“Don’t Betray the Constitution. Withdraw CAB 2019.”

More than 600 artists, writers, academicians, ex-judges and former bureaucrats have released an open letter asking the Narendra Modi-led government to withdraw the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, terming it "discriminatory, divisive", and violative of the secular principles enshrined in the Constitution. Here is the full text of the letter.

Since independence, Indian citizenship has been firmly rooted in the Constitution. In its citizenship provisions, the Constitution insists on the fundamentals of equality, regardless of gender, caste, religion, class, community or language.

The Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2019 tears to shreds the inclusive, composite vision of India that guided our freedom struggle. In the amendments it introduces to the Citizenship Act of 1955, the new Bill violates every single one of these fundamentals of equality, regardless of gender, caste, religion, class, community or language.

The Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2019 tears to shreds the inclusive, composite vision of India that guided our freedom struggle. In the amendments it introduces to the Citizenship Act of 1955, the new Bill violates every single one of these fundamentals of the Constitution. In fact, it is not a mere change in statute. It is a Bill that will alter, fundamentally, the character of the Indian republic.

For the first time since the founding of our free and secular republic, the Bill makes religion the key to citizenship. The Bill seeks to amend the Citizenship Act 1955 so that non-Muslims from Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan can be offered an expedited path to citizenship. For the first time there is a statutory attempt to offer privileges to certain faiths. For the first time, there is an attempt, by statute, to exclude Muslims from the possibility of amnesty and citizenship—for no reason other than their religion. In fact, nowhere, under the successive reigns this country has had through millennia, is it possible to find the articulation of an official position that has denied migrants or refugees a place on the basis of religion.

The CAB has to be viewed along with the proposed nation-wide implementation of the National Register of Citizens. Already the NRC exercise in Assam has shown us the terrible human costs of dividing people and linking citizenship to papers and detention centres and tribunals, especially among those who already lead a precarious existence. Death, families torn apart; detention camps and foreigners’ tribunals; fear, the confusion of statelessness—this is what the common people, especially minorities, women, children and the poor have had to suffer and continue to suffer. The Citizenship Bill, as well as a nation-wide NRC, will unleash widespread division and
suffering among people across the country—rather than address the critical needs of the people, from food security and employment to the annihilation of discrimination based on caste, community and gender, to the freedom to speak, worship, and live as our diverse people choose. The Bill states that non-Muslims from three Muslim-majority countries will be granted citizenship if they have faced religious persecution in their countries; or if they migrated to India fearing such persecution. Why leave out refugees such as Rohingyas from Myanmar or Tamils from Sri Lanka or Ahmadiyyas from Pakistan? Why focus on only three countries as if these constitute the only possible sources of asylum-seekers? The Bill shows us, sharply, that India needs a refugee policy in line with international law, not a law dictated by an ideology that makes use of religion for political gains.

Indian citizenship flows from the Constitution. The Citizenship Amendment Bill’s blatant exclusion of a community is discriminatory and divisive. It violates the secular principles enshrined in the Constitution—including Articles 14, 15, 16 and 21 which guarantee the right to equality; equality before the law; and non-discriminatory treatment by the Indian state. The Bill threatens the federal framework provided by the Constitution. It has ignored the need for debate in Parliament as well as open and widespread public debate in a constitutional democracy.

All of us from the cultural and academic communities condemn this Bill as divisive, discriminatory and unconstitutional. It will, along with a nationwide NRC, bring untold suffering to people across the country. It will damage, fundamentally and irreparably, the nature of the Indian republic. This is why we demand that the government withdraw the Bill. This is why we demand that the government not betray the Constitution. We call on all people of conscience to insist that the Constitutional commitment to an equal and secular citizenry be honoured.

