their connection to western nations. In one of the most iconic moments, demonstrating how these protests are really a microcosm of the conflict between the US and China, a protester used a US flag to beat a Chinese reporter, Fu Guohao of Global Times, who was tied up and assaulted at the Hong Kong airport.

Some believe the protests are too big for the US to control and point to the amount of money being spent by the NED. If the populations of Hong Kong and the US are compared, $1 million in funding for the movement in Hong Kong is equivalent to $60 million in the US. Additional funds are also being provided by billionaires. That level of resources is gigantic for popular movements that typically run on shoestring budgets.

The only way not to see US involvement in the Hong Kong protests is to close your eyes, ears, and mind and pretend it does not exist.

Hong Kongers are becoming pawns in the US Great Power Conflict with China. They are advocating against their own interests by seeking what will essentially be re-colonization by the West. If the US is successful, it will not be good for the people of Hong Kong, Asia or the world.

( Kevin Zeese and Margaret Flowers are directors of Popular Resistance, which provides information about progressive movements around the world and also organises campaigns on a broad range of issues in the US.)

Articles Put on Janata Blog
Last Week (Sept 15)

1. Faizan Mustafa, “Article 370, Federalism and the Basic Structure of the Constitution”
3. Stephen Sefton, “Green-smearing from Nicaragua to Bolivia”
4. When JP Cautioned the Indian State on Kashmir
6. Tom Engelhardt, “Who Are the Real Invaders on Planet Earth?”
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Greta Thunberg, the young climate crisis activist on September 23 opened the United Nations Climate Action Summit with an angry condemnation of world leaders for failing to take strong measures to combat climate crisis. Below is her full speech.

This is all wrong. I shouldn’t be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope? How dare you!

You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I’m one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction. And all you can talk about is money and fairytales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!

For more than 30 years the science has been crystal clear. How dare you continue to look away, and come here saying that you are doing enough, when the politics and solutions needed are still nowhere in sight.

You say you “hear” us and that you understand the urgency. But no matter how sad and angry I am, I don’t want to believe that. Because if you fully understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil. And I refuse to believe that.

The popular idea of cutting our emissions in half in 10 years only gives us a 50% chance of staying below 1.5 °C, and the risk of setting off irreversible chain reactions beyond human control.

Maybe 50% is acceptable to you. But those numbers don’t include tipping points, most feedback loops, additional warming hidden by toxic air pollution or the aspects of justice and equity. They also rely on my and my children’s generation sucking hundreds of billions of tonnes of your CO2 out of the air with technologies that barely exist. So a 50% risk is simply not acceptable to us–we who have to live with the consequences.

To have a 67% chance of staying below a 1.5 °C global temperature rise–the best odds given by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change–the world had 420 gigatons of carbon dioxide left to emit back on 1 January 2018. Today that figure is already down to less than 350 gigatons.

How dare you pretend that this can be solved with business-as-usual and some technical solutions. With today’s emissions levels, that
remaining CO2 budget will be entirely gone in less than eight and a half years.

There will not be any solutions or plans presented in line with these figures today. Because these numbers are too uncomfortable. And you are still not mature enough to tell it like it is.

You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us I say we will never forgive you.

We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up. And change is coming, whether you like it or not.

Thank you.

Across the Globe, Millions March against Climate Change

Four million people participated in the global climate strike across every continent on Friday, many of them students who skipped school on that day. In an explosion of the youth movement started by the Swedish school striker Greta Thunberg just over 12 months ago, people protested at more than 5,800 locations in an estimated 185 countries. The demonstrations began in Australia and the Pacific, moved to Asia, Antarctica, Africa and Europe, and then to North and South America. This is the third such climate strike this year, following similar mass global demonstrations this past March and May, and the largest to date.

For the first time since the school strikes for climate began last year, young people called on adults to join them—and they were heard. Trade unions representing hundreds of millions of people around the world mobilised in support, employees left their workplaces, doctors and nurses marched and workers at firms like Amazon, Google and Facebook walked out to join the climate strikes.

The protests were directed against the inaction and inability of world governments to take any significant measures to resolve the crisis, despite increasingly dire warnings from the United Nations and other agencies that if greenhouse gas emissions are not immediately halted, at least half the world’s population will likely face one or more climate-related catastrophe in the next decade. Similar outrage was directed against international climate summits such as the 2015 Paris Agreement, which have proven worthless in the face of the crisis.

Some of the largest demonstrations occurred in Germany, where over 100,000 protested in front of Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate, according to news reports, and up to 270,000 according to the protest organisers, for a total of 1.4 million people across the country. More than 330,000 demonstrated across Australia, 100,00 in Britain and up to 300,000 in the United States. Thousands more took to the streets in Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana and across North Africa. Thousands more demonstrated in Colombia, Bolivia, Brazil, India, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, Japan and New Zealand.

More than 250,000 join protest in the USA

The global protest culminated in New York which was anticipating one of the largest climate strikes. Education chiefs in the city gave every one of the 1.1 million children in its schools permission to attend the climate strike and hear Thunberg speak at a rally at the United Nations headquarters.

“Greta! Greta! Greta!” the crowd chanted as she took to the stage.

The 16-year-old directed her speech to the students in the crowd, though she acknowledged that adults also skipped worked to strike.

“We will do everything in our power to stop this crisis from getting worse, even if it means skipping school or work, because this is more important,” she said. “Why should we study for a future that is being taken away from us?”

She sparked laughter when she described all the politicians she had met who asked for selfies and “tell us they really, really admire what we do” yet have done nothing to address the climate crisis. “We demand a safe future. Is that really to much to ask?”

It was estimated that more than 250,000 people turned out for the protests in New York, with thousands more demonstrating in Boston, Miami and San Francisco.

Articles Put on Janata Blog

Last Week (Sept 22)

1. Arun Kumar and Astha Ahuja, “Can India’s Rich Wealth Creators Boost the Economy to $5 Trillion?”
2. Justin Akers Chacon, “Close the Concentration Camps”
3. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: A Time to Break Silence
5. Letter to Editor: Bharat Dogra, “Gandhian Economics is Closely Linked to Ethics”
6. Bill Moyers, “What If We Covered the Climate Emergency Like We Did World War II?”
The week from September 20 till September 27 has been designated as the week of the ‘Climate Strike’. It is an unprecedented event in its ambition to disrupt business as usual.

Thousands of events are taking place around the globe to demand that world leaders pay attention to the looming climate catastrophe that threatens our existence. The event is also unique as it is being spearheaded by school students, with a 16-year-old Swedish girl, Greta Thunberg, emerging as the symbolic voice of the movement.

These radical actions are taking place in the backdrop of “a warning to humanity” written by climate scientists in 2017. These scientists summarised the catastrophic consequences of human activity on the planet, in particularly our civilisation’s dangerous addiction to fossil fuels. Humans have already induced about 1 °C warming in global temperatures and we are headed to over 2 °C in the near future. Such an increase can lead to a self-perpetuating cycle of warming on the planet, with melting glaciers and rising sea levels threatening entire eco-systems. The stakes could not be higher.

Yet, the global community remains in denial about the scale of the impending disaster even as it pays lip service to addressing the undeniable science of global warming. The self-designated ‘leader of the free world’, Donald Trump, fails to even recognise climate change as a scientific phenomenon and has consistently promised to increase investments in fossil fuels. China, now known as the chimney of the world for emitting the highest number of greenhouse gases, continues to invest in coal projects in Third World countries, such as the monstrosity known as the Sahiwal Power Plant.

There can no longer be a discussion about climate change without laying bare the system that (literally) fuelled it—ie: global capitalism. What is unique about capitalism as compared to previous systems is its tendency to measure wealth in monetary terms by turning products into saleable commodities. The aim is neither to create material goods nor engage in long-term sustainability but to create private profits through the circulation of commodities. The uniqueness of this system can be gauged by the fact that prior to the advent of capitalism in late 18th century, much of the world’s material wealth was communally owned with detailed codes of rights and responsibilities towards present and future generations.

Capitalism’s advent was a disruptive event in the long course of human history rather than an evolutionary path inscribed in ‘human nature’. Detailing the history of violence and loot that preceded the rise of capitalism, Marx demonstrated how an attack on communal property was central to the formation of a society based on commodity production. It was not human nature but the displacement, abandonment and starvation faced by millions that set the conditions for the emergence of global capitalism.

Capitalism is an expansionary system that cannot remain in equilibrium with its surroundings. The perpetual search for profits requires the extraction of more natural resources as well as new markets to sell their products. John Bellamy Foster, an expert on climate politics, famously called this tendency the “Treadmill of Production” in which one must continue to run, even accelerate, in order to maintain a place on the treadmill.

On the production side, it means engulfing more and more resources for commodification, even if it has negative social/ecological imperatives. On the consumption side, the $1.2 trillion advertising industry directed at us ensures we feel incomplete without the latest gadgets that we probably do not need. This vicious cycle engulfs not only our environment, but objectifies even our social relations as objects symbolise the social worth of an individual.

In the Third World, capitalism arrived through the force of colonial violence, abruptly breaking our historical trajectories to open natural resources to the ‘free market’. Today, it is the exorbitant debt propelling the deepening of capitalism in poorer countries. In her excellent study titled The Debt Boomerang, Susan George explains that since the debt crisis of the 1980s, poor countries have been forced to improve their balance of payments ie increase their exports. Since many do not have large-scale industrial production, they are forced to open up their natural resources to foreign companies in order to pay back the impossible debts.
they have accumulated. Moreover, the drive to increase exports also leads to unsustainable practices of agriculture that produce quick profits in the short term but result in ecological ruin in the long term, adversely affecting the poorest sections in the countryside.

Much of the deforestation taking place around the world is geared towards giving access to mining companies or to the furniture industry in the West. The latest fires in the Amazon also appear to be a deliberate attempt to clear land for cattle grazing in order to export beef to Western countries. That the ‘lungs of the planet’ can be sacrificed to ensure that those living in the Global North can have uninterrupted access to their hamburgers shows the irrationality of a system that weighs private profits above social responsibility.

This explains why we are unable to phase out fossil fuels despite scientific warnings. The big fossil companies have made massive investments and buy the support of Western governments to ensure their future profits remain safe. Third World countries are looking for investments in natural resources to pay back their debt, opening their economies to the worst environmental and labour practices. Capitalism has locked us into a logic that is forcing humanity to participate in its own spectacular self-annihilation.

These examples also show that, while individual lifestyle changes are important, they cannot replace collective action necessary to confront the systemic crisis. Fighting climate change is today inextricably linked to reinvigorating a vibrant democracy that is responsive to the demands of the citizenry.

UN experts have claimed that we may be heading towards a climate apartheid where the wealthy will cordon off their areas from those affected by the ecological breakdown. That process is already underway and cannot be meaningfully addressed without questioning the underlying logic that propels it. In other words, the key to fighting climate change is not to condemn an abstract process but to identify the social relations of exclusion, domination and exploitation that shape our context. Only a new social system that privileges sustainability and planning over the destructive chaos of late capitalism can provide a way forward.

We can either witness a climate catastrophe that intensifies the construction of walls and borders around the world, sending millions into militarised forms of social control. Or we can build an alternative system that brings back the control of production and consumption in the democratic control of communities across the world. The stakes have never been higher. It is time to organise and fight back.

(The writer is an historian and a member of the Haqooq-e-Khalq Movement of Pakistan.)

From Scientist to Activist

Heather Price

“Dr. Doom” fellow students joked as we walked out of our department seminar. It was 1998 and the presenter was Richard Gammon, a co-author of the first IPCC report. I didn’t share my fellow University of Washington grad students’ joke. I was uneasy, wondering about the timing of forecasts and feedback loops.

My grad school journals detail my awakening to the climate crisis. One 1999 entry reads, “I’m probably an expert on climate change compared to my peers and the general public. I need to share my knowledge.” Then I listed areas the public needed to know: “Climate change, coral bleaching, ozone hole, air pollution, and mass extinction.” I feel a sense of missed opportunity re-reading my journal. I clearly felt a sense of urgency in 1999. In grad school and postdoc, I heard stories of colleagues, such as Michael Mann, professionally maligned and harassed by fossil fuel industry stooges. I’m afraid to admit, his experience scared my younger self away from climate action.

I was a ‘good scientist’. I stuck to the science and didn’t interject my views regarding action or policy solutions. When I taught my first climate class in 2001, the strong El Nino year 1998 was the warmest year on record and CO2 concentration was 367 ppm. Today, 1998 doesn’t even rank among the top ten hottest years on record, and CO2 reached a new high of 415 ppm in 2019.

It took me decades to learn that just presenting the problem and solutions isn’t enough to effect change. It is the contributions of women climate scientists, activists, and children, who inspired me to join them and raised my awareness of climate justice. Mary Heglar, Jamie Margolin, Greta Thunberg, my own children, and scientists Sarah Myhre, Katharine Hayhoe,
and Peter Kalmus, have all inspired me to step out of my comfort zone, act, and encourage others to act with us.

If I, a climate scientist, don’t share what I know and how I feel, who will? How many atmospheric chemists are out there who can explain the science in a way that the average person can understand and connect it to justice and equity? Every scientist I know feels a sense of urgency around the climate crisis. Urgency that we should share with our families, colleagues, and public. As I tell my students, “You know more about climate change than 99% of people. Share what you know. Talk about it.”

Today, I share my sense of urgency and connect to the civil rights and women’s rights heroes of the past: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, suffragettes. I introduce audiences to today’s climate activists: Michael Foster, and scientists turned activists, James Hansen, retired Director of NASA-GISS, and Sandra Steingraber, whose peaceful direct actions all led to imprisonment. Michael Mann is also among these heroes, standing up for decades to the fossil fuel juggernaut of disinformation.

Social media helped facilitate my climate outreach and activism, connecting me with journalists, fellow climate scientists, and activists. I don’t seek out media opportunities, but when asked, I now see it as my duty to share my knowledge and sense of urgency.

It’s not enough to just study and report on the fossil fueled climate changes occurring. I feel compelled to sound the alarm. You don’t need to be a doctor to tell someone to stop smoking around a baby. All of us who understand the climate crisis have a duty to speak up. A medical doctor is not viewed as an activist when advocating for her patient. Our patient is in the ER with a fever over 1°C, it’s getting hotter, and the toxic buildup in her systems is reaching critical limits. What gives me hope is our human capacity for love, ingenuity, faith, and my knowledge that we already have the solutions.