Ayodhya Letter

On 6 December 2019, 46 former civil servants, most having held positions of great prominence during their careers, wrote an open letter addressed to the people of India expressing deep concern on where the nation stands today, 27 years since the Babri Masjid was demolished by Hindu activists on December 6, 1992. The signatories to the letter are members of the Constitutional Conduct Group, an organisation that advocates the constitutional spirit of pluralism and non-violence. The letter is reproduced in full below.

We, a collective of retired civil servants deeply committed to the values and guarantees of the Indian constitution, share with our fellow Indians our extreme grief and deep concern about where India stands today, 27 years after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on 6 December, 1992.

1. We recall that 6 December is also the anniversary of the day on which the man who led the creation of one of the finest constitutions in the world, Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, left this world. The battle for the land on which the medieval mosque in Ayodhya stood was at its core a battle for the defence of the highest values of this constitution.

2. This was not simply a contest between a medieval mosque, now razed, with a grand temple, still imagined. It was a dispute about what kind of country this is and will be in the future, to who does it belong, and on what terms must people of different identities and beliefs live together in this vast and teeming land.

3. We feel intense anguish because 27 years after the mosque was demolished, those who were responsible for this crime which tore India apart and led to the highest levels of communal bloodletting after the Partition riots, have still not been punished, even though the Supreme Court directed that this criminal case be heard on a day-to-day basis. Instead, many of those who led and participated in this assault not just on a mosque but on India’s constitutional morality, have held some of the highest offices in this country.

4. We worry also that the recent judgment of the Supreme Court of India in effect rewards this grave crime. It also creates a false and illusory notion that a verdict favouring those who claim to speak for the majority community can result in peace and reconciliation and everyone should move on, injustice notwithstanding.
5. In this deeply troubling moment in the journey of this country which we love, we contest resolutely the message that it seems to convey to India’s religious minorities that their claim to this country and its democratic institutions is subordinate to anyone. We would like to recall the famous dictum “Freedom is the outcome of the tranquillity of peace and peace emanates from justice.” Freedom and justice are the soul of our constitution.

6. This is a time when every Indian should recall Mahatma Gandhi’s last fast, two weeks before he was assassinated. One of his three demands was that the mosques and dargahs in Delhi in which Hindu idols had been inserted should be returned respectfully to the Muslims. Hinduism, he said, would be emptied for him of meaning if a single place of worship of another faith was desecrated in the name of the Hindu faith.

7. We who sign this letter to the Indian people include a Jain, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, atheists and agnostics. We are together convinced that true religion never teaches violence and hate of another. Therefore, on 6 December, we first express our collective agony and atonement that a place of worship was pulled down with such hate. We also pledge that we will not allow our great Constitution to be emptied of its soul.

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**Press Release**

**AIKSCC’s Call for Grameen Bharat Bandh on 8 January 2020**

The All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC), a platform of more than 250 farmer organisations, at its national convention in Delhi on 29–30 November 2019 gave a call for a Grameen Bharat Bandh on January 8, 2020, to protest the anti-farmer policies being adopted by governments.

**Demands of Farmers**

We call upon the Parliament of India to immediately hold a Special Session to pass and enact the two Kisan Mukti Bills that are of, by and for the farmers of India namely,

1. The Farmers’ Freedom from Indebtedness Bill, 2018; and

2. The Farmers’ Right to Guaranteed Remunerative Minimum Support Prices for Agricultural Commodities Bill, 2018 and to hold a special discussion on the grave and unprecedented agrarian crisis in our country and its related aspects.

and demand that the Government of India must immediately:

3. Increase the number of guaranteed employment days under MGNREGS to 200 days per family, ensure wage payment at par with legal minimum wages for unskilled farm labour, and ensure that all pending payments are made immediately;

4. Reduce the cost of inputs including seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, water, diesel and electricity for farmers;

5. Provide universal comprehensive social security for all farm households including pension of at least Rs. 5,000 per month per farmer above the age of 60 and health coverage;

6. Universalise the Public Distribution System with providing cereals, pulses, oils and sugar and stop its linkage with Aadhaar and the biometric system;

7. Address the menace of stray animals by removing all legal and vigilante-imposed restrictions on cattle trade;

8. Stop land acquisition without informed consent, Social and Environment Impact Assessment, acquisition of agricultural land for commercial land development and Stop bypassing or diluting The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 at all levels including by state governments;

9. Make payment of cane dues mandatory within 15 days of opening of the mill, maintain recovery rate at 9.5%; and introduce SAP for cane throughout the country;

10. Withdraw pesticides that have been banned elsewhere and not approve GM seeds without a comprehensive needs, alternatives and impact assessment;

11. Disallow Foreign Investment in seeds, agriculture and foods processing.

12. Stop uprooting Adivasi farmers
in the name of big dams, mining, SEZs, afforestation, ensure strict implementation of Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, and prevent dilution of Forests Rights Act 2006 and ensure its stringent implementation all over the country.

13. Provide land and livelihood rights to the landless, including on agricultural land and in water for fishing, mining of minor minerals etc.;

14. Implement a comprehensive crop insurance scheme to cover all types of risks for all crops and for all farmers, with farm as the unit of damage assessment; ensure benefit to farmers and not corporate insurance companies;

15. Build assured protective irrigation through sustainable means for farmers, especially in the rainfed areas;

16. Ensure remunerative guaranteed prices for milk;

17. Waive off all outstanding agricultural loans of farmers from suicide affected families and provide special opportunities to women and children of such families;

18. Protect farmers from corporate plunder in the name of contract farming;

19. Invest in farmers’ collectives to create Farmer Producer Organisations and Peasant Cooperatives instead of corporatisation of agriculture and takeover by MNCs; and

20. Promote an agro-ecology paradigm that is based on suitable cropping patterns and local seed diversity revival, so as to build economic viability, ecologically sustainable, autonomous and climate resilient agriculture.

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**CAB and NRC: Why Both are Terrible Ideas**

Ujjwal K. Chowdhury

The Citizenship Amendment Bill has passed in the Lok Sabha, after a marathon discussion on 9 December. This proposal was a part of the manifesto of BJP in the last 2019 general elections.

What does it basically entail?

The Bill provides for persecuted minorities professing to be Hindu, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain and Parsi, from three neighbouring nations, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh and who have been staying in India since December 31, 2014 or earlier to apply for Indian citizenship. India, under this law, shall accord them the status of citizens. The Bill clearly excludes Muslims, noting that they are the majority in these three nations.

Several questions have been raised on these proposals, and rightly so.

If this law is about trying to be large-hearted and compassionate, then why leave out persecuted Muslims in India’s neighbouring nations, such as the Rohingya of Burma or the Ahmadiya and Baluch people in Pakistan? Why should India leave out Sri Lanka’s persecuted Tamil population? Or the discriminated-against madheshis of Nepal? What about the Gorkhas, who have shifted from Nepal to India, or have worked in India for long?

Next, why is religion the basis of determining whether someone is persecuted, when there can be a variety of other sources of ill-treatment and oppression? There can be persecution on the basis of belief; for instance, the writer Taslima Nasreen had to leave Bangladesh; or due to war as seen in Syria, due to economic hardship, as were many marginalised Nepalese and Bangladeshis who once migrated to India, and due to political belief, as happened with the Dalai Lama and his followers. Even extremes of climate can, and does, trigger migration.

Article 14 of India’s Constitution states that the state “shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India” and Article 15 prohibits “discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth”. Article 14 says “persons” rather than “citizens”, which is significant for it means that Indian nationals and foreigners in India have alike rights to equal treatment. Therefore, the provision of citizenship on grounds of religion, as in the new Bill, violates the spirit of the Indian Constitution.

The Supreme Court has held in a case dealing with applicability of Article 14, *Chiranjit Lal Chowdhury vs Union of India*, that the law would not fall afoul of the equality principle when it deals in a similar way with “all of a certain class”, but such a classification should never be arbitrary.