The burden of responsibility lies with the business and political leaders hindering change for profit. Rich businesses and individuals don’t intend to destabilise climate, hurting the poor and most vulnerable. Yet rich lifestyles do exactly that. The lifestyles of the richest 0.54% (~42 million people) are responsible for more emissions than the poorest half of global population (3.8 billion people). As with all issues of equity and justice: It’s actions that count, not intentions. I find hope in the more equitable, healthier and peaceful world we will create as we address this crisis.

My activism today is speaking out, showing up, and educating. I say yes to testifying against the continued poisoning of my patient, with a liquified natural gas plant in Tacoma, Washington. I say yes to media requests for interviews to explain climate science and discuss anxiety. I say yes to joining the youth at Friday climate strikes.

No one wants to sacrifice time and energy or become a political prisoner. Yet sacrifice of time and freedom by the great activists (MLK Jr, the suffragettes, Rosa Parks, etc...) was required to effect change. And they did not act alone. Thousands marched and sacrificed with them. You can too. Join a climate action near you between Sept 20–27, 2019: the Global Climate Strike. Everyone is needed.

(=Dr. Price is an atmospheric chemist, climate scientist, researcher and educator in Seattle Washington.)

Shahid Bhagat Singh
Bharat Dogra, Jagmohan Singh, Madhu Dogra

September 28, 2019 marks the immortal revolutionary martyr Bhagat Singh’s 112th birth anniversary. On this occasion we are publishing an extract from an article on Bhagat Singh. The full article can be read on Janata blog.

Shahid Bhagat Singh is widely recognised as perhaps the most famous and respected revolutionary of the freedom movement of India. Although he, along with his two comrades Sukhdev and Rajguru, was hanged by the colonial regime at the extremely young age of 23, he had already won so much affection and respect that in vast parts of India his fame rivalled that of Gandhi. This has been acknowledged by the official chronicler of the Congress party. His death (and that of his two colleagues) was mourned by millions across India, from Punjab (his home-province) to Tamil Nadu. Many of them wept openly. Political and other differences were set aside as the vast nation was united by tears.
over the loss of its most beloved sons. Indeed, there were appeals against this death sentence even from the base of the imperial power, from Britain.

While details of this inspiring saga of Shahid (Martyr) Bhagat Singh have been published widely, nevertheless there remain significant gaps in acknowledging the many-sided achievements and contributions of this remarkable youth, one of the most accomplished among the young leaders of world history. While his predominant role has been that of a freedom fighter, this encompassed many distinguished roles as a scholar, writer, journalist, disaster relief worker, civil liberties activist, and socialist ideologue, all of which he performed with great merit. Among many dedicated comrades, he emerged as almost a natural leader, a reality acknowledged spontaneously by people. On the lighter side, more by force of circumstances (the need to hide his main identity) he also worked for some time as a school teacher (actually a headmaster) and even a small-time dairy entrepreneur (where he is reputed to have distributed free a substantial share of the milk to employees and friends, remonstrating with his annoyed mother that milk should be distributed among all).

How Handcuffed Prisoners Defeated Biggest Imperial Power

After their arrest in 1929, Bhagat Singh and his comrades, by their courage and noble conduct, were able to inspire and mobilise millions of people for greater participation in the freedom movement. This period of the imprisonment of Bhagat Singh and his close comrades thus became one of the most glorious chapters in the freedom movement of India and indeed in all liberation struggles. During these two years, April 1929–March 1931, Bhagat Singh and his close comrades can justly be credited with not justly defying but even defeating the world’s biggest imperial power from behind the bars. The more the colonial government tried to repress and torture them, the more reverence and affection they received in the entire country because of the courage and determination with which they faced the onslaught. This is why the colonial power with its vast reach and strength was defeated by its handcuffed prisoners.

Much more than their own defence, Bhagat Singh, along with B.K. Dutt and other comrades, concentrated on focusing attention on the rights of all political prisoners and issues concerning this. In the course of the various struggles of the freedom movement, a large number of political prisoners (mostly freedom fighters) were all the time being imprisoned and the terrible conditions in jails posed a serious threat to their life and health much beyond the punishment to which they were sentenced by the legal system. Bhagat Singh and his close comrades went on fasts ranging from 60 to 95 days to demand the essential rights of all political prisoners.

Secondly, despite the fact that the colonial government was violating all norms of justice to rush up the case against Bhagat Singh and his close comrades, denying various essential rights to the accused, Bhagat Singh and his colleagues worked very hard to present their views and ideology in careful, well-thought-out ways. As a result it became increasingly clear to the people that these revolutionaries had actually taken all care to save human lives in the Assembly Bombing Case. A terrorist generally tries to take more human lives, whereas these freedom fighters had taken the maximum precaution to ensure that there was no loss to human life. This was evident in the way the bombs were prepared, and the way in which these were used. They had also given away their revolvers on their own to security-men, although they could have used these weapons to make good their escape.

It was becoming increasingly clear to the people from the conduct and statements made by the revolutionary prisoners that far from indulging in any indiscriminate violence, they had planned their activities very carefully keeping in view only the interests of their country and the freedom movement for which they were willing to make any sacrifice and bear any hardship.

This became apparent from the courage and nobility with which they faced torture and beatings. They endured fasting for very long periods. Even as they saw their own health and the health of their dearest friends collapsing before their eyes, they did not surrender. Paralysis gradually spread from one part of the body of the fasting freedom fighter, Jatindranath Das, to another part, and yet he did not break his fast. Prison authorities used to mix milk in the water, so that when they drink water the fast of the revolutionaries would automatically break. Instead of drinking this milk-mixed water, the thirsty prisoners simply broke the pitchers containing this water. When the authorities tried to force feed them in a cruel way, the prisoners still resisted so much that they were injured. Ultimately fearing loss of life due to force feeding the jail
officials had to discontinue these efforts.

As news of such acts of courage and determination spread, the support for these revolutionaries grew rapidly in the country, just as these young freedom fighters had hoped.

When fasting freedom fighter Jatindranath Das died on September 13, 1929 after a continuous fast of 63 days, 50,000 funeral processions marched through Lahore. The Central Legislative Assembly passed a motion of adjournment to censure the government for their policy regarding the hunger striking prisoners in the Lahore Conspiracy Case.... In the Punjab, Drs. Muhammad Alam and Gopi Chand Bhargava resigned from the Punjab Legislative Assembly. Subhas Bose led the miles-long funeral procession in Calcutta.... Rabindranath Tagore was inspired to compose a song.

Later, when Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru were sentenced to death, Bhagat Singh Appeal Committees were established in every district of the Punjab. At a Bhagat Singh day on 17 February, 1931, colleges emptied out into streets, 15,000 people met in Lahore. Over 138,000 signatures seeking the commutation of the death sentence were sent by the All Punjab Bhagat Singh Appeal Committee to the Viceroy. In Amritsar, a public meeting organised by the Workers and Peasants Party demanded the immediate release of all political prisoners. The Tamil Nadu Congress Committee insisted that commuting the death sentence was an essential condition for peace.

Indeed the protest against the glaring unjust trial and death sentence even reached Britain where an appeal titled ‘Stop the Lahore Executions!’ was signed by thousands of people. This appeal stated: “We, the undersigned electors in Great Britain, emphatically protest against your sanction being given to the sentences, including three death penalties, passed by the judge in the Conspiracy Case at Lahore, India, after a trial, the character of which arouses the gravest misgivings.