Arguably, CAB has made an arbitrary classification based on religion, because some Muslim sects also face serious threat and maltreatment in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, arising from their faith. Similarly, Tamils in Sri Lanka have been a persecuted minority—but India’s Bill excludes the country.

CAB is not the first time that India has extended protection to
minorities from neighbouring countries. In 2015, the Centre issued two notifications in the Official Gazette under the Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920 and the Foreigners Act of 1946. Through these, India allowed Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and Christian immigrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh to enter India even without valid documents.

Importantly, these notifications permitted them to enter and stay in India without valid documents, though it did not grant citizenship.

A significant official document dealing with refugees/illegal immigrants was the Assam Accord of 1985. According to the central government, the National Register of Citizens (NRC) gives effect to that Accord, which the Centre, the Assam government, the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and All-Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) had signed.

In the Accord, it was settled that immigrants who came to Assam before 1 January 1966 would be given citizenship. Those who entered Assam between 1 January 1966 and 24 March 1971 would be “detected in accordance with the provisions of the Foreigners Act, 1946 and the Foreigners (Tribunals) Order 1964.” Thereafter, they would remain disenfranchised for ten years. Lastly, those who came to Assam after 24 March 1971, would be detected and expelled.

The connection between NRC in Assam and CAB

The CAB has to be viewed along with the NRC, which, in Assam, has already excluded 19 lakh people, of whom 13 lakh are Hindu. This is now being touted by Union Home Minister Amit Shah as a template to be applied across India. To be considered citizens, NRC calls for documents as old as seven decades, and proof that a person, and their three generations, have been living in India.

The BJP was initially very enthusiastic about the NRC, but now it is in a Catch 22 situation, since a large number of Hindus, mainly Bengali-speaking people, have been excluded in Assam. Hence, CAB is being brought in to allow the left out non-Muslims to apply for citizenship.

But the 13 lakh excluded Hindus have already claimed that they are Indians, and they have submitted documents to prove their claims, which were rejected. How would these people now move to a different claim, that they are not Indian but Bangladeshi—and persecuted ones at that—and seek Indian citizenship?

How legally tenable is this sort of somersault?

If we deny citizenship even to those who were born in India and own valid Aadhaar cards, PAN cards, voter cards and in many cases passports of India—as happened to many in Assam—millions of Indian-origin citizens or migrants in the United States, United Kingdom, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and other nations may be denied citizenship based on religious considerations despite these documents.

These two laws together, NRC and CAB, if applied nationally, will serve to make India an international pariah.

More questions

Why has an arbitrary cut-off date of 31 December 2014 been picked? Why exclude any persecuted person who has shifted to India from a neighbouring nation anytime in the recent past? Why certain states of Northeast are being left out of its purview? The fear of people coming from elsewhere and swamping Northeastern states is looking real in Tripura; where the indigenous Tripuri tribal population is 12 lakh, while the Bengali migrant population is at 28 lakh.

The Intelligence Bureau has noted that only 31,313 non-Muslims have so far applied for long-term visas under the Gazette notification of 2015, which makes this brouhaha about persecuted non-Muslim immigrants a minor issue in reality. The IB also notes that in order to apply for Indian citizenship, one has to provide the reasons for persecution at the point of entry. However, the deadline of 31 December 2014 under the CAB is long gone: those who had to enter India on that date have already done so. Then why push for such a major change in the law which violates the Constitution?

Further, it is not clear that what happens to all those people (now predominantly Muslims) who are kept out of citizenship or identified as foreigners, in Assam or elsewhere. Are they to be pushed into the three neighbouring nations? No country will accept this and Prime Minister Narendra Modi has assured Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina that India would not resort to such tactics. What then—are people to be segregated from the rest of society and kept in detention camps? Already, many such camps are under construction in Assam and some are in squalid conditions.

India is creating concentration camps through these detention camps. Detained persons will be
pulled out of their economically-productive engagement with society and dumped in prison-like camps that are being constructed, and will be run, by the Indian state. Each detenu will be fed and monitored by the Indian state, at tax-payers’ expense. The state and the people of India will pour money into these camps, simply waiting for the detainees to die. With their departure from the labour market, costs will go up and the economy will suffer.

Does any of this sound like a 21st-century prescription to a vexed demographic issue?

Deliberate division

Like the Ayodhya issue, that lasted a quarter-century, NRC–CAB will divide Hindus and Muslims. They will keep the nation engaged in endless debate and action; in which each individual will have to prove his citizenship. This can lead to Hindu polarisation, which brings in electoral benefits to the ruling BJP. This is the foremost reason why NRC and CAB are being upheld.

Second, the debate on religion-based citizenship helps take attention away from the flailing economy, rising joblessness, growing farm distress, falling value of rupee, and deliberate dismantling of the fundamentals of the Indian economy, which is now growing at the slowest pace in South and Southeast Asia.

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Modi’s India & Hitler’s Third Reich

In the 1930s after a sweep to power, the Reichstag passed a slew of laws that discriminated against its Jews, Romans, Blacks and dissenters. Called the Law for Protection of German Blood & German Honour, the world watched as ‘othering’ became the German way.

Back home, in the India of 2019, are there similarities? M.S. Golwalkar (Bunch of Thoughts and We, or Our Nationhood Defined) and B.S. Moonje’s diary were both equally awestruck by not just Hitler’s Germany’s discriminatory laws and policies (vis a vis Jews) but committed also to fascistic Italy’s violent, militaristic mode to achieve its goals.

Hitler

Moved by the understanding that purity of German blood is the essential condition for the continued existence of the German people, and inspired by the inflexible determination to ensure the existence of the German nation for all time, the Reichstag unanimously adopted a law that was discriminatory. India by excluding Muslim migrants from equal rights to claim citizenship by naturalisation is going down this same, dangerous path.

It was in 1920 that the Nazi Party’s 25-point programme spelt out their objective of segregating Jews from ‘Aryan’ society and ending their economic, social and political rights. After storming to power in 1933, the Nazis started moving quickly towards this objective by bringing in laws and regulations to isolate Jews. It is estimated that nearly 2,000 such statutory changes were ordered at all levels, from national to provincial to local. Some of these anti-Semitic laws are listed below.

Before that, a timeline of events. Is India going the same way ?

What Happened in Nazi Germany

1933: New laws to remove Jews from government service; forbidding Jews to become lawyers; limiting number of Jewish students in public schools; revoke citizenship of naturalised Jews and “undesirables”; banning them from editorial posts; banning 'Kosher' (ritual slaughter of animals).

1934: Jewish students forbidden from appearing in exams for medicine, dentistry, pharmacy and law; Jews excluded from military service.

1935: Infamous Nuremberg Laws: exclude German Jews from Reich citizenship and lose voting rights; prohibit them from marrying or having sexual relations with persons of “German or German-related blood.”

1935–36: Jews banned from parks, restaurants and swimming pools; not allowed use of electrical/optical equipment, bicycles, typewriters or records; Jewish students removed from German schools and universities; Jewish teachers banned from government schools.

1938: Special identity cards issued to Jews; excluded from cinema, theatre, concerts, exhibitions, beaches and holiday resorts; forced to add the names ‘Sarah’ or ‘Israel’ to their own; Jews’ passports stamped with a red letter ‘J’.

November 9-10 night (called Kristallnacht or Night of Broken Glass): Countrywide violence against Jews, synagogues burnt and shops destroyed.

1939: Many Jews evicted
from their homes; Jews' radios confiscated; Jews told to hand over all gold, silver, diamonds and other valuables to the state without compensation; curfew for Jews.

1940: Jews' telephones confiscated; war-time ration cards for clothes stopped.