“We are aware that the twenty-seven Indian youths accused in this case were not only tried without a jury but by the special personal instructions of the Viceroy. Extraordinary regulations were adopted to conclude the trial without regard to the usual procedure.

“We regard the sentences passed under these circumstances as a violation of justice and demand that they should be disallowed by you. If the three death sentences are put into operation, we shall hold you and your Government responsible for sanctioning what amounts to the murder of political opponents under the guise of official judicial sentences.

“Without entering into the question whether there was any justification at all for the trial of the accused men at Lahore, whose conviction could only be obtained by such extraordinary means, we desire as strongly as possible to press our views upon you that there should be in all cases, without exception, an open, normal trial by a jury of the countrymen of the accused persons.”

Invaluable Contributions of Great Relevance to Our Times

It is clear that Bhagat Singh and his colleagues with hardly any resources and working in very adverse situations were able to cause a massive impact in terms of creating high levels of commitment and courage for the freedom movement. This they achieved by their personal example of great courage and noble conduct, and also by careful planning of how to make the best possible use of their very adverse circumstances to somehow take their message in a very convincing way to the people. In all of this Bhagat Singh as a strategist played a very significant role. The impact of the fasts and other courageous actions of Bhagat Singh and his colleagues could be specifically seen in the Congress moving rapidly towards the goal of full freedom (complete independence) from colonial rule.

He and his colleagues also made it amply clear to the people that they did not believe in indiscriminate violence and greatly valued human life. All misunderstandings on this score were cleared by them in their statements.

Bhagat Singh wrote very clearly, “non-violence as a policy is indispensable for all mass movements” while force is justifiable only “when resorted to as a matter of terrible necessity”. During the trial, Bhagat Singh and B.K. Dutt said in a joint statement: “We hold human life sacred beyond words.” When asked to define ‘revolution’ they said equally clearly that it did not mean the cult of ‘bomb and pistol’. A similar message was reiterated to the Punjab Student Conference in Lahore.

Basic changes in the existing system rooted in injustice are needed. The system of capitalism and imperialism has to be confronted on a wider scale to remove the basic causes of exploitation and injustice. Only then conducive conditions will emerge for ending war and establishing real and stable
peace based on justice. World level fraternity based on equality in the true sense was emphasised by Bhagat Singh.

On another aspect of peace, Bhagat Singh gave very high priority to ending all sectarian conflicts based on narrow and aggressive interpretations of religious beliefs. He was very active on this front in Punjab, Delhi and Kanpur, establishing close collaboration with others like Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi who were very devoted to this work. The Naujawan Bharat Sabha formed by Bhagat Singh and his colleagues was very active on this front in adverse situations and helped to check the spread of communalism.

Bhagat Singh also gave very high priority to the strong mobilisation of Dalits for ending discrimination and exploitation within the Indian society. He assigned great importance to social revolution based on the mobilisation of Dalits and this was also a part of the freedom struggle. He called upon the Dalits to get united and challenge the entire society against the injustices suffered by them for so long. At the same time he warned them against the manipulations of the bureaucracy of the capitalist system to misguide and use them for its own ends.

Bhagat Singh called upon the youth to mobilise workers and peasants as they are the real strength of the movement. Bhagat Singh equally emphasised workers and peasants, city slums and village huts.

The establishment of a socialist system was emphasised by Bhagat Singh, as is evident from the fact that largely on his insistence the name of their organisation was changed from the Hindustan Republican Association to the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association.

All this remains highly relevant for India today and a lot of this is also relevant in the international context. It is amazing that Bhagat Singh as the leading ideologue of his organisation was able to formulate such a mature agenda at an age of 20 to 23 years. All the time he was extremely tied up in various activities of his party or he was jailed, yet he was able to study and write extensively. Finally, all these ideas could be used in such a way as to inspire millions of people only because of the immense sufferings that Bhagat Singh and his comrades were able to face with great courage and nobility of conduct. It is the combination of all these achievements which makes Bhagat Singh one of the greatest freedom fighters of India and also one of the most inspiring figures of all liberation struggles who continues to inspire millions of people even today.

(Bharat Dogra is a free-lance journalist involved with several social initiatives and movements. Jagmohan Singh is the Chairman, Shahid Bhagat Singh Centenary Foundation. Madhu Dogra is a free-lance writer and researcher.)

Gandhi’s Lonely Furrow

Nikhil Chakravartty

As the country is getting ready to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of attainment of freedom, many memories come back to those who were fortunate to be witness to those momentous events. The subcontinent—both India and Pakistan winning independence—opened a new chapter in history, the chapter on decolonisation. It is not often realised that it is the people of this subcontinent who started a historic movement which saw country after country becoming free from colonial bondage and asserting themselves as independent nations.

For those of us who have seen with our own eyes the ushering in of the independence to this country, there will always remain a tinge of tragedy attached to it—namely, the searing partition of the country. The ecstasy of freedom was accompanied in those memorable days with the agony of partition. As we remember one, the other also comes back to mind. The joy of freedom was shattered by the bitter desolation evoked by the partition.

In the excitement of the golden jubilee celebrations, is but natural that the aspect of joy, of triumph is remembered and highlighted, while that of sorrow, of defeat, is often forgotten or glossed over. But at 50, a nation certainly reaches adulthood and can look back without anger or remorse on what happened and into the cause of this tragic development, namely, the vivisection of a country as a condition precedent to its independence. It is time we assessed who was responsible and for how much this division of the country, this slicing up of the organic whole of a vibrant body politic.

(This article was published in Mainstream on 9 August, 1997. We are reproducing it here as it is still as relevant today.)
In this context, it is surprising to find that some of the principal actors on the Indian side could not anticipate the blood and tear that would follow the partition. In their intellectual horizon, it was going to be a smooth, painless partition which would usher in freedom but without tears. It is on record that both Sardar Vallabhai Patel and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru expected that it would just be a peaceful partition and everything would be all right once it was brought about. Only Gandhiji had a different view. He had the terrible premonition that the partition would lead to endless distress as it turned out to be. This difference among the leaders of the triumphant national movement was known at that time to even the youngest of reporters. It was known that Gandhiji was not happy, and he was not called to the meeting of the Congress Working Committee which accepted the Mountbatten Plan for the partitioning of the country.

D.G. Tendulkar, who did a great national service writing volumes after volumes on Gandhiji’s very active life, had recorded an extraordinary piece out of Gandhiji’s papers. Two days before the Mountbatten Award was announced on June 3, 1947, Gandhiji who was in Delhi at the time, woke up half-an-hour before his early morning prayer on June 1, 1947 and wrote down in his diary the following which is part of our history:

“The purity of my striving will be put to the test only now. Today, I find myself all alone. Even the Sardar and Jawaharlal think that my reading of the political situation is wrong and peace is sure to return if partition is agreed upon. They did not like my telling the Viceroy that even if there was to be partition, it should not be through British intervention or under the British rule. They wonder, if I have not deteriorated with age.

“Nevertheless, I must speak as I feel, if I am to prove a true, loyal friend to the Congress and to the British people, as I claim to be, regardless of whether my advice is appreciate or not. I see clearly that we are setting about this business the wrong way. We may not feel the full effect immediately, but I can see clearly that the future of independence gained at this price is going to dark. I pray, that God may not keep me alive to witness it. In order that He may give me the strength and wisdom to remain firm in the midst of universal opposition and to utter the full truth, I need all the strength that purity can give.

“But in spite of my being all alone in my thoughts, I am experiencing an ineffable inner joy and freshness of mind. I feel as if God Himself is lighting my path before me. And that is perhaps the reason why I am able to fight on single-handed. The people ask me to retire to Kashi or to the Himalayas. I laugh and tell them that the Himalayas of my penance are where there is misery to be alleviated, oppression to be relieved. There can be no rest for me, so long as there is a single person in India lacking the necessaries of life. I cannot bear to see Badshah Khan’s grief. His inner agony wrings my heart. But, if I give way to tears, it would be cowardly and, the stalwart Pathan as he is, he would break down. So I go about my business unmoved. That is no small thing.

“But maybe all of them are right and I alone am floundering in darkness... I shall, perhaps, not be alive to witness it, but should the evil I apprehend overtake India and her independence can be imperilled, let posterity know what agony this old soul went through thinking of it. Let it not be said that Gandhi was party to India’s vivisection. But everybody is today impatient for independence. Therefore, there is no other help.”

Here is the clear proof that Gandhiji was not a party to the partition of India, while statesmen like Nehru and Patel were beguiled into accepting it, nurturing the illusion that once the partition was brought about, everything would be lovely in the garden. Only Gandhi had the premonition that the partition would unleash forces which would be terrible for the two countries. It is known that in the negotiations that preceded the partition, Gandhi went to the utmost length to avert it. So much so that he at one stage proposed to hand over the Prime Ministership of India to Jinnah, an offer which was not approved by either Nehru or Patel. This was the report that the young reporter like the present writer got at the time.

Actually Gandhiji’s herculean efforts at averting the partition of India started long ago. Even from prison, he welcomed Rajaji’s formula in 1944 and immediately after his release, he had long and confidential parleys with Jinnah. The collapse of that round of talks naturally came as a severe blow for many of us. But the atmosphere at the time was not one of touch-and-go. Hope was nurtured that something would sooner be found to escape the partition. By the time Mountbatten started his final round of talks, it became inevitable that Gandhiji would not be able to avert the partition. It is thus clear that only one among the stalwarts of our freedom movement, Gandhiji, had
the foresight about the irreparable damage that the partition would bring to the subcontinent.

All the other leaders regarded that the scar of the partition would be short-lived, though the British, as the imperial power still wielding their baton, wanted to make use of the partition for their Central Asian policy. It may be noted that three years before the actual partition, Prof Coupland had drawn up a tentative map of the partitioning of India. The idea behind that exercise was obviously to decontaminate the north-west from the rest of the subcontinent, and keep it as a reserve to use it as the jumping-off ground into Central Asia. Sir Olaf Caroe, who was one of the star players in the Great Game, found that after the War, Britain was too weak to play it. So, he took all his plans and papers for the Great Game to the US State Department and urged the USA, the new avatar, to take up the role which Britain had played for nearly a century. This gives us the clue why the US Administration assigned for Pakistan a strategic role in the period of the Cold War.

Why did the Congress leadership accept the partition? One gets the impression at the time that practically the entire lot of the Congress leaders had become tired, unwilling to undertake another round of struggle. Secondly they seemed to have been taken in by Mountbatten’s persuasions and blandishments. Gandhi saw through both. But perhaps he had the misgiving that another round of mass struggle—bigger even than the 1942 movement—might not be possible in view of the fact that the Congress leadership itself did not seem to be prepared for it.

This obvious reluctance of Gandhiji to undertake another round of struggle is one of the mysteries of Indian history in the modern age. Gandhi was never known to shirk even when he was single-handed, as it happened in the twenties. This time, he had on his side JP and the entire Left (including the thoroughly chastened Communists). Why then did he keep quiet, anticipating the harrowing consequence of the partition?

Sometimes History does not provide the right answer—even after 50 long years.

[Nikhil Chakravartty (1913–88) was a famed journalist and the founder–editor of the respected current affairs weekly Mainstream.]

How Corporate–Hindutva Axis is Assaulting India’s Federalism

Prabhat Patnaik

The anti-colonial struggle saw the emergence of a pan-Indian national consciousness that was superimposed upon a pre-existing “nationality” consciousness based on linguistic regions. The pan-Indian national consciousness, in other words, was superimposed upon a Bengali or Gujarati or Tamil or Odiya consciousness; and the anti-colonial struggle saw the flourishing of both kinds of consciousness.

Every Indian is imbued today with a dual national consciousness. Both forms of consciousness have to be nurtured; a delicate balance has to be maintained between the two. Overemphasis on any one consciousness to the exclusion of the other will lead to a break-up of the nation.

The federal structure of our polity is an expression of this dual consciousness. In fact, below the linguistic–regional consciousness, there are other levels of consciousness, for which again the polity has devised various means of accommodation, such as “autonomous councils”; these may or may not be adequate or sufficient, but the basic point is that Indian federalism requires mutual accommodation, not centralisation, as is the current tendency.

This derives from the very nature of our anti-colonial nationalism. No other kind of nationalism, such as religious nationalism, can provide the basis for such accommodation, which is why re-fashioning the polity on the lines of the Hindutva ideology, will lead inevitably to a break-up of the nation. This point will be recognised immediately with regard to the oppression that Hindutva unleashes on the religious minorities; but it has a general validity, beyond the communal divide that Hindutva stokes, encompassing regional revolts that any centralisation would inevitably generate.

Hindutva “nationalism” assumes that the (Hindu) “nation” has already existed, so that there is no need for any accommodation between the Centre and the states; that any demand for such accommodation can come only from some “corrupt regional elites” wishing to line their own pockets; and that riding roughshod over any demand for accommodation is in the “nation’s interest”. It is, therefore, essentially centralising; and every such
centralisation pushes the country either towards an eventual partition, or towards authoritarianism to prevent such a partition.

Such authoritarianism then becomes a self-justifying phenomenon: “look at the law and order situation, the number of violent incidents perpetrated by the ‘terrorists’; surely the suspension of civil liberties and the imposition of a clampdown is justified under these circumstances” (the kind of official argument advanced in the case of Jammu and Kashmir that has reportedly impressed even the Supreme Court of India).

The disastrous consequences of such centralisation are evident in the case of Jammu and Kashmir. Articles 370 and 35A were expressions of an accommodative nationalism, which took into account the exceptional circumstances of the state’s accession to India: a Muslim-majority state ruled by a Hindu ruler, which, instead of acceding to Pakistan, acceded instead to India on the basis of these special Articles. To suddenly and unilaterally abrogate these Articles represents a violation of that pledge, which, no matter how strongly cheered by Hindutva votaries in the rest of India, is a blow against the foundations of the entire Indian nation.

The fact that religion cannot be the basis of nationalism, because it presumes the existence of a nation from time immemorial, and hence precludes the accommodativeness that must inform the emergence of a modern nation after long years of colonial rule, was demonstrated very clearly by the break-up of Pakistan, where the eventual secession of the eastern part had begun with a language movement. Hindutva nationalism is pushing India in the same direction; and those celebrating the humiliation of the Kashmiris will come one day to rue the government’s decision.

In fact, not content with the disaster it has unleashed in Jammu and Kashmir, the Narendra Modi government is now pushing for the imposition of Hindi all over the country, which is another horrendous measure of over-riding the aspirations of the various regional–linguistic nationalities. It is another move for fracturing the nation in the name of unifying the nation; and the tendency towards fracturing will inevitably call forth, for the sake of countering this tendency, further curbs on human rights and civil liberties for all.

This tendency to over-ride the aspirations of the regional–linguistic nationalities, which takes the form of increasing centralisation within our federal arrangement, does not arise from Hindutva alone; in its economic form, it also conforms to the demand of the corporate–financial oligarchy. The introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), which took away the states’ rights to impose commodity taxes as they liked and vested this right in a GST Council before which every state must now come as a supplicant if it wishes some adjustment in rates, was an astonishing measure of centralisation. The states which had then agreed to such centralisation under various erroneous expectations are now realising the gravity of their mistake. “One nation–one language” is as dangerous to our federal polity as “one nation–one tax” which is how the GST was portrayed.

A view is commonly advanced that it is not the GST as such but the haste with which it was introduced that is the cause of the troubles that have arisen. This is simply not true. The travails of the economy arising from the GST do so because of the GST itself. The reason is simple: in an economy like ours where the large-scale sector often buys inputs from the small-scale and petty production sector (so that it can take advantage of the latter’s low wages), for the former to get tax refunds it must ensure that the latter, i.e. its input suppliers in the small-scale sector, file their GST returns.

This implies two things: first, the small-scale sector has to incur larger costs than it did before. In fact, because of “indivisibilities”, the cost of complying with the GST procedure is even greater per unit of output for the small-scale sector than for the large-scale sector. Second, many small units that did not pay taxes earlier are now dragged into the tax net. Not surprisingly, many small units that did not pay taxes earlier are now dragged into the tax net. Not surprisingly, many small units that did not pay taxes earlier are now dragged into the tax net. And given the fact that the GST rates had to be fixed so as to make them “revenue-neutral” as far as possible, and also the fact that the rates had to be uniform across the country for individual goods, many small units that did not pay taxes earlier end up paying hefty taxes.

Not surprisingly, many small units are going under because of the GST burden. When this happens, it adds to the recessionary effects on the Indian economy of the global slowdown that has itself arisen because of the contradictions of neo-liberalism. Such recessionary tendencies, in turn, result in reduced tax revenue collections from the GST which is what we find today.

All this, to repeat, is not because of any haste or clumsiness in introducing the GST; that is just a neo-liberal myth. It arises because of the GST itself. A tax amount that was raised earlier from only one segment of the economy, excluding many
small producers, is now sought to be raised from a much larger segment of the economy that includes these small producers. Little wonder then that the small producers are getting squeezed in a manner they had not been before.

The GST idea that was “sold” using all kinds of spurious arguments, such as the fact that it would unify the “national” market (as if the world’s mightiest capitalist economy the US which does not have a GST lacks a unified “national” market), is now getting exposed for what it really is: a way of passing off a part of the commodity tax burden that was earlier borne by the large-scale sector to the shoulders of the small-scale sector as well.

The assault on the federal structure of the Indian polity arises, therefore, from two sources: the Hindutva elements on the one hand, and the corporate–financial oligarchy, on the other. Since the country is currently ruled by an alliance where these two elements play a pivotal role, a corporate–communal axis if you like, the centralising tendency is overwhelming. It is riding roughshod over the regional–linguistic nationalities that are an essential component of our dual national consciousness; this fact will spell disaster for the nation in the days to come.

The Bharatiya Janata Party often claims that it has done in 70 days what earlier governments had not been able to do in 70 years. It is correct. The nation had not allowed bulls into its China Shop all these years; now these are running rampant.

Sops that are No Stimulus

C.P. Chandrasekhar

The government has finally admitted that the Indian economy is on a steep downturn. For some time now, even the business community, which tends to shower all praise and disapprove any criticism of the reformist Modi dispensation, has expressed concern about deteriorating economic conditions and the absence of any decisive action on the part of the government.

This was seen as a signal that the ‘business friendly’ government had to act, though there appeared to be no clarity in the policy establishment of what needs to done.

It was only after experimenting with a range of half-hearted measures, including a partial withdrawal of surcharges on capital gains made by portfolio investors and on incomes of the ‘super rich’, that Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman finally announced what she claims to be a major stimulus package. Principal components of the package include a reduction in the corporate tax rate from 30 (or an effective rate of 34.61 per cent after surcharge and cess) to 22 per cent (or an effective rate of 25.17 per cent) for domestic companies that do not avail of tax incentives or exemptions. New domestic manufacturing companies incorporated on or after October 1, 2019 will pay corporation tax at the reduced rate of 15 per cent (which is an effective rate of 17.01 per cent) so long as they do not avail of incentives and exemptions. And the minimum alternative tax (MAT) applicable to companies that do avail of incentives and exemptions has been reduced from 18.5 per cent to 15 per cent. This is a huge bonanza, which is expected to account for much of the revenue foregone to finance the stimulus, estimated at Rs 1.45 lakh crore or around 0.8 per cent of GDP.

The handout implicit in these tax cuts for business firms, especially the larger and more profitable amongst them, has cheered markets, leading to a spike in the Sensex. But there is reason to believe that the measures would not deliver the needed results. The slowdown, as a response to which the Finance Minister’s stimulus has been announced, is the result of a shortfall in demand in sectors as diverse as automobiles and biscuits that comes from three sources. The first, is the long-term tendency for sluggish demand growth resulting from agricultural stagnation, agrarian distress, rising unemployment and stagnant or declining real incomes. Second, is the absence of any demand stimulus from enhanced public spending, which is constrained by limited resource mobilisation because of a lenient, business-friendly tax regime and an obsessive adherence to fiscal deficit targets in central and state budgets inspired by neoliberal fiscal reform. And, third, is an inability to sustain the artificial boost to investment and consumption spending that had been provided by a surge in credit offered by banks and non-bank financial corporations over the decade since the mid-2000s.

Given these factors underlying the weakening demand trend that led to the slowdown, the options before the government were limited. There was no way in which the structural factors resulting in the
agrarian crisis, rising unemployment and stagnant real earnings could be addressed in the short run. Reversing those trends to revive demand would take time. Continued reliance on credit as an artificial stimulus to growth, when the incomes and profits to service the resulting debt were absent, was not possible, as the debt defaults and accumulating non-performing assets in the financial system made clear. When the Finance Minister announced plans to force credit out of the banking system at lower interest rates linked to the now-falling repo rate fixed by the Reserve Bank of India, observers and analysts were not impressed. That left only public expenditure, to enhance which increased taxation and larger deficit spending were needed. The Modi government’s neoliberal mindset and pro-business inclinations prevented both of these.

The aversion to public spending persists, as is evident from the kind of stimulus package that has been chosen. The package announced by the Finance Minister consists not of increased public expenditure, especially capital expenditure, that can inject much needed demand into the system and improve capacity utilisation and induce private investment. Rather, the perspective underlying the stimulus seems to be that cuts in corporate taxation would revive business sentiment and automatically lead to increased economic activity, including investment.

That expectation is bound to be belied. If instead of reducing revenues, expenditures had been increased to enhance wages paid under and widen the scope of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme, to improve farm incomes, and to add to infrastructure spending financed from the budget, the contribution to a revival of demand would have been immediate. As compared to that, allowing business to retain more of the profits it makes by offering it tax concessions would not impact demand significantly. With demand still depressed the tax cuts will not translate into increased investment as the government expects. The possibility that lower corporate taxes will attract investment in production for world, as opposed to domestic, markets, is also foreclosed by depressed conditions in world markets and the intensifying protectionist turn in many countries.

What is also striking is that, when designing the package, the government has decided to ignore the implications the move has for the size of the fiscal deficit and the magnitude of government borrowing. With the reserves of the Reserve Bank of India having been tapped to the maximum extent possible and disinvestment proceeds already estimated at a huge Rs 90,000 crore, there are no sources other than borrowing left to cover the loss of revenues resulting from the tax concessions that amounts to close to one per cent of GDP or a 25 per cent addition to the budgeted fiscal deficit. The government is expecting that since the increased deficit is going to pay off business and finance, it will not receive the adverse response it would have got if it was diverted to employment generation or raising farmer incomes. If the deficit was used to finance the latter, the stimulus package, though more in keeping with its objectives, would inevitably have been labelled ‘populist’ and been subject to attack, especially by market spokespersons and the mainstream media.

These characteristics of the so-called stimulus suggest that the real intention of the government was not one of stimulating demand, but of buying out business opinion that had turned mildly critical. This is no real solution to the problem at hand, but only a means of buying time, during which business criticism is silenced, and the problem, the government hopes will go away. It will not.

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‘The Criticism of Religion is the Premise of All Criticism’

Vinutha Mallya in conversation with Raosaheb Kasbe

[When Raosaheb Kasbe’s Zot was published in Marathi in 1978, RSS cadres made a public bonfire of it at the Janata Party convention in Pune that year. The book presented an incisive critique of M.S. Golwalkar’s Bunch of Thoughts, the main ideological treatise of the RSS. Kasbe traced the historical roots of cultural nationalism as outlined by Golwalkar, and exposed its authoritarianism. His study of the functioning of the RSS revealed its communal blueprint, its anti-modern views and anti-democratic objectives.

Kasbe challenged the RSS on its own turf—its interpretation of Hinduism. Through a rigorous critique of Golwalkar’s text and careful analysis of ancient texts, the scholar showed how the RSS version of Hinduism was unapologetically casteist and deeply patriarchal.

Four decades and seven editions after its first publication, Kasbe’s zestful polemic is finally available for the first time in English as Decoding the RSS: Its Tradition and Politics. The book has been translated by Deepak Borgave and edited by Vinutha Mallya, and published by Leftword Books. In this interview, the author speaks to Vinutha Mallya about the book.]

Vinutha Mallya [VM]: Why did you write Zot?

Raosaheb Kasbe [RK]: When I was a student of MA, I read four books that sparked something in my mind. The first was Karl Marx’s [and Friedrich Engels’] The Communist Manifesto. Then I read Babasaheb Ambedkar’s Annihilation of Caste and Caste in India. After that I read M.S. Golwalkar’s Bunch of Thoughts—it left me disturbed. I decided that one day I must write about this.

After I started teaching at Sangamner College, I began writing articles for newspapers and periodicals like Samaj Prabodhan Patrika, which was one of the best journals in Marathi. I wrote a lot for this publication.

I had already been teaching at Sangamner College for five years when Zot, my first book, was published in 1978.

VM: How was the book received?

RK: There was a store in the college where the books were kept on sale. The college management consisted of many RSS people. They protested to the principal [M.V. Koundinya] and demanded that the college store stop selling the book because it portrayed the RSS in a bad light. Koundinya said that if I had written a book it must be something good. He sent them back with the advice that they should write something nice about the RSS and get it published. Then the store could sell both books.

At the Janata Party convention in Pune later that year, the problems between the old Jan Sangh and the socialists began to surface. The socialists had kept this book on sale there, along with Baba Adhav’s Sanghachi Dhongbaji (Shenanigans of the RSS). People from the RSS demanded that the book be removed. There was an outbreak of fisticuffs between the two sides. The Jan Sangh group made a bonfire of the book and burnt it in public. I found out about it only the next day in Sangamner. I was on my way to give a talk somewhere and was at the state transport bus stand when I saw a newspaper with my name in the headline, ‘Raosaheb Kasbe’s Zot burnt’.

After it was burnt, Zot kept making headlines in the newspapers. It received a lot of support in Maharashtra, among the socialists, communists, the Dalit Panthers, and even from the Congress. The Congress raised the matter in the state assembly as well. In fact, Indira Gandhi and Jayaprakash Narayan both condemned the book burning and said that it would not kill the ideas that were in it. The book rode on a wave of popularity. It was priced at Rs 5. Pu La Deshpande bought a hundred copies and gifted them to his visitors. Sharad Pawar, who was Maharashtra’s chief minister, also bought a hundred copies to give away. Some freedom fighters in Dhule sold the book standing by the wayside.

Many well-wishers started telling me, out of concern, that the RSS was dangerous. I said that they wouldn’t harm me because they knew it would cause retaliation. But I received a lot of anonymous letters with threats (I didn’t have a phone connection in those days). So things kept going on like this.

VM: You never formally joined a political organisation. Why?

RK: Who will follow its discipline? It is good to remain independent. However, I’ve been friendly with all Left parties.

When my book Ambedkar ani Marx was released at Tilak Smarak
in Pune in 1985, it was a big event. S.M. Joshi, a socialist, launched it. One of the speakers was S.Y. Kolhatkar, who was a member of CPI-M’s central committee. There was Republican Party of India’s Dadasaheb Rupwate too. Ram Bapat, professor of Politics in Pune University, was also there. Former chairman of the state legislative council V.S. Page, the socialist leader Nanasaheb Gore, and the noted freedom fighter Bhausaheb Thorat, were in the audience. So I was reassured that many people were with me. But I was also aware that when a person achieves fame, it requires a balancing act. You don’t know when you’ll fall.

**VM:** What is the relevance of socialism and communism now? Do they have a future?

**RK:** Whatever is happening here is happening in Trump’s America too. It is the same thing in Brexit England. The situation will continue like this, and the violence will go on until socialism is established. Like Marx said, the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism. And religious criticism can end only when it becomes clear that the human being forms the core of the world. There will be no contradictions then—and the social and political systems that will work, and move forward, are those that keep the human being as their base.

Capitalism is going through a crisis just now. [Narendra] Modi’s rise is a strong indication that India’s capitalism is in crisis, and he is here to strengthen it. The contradictions emerging from capitalism will become stronger one day or the other, and it will lead to an explosion. It will lead to anarchy, and movements will begin from there—with the struggles between the poor and the capitalists. It is socialism that will win this battle. But we need to create a mass movement, no? Who is thinking of a mass movement? Everybody is going behind electoral politics.

There is a lot of illiteracy and lack of discernment just now. India’s people are not yet ready for democracy. That is why in his last speech in the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949, Ambedkar warned the country about the social and economic inequalities in our newly formed political democracy. It was a great lecture, which won great applause. But people haven’t read all this; they are now waking up to it because there is a need. Unless economic and social equality arrives in India, nothing will change here.

In the Left movement, people criticise Modi saying he is this and that. I say that Modi’s arrival was imminent—it was to happen. Because the Left failed to do what Marx said is the first thing to do, i.e. the premise of all criticism being religious criticism. We did not do a diagnosis of religion and culture. This is why there are so many illusions about religion in people’s minds. We haven’t tried to dispel these illusions about religion.

The first reason to bring in socialism is caste. But we did not initiate the anti-caste movement.

The Naxalites are talking about it now because there are many from the Scheduled Castes in that movement. They say ‘Jai Bhim, Comrade’ today. But it should have been said 50 years ago. And, because of not paying attention to the caste system, see what happened to the communists in Bengal. The Communist Party there was seen as a bhadralok party.

**VM:** Isn’t it said that there is no casteism in Bengal?

**RK:** This is the thing about communists—they didn’t believe that casteism existed in India. They believed that there was no caste in India, only class. That’s why they called Ambedkar a ‘bourgeois liberal’. Ambedkar raised the question in Annihilation of Caste in 1936. He asked the communists how they were going to bring the revolution, because for revolution you need class. How will you create class? Even between the poor upper caste person and poor lower caste person there is caste conflict. Had anyone thought about it?

**VM:** There are many misconceptions about Ambedkar and his philosophy.

**RK:** Ambedkar was asked by a journalist once, ‘What is your political character?’ Ambedkar responded, ‘Is this something you should ask? I am a socialist’. The journalist persisted and said there were many socialists in the Congress too, so why didn’t he join the Congress. Ambedkar replied that the socialists in the Congress were suffocating and he wanted to breathe freely in the open.

Many didn’t understand Ambedkar, including the Left parties. Madhu Limaye once asked me, ‘Was Ambedkar a socialist?’ I felt, what were people saying? They don’t at all read Ambedkar. At least read him first, I said. Later, in his *Prime Movers: Role of the Individual in History*, Limaye wrote 110 pages on Ambedkar.

They used to think Ambedkar was a sectarian leader and that Gandhi was the tallest leader. But Ambedkar established the Independent Labour Party. How could he have been a sectarian leader? So one set was blinded by Gandhi and the other by Marx. But is every single word
of Marx the final truth? Something would have changed, no? Marxism is a dynamic thought; it must keep changing. Ask any question, and Marxists pull out a book, and say, ‘No, no, Marx has said this, Engels has said that, Lenin has said this, Stalin has said that.’ They should state what they want to do.

**VM:** If you had written Zot now, do you think the responses would be very different and the risk too?

**RK:** Things are happening exactly like I’ve written in the book, isn’t it? LeftWord should have published this [the English translation] by 1980. But they thought it was a book about religion... Oh, but LeftWord didn’t exist in 1980! [Laughs]

(Raosaheb Kasbe is an eminent political scientist and scholar on Ambedkar and Dalit movements.)

## Veteran Socialist Chandra Bhal Tripathi is No More

**Qurban Ali**

Chandra Bhal Tripathi passed away at his New Delhi home on 20 September 2019. He was 88. Born on 29 October 1930 at Basti in eastern Uttar Pradesh, he was a social anthropologist, a social activist and a former prominent student and socialist youth leader. He belongs to a family of freedom fighters, litterateurs and scholars of ancient Indian history and archaeology. He took his Master’s degree in Anthropology from Lucknow University.

He joined the All India Students’ Congress at Basti in 1945 and took an active part in Congress activities for two years before Independence. At the age of 16 he attended the Meerut session of the Indian National Congress in 1946. At Allahabad he was actively involved with the Congress Socialist Party for two years in 1946–48 and later with the Socialist Party and the Praja Socialist Party (PSP).

He was one of the founders of the All India Samajwadi Yuwak Sabha, the youth wing of PSP at Kashi Vidyapeeth, in 1953. As President of Lucknow University Union in 1952–53 he earned a name for giving it a new orientation by attending to the needs of poor students and encouraging the cultural talent among the students. In 1953 he led a powerful student movement throughout UP for protecting the autonomy of student unions. Governor (Chancellor) K.M. Munshi and Health Minister C.B. Gupta were spearheading the move to finish the autonomy of the State Universities and the autonomy of the student unions. In the student agitation about 14,000 students were imprisoned and three persons were killed in police firing.

Tripathi remained underground and when the agitation threatened to take a violent turn he suspended the agitation as Chairman of the UP State Students’ Action Committee. His adherence to non-violent peaceful means won him admiration from all quarters and ultimately the UP Government led by Pandit Govind Ballabh Pant had to concede the legitimate demands of the students.

Dr. Rammanohar Lohia wrote an article captioned “The Lucknow Revolt” in the National Herald in 1953 wherein he analysed the mighty student agitation and, inter alia, praised the leadership of Tripathi.

In 1954 he led an Indian student delegation to the Indo-Burmese Students’ Cultural Festival at Rangoon. He also attended the Anti-Colonial Bureau meeting of the Asian Socialist Conference at Imphakhon in Eastern Shan States of Burma.

In 1956 he went to Bandung in Indonesia as a National Union of Students (NUS) delegate to the Afro-Asian Student Conference with a briefing by the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. In September 1956 he was a part of the three-member NUS delegation to the Sixth International Student Conference at Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.

He taught Anthropology at Lucknow University in 1958 and worked in the Constitutional organisation of Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes for thirty-one years.

A great champion of communal harmony, he was one of the organisers of a national conference in Delhi in March 1990 to consider the grave communal situation in the country after barbaric communal riots in Bhagalpur (Bihar). It led to establishment of a national level body known as as Society for Communal Harmony. It had Dr. B.N. Pande, Shri P.N. Haksar, Shri Sadiq Ali and Shri Rabi Ray as its Presidents. C.B. Tripathi worked as its General Secretary of the Society during 1997–2015 and was one of its Vice-Presidents till his death.
In 2006, he coordinated a historic International Conference on ‘The Heritage of Nalanda’ at Nalanda (Bihar). In 2007, he was the Academic Coordinator of the ‘International Conference on Buddhism and the 21st Century’ held at Bodhgaya. He was a hockey player, winner of prizes in several inter-university debates, broadcaster since 1950, performer in radio plays and stage plays, writer and translator. Besides contributing to anthropological journals and popular magazines both in Hindi and English, he wrote and edited many books.

(Qurban Ali is a senior broadcast journalist.)

‘Deshgaan’
Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena

(We give below the English translation of Hindi poet Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena’s celebrated poem, Deshgaan (An Ode to the Nation), to commemorate his 36th death anniversary. Deshgaan was part of a poetry collection written between 1976 (when the Emergency was still on) and 1981. The political and moral concerns voiced in this four-decade-old poem are as relevant today if not more.)

An Ode to The Nation

What a country this is, what a country!
Of courts and clients there is no sign
Yet cases are made out all the time

Every heart is a stony mountain
every eye a river of brine
The human is mere topography
carved into the map of choice
What a country this is, what a country!

All are masters at conjuring
crops in the palm of the hand
But the palm itself is a pauper
wandering door to door
What a country this is, what a country!

Tree or human
It makes no difference
Raze them all to the ground
Yet the jungle is forever
What a country this is, what a country!

More the questions
less the answers
Even in a conscious state
the entire nation is unconscious
What a country this is, what a country!

Will people remain on the hook under the impression
the fault is not theirs, the hook is to blame
What a country this is, what a country!
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(Multistate Consumer Co-operative Society)

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“We are, what we repeatedly do, Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

Aristotle

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