1941: Jews forbidden use of public telephones; forbidden to keep pets; forbidden to leave the country.

1942: Fur coats and woollen items of all Jews confiscated; not allowed to receive eggs or milk.

This is only the story of some of the legal changes. In life, Jews along with Roma people, sexual minorities, trade unionists, communists and social democrats, blacks—all ‘Non-Aryans’—were systematically isolated, tortured and killed in the most horrendous ways. Often, these laws were used as pretext for violence. The Nazi storm troopers implemented these policies, which were fully sanctioned by the fascist rulers and its Fuhrer, Adolf Hitler.

What did the Nuremberg Laws say?

The Nuremberg Laws were exclusivist, anti-Semitic and racist. Enacted by the German Parliament on September 15, 1935, the two laws were the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honour, which forbade marriages and extramarital intercourse between Jews and Germans; and the employment of German females under 45 in Jewish households, and the Reich Citizenship Law, which declared that only those of German or related blood were eligible to be Reich citizens. The remainder were classed as state subjects without any citizenship rights. The laws were expanded on November 26, 1935 to include Romani people and Blacks. This supplementary decree defined Romanis as "enemies of the race-based state", the same category as Jews.

Out of sly foreign policy concerns, prosecutions under the two laws did not commence until after the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. Books considered un-German, including those by Jewish authors, were destroyed in a nationwide bookburning. Jewish citizens were harassed and subjected to violent attacks. They were actively suppressed, stripped of their citizenship and civil rights, and eventually completely removed from German society.

The Nuremberg Laws had a crippling economic and social impact on the Jewish community. Persons convicted of violating the marriage laws were imprisoned and (subsequent to March 8, 1938) upon completing their sentences were re-arrested by the Gestapo and sent to Germany’s notorious concentration camps. Non-Jews gradually stopped socialising with Jews or shopping in Jewish-owned stores, many of which closed due to lack of customers. As Jews were no longer permitted to work in the civil service or government-regulated professions such as medicine and education, many middle class business owners and professionals were forced to take menial employment.

Similarities with CAB–NRC

Will CAB and Nationwide NRC set the base for systemic discrimination?

The ideological underpinnings of the present regime are there for all to see. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has been clear in the past of its support to discriminatory citizenship. It has also lauded what the Nazis did. RSS supremo and chief ideologue M.S. Golwalkar has this to say in his famed book We, or Our Nationhood Defined:

“Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic Races—the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifest here. Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindusthan to learn and profit by.” (p. 87–88)

Golwalkar goes on to define the Hindu Nation and asserts that “All those not belonging to the national i.e. Hindu Race, Religion, Culture and Language, naturally fall out of the pale of real ‘National’ life.” (p.99) He advises that such people would be considered foreigners if they “maintain their racial, religious and cultural differences.” (p. 101)

The RSS ideology then puts it out in crystal clear terms:

“The foreign races in Hindusthan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture, i.e., of the Hindu nation and must lose their separate existence to merge in the Hindu race, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu Nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment—not even citizen’s rights.” (p. 105)

Besides discrimination, violence, fear and intimidation have been the RSS way. As India heads into the new year, violence and conflict are likely to follow this brazen abrogation of rights.

Courtesy: Sabrangindia
Neo-Liberal Regime’s Perversity

Prabhat Patnaik

When income growth slows down in an economy, so does the growth of tax revenue within the given tax regime. Since the government has certain expenditure obligations, to meet these obligations it has to either impose additional taxes or expand its fiscal deficit.

Enlarging the fiscal deficit in such a situation, which was the typical response everywhere under post-war capitalist dirigisme, has the additional effect of ensuring that one component of demand, namely, that arising from government spending, remains unchanged, even as the economy is otherwise slowing down, thereby checking this slowdown itself. This was referred to in economics textbooks as the economy’s having an “automatic stabiliser”: government expenditure under these circumstances acted as an “automatic stabiliser” and served to restrict the downturn.

All this was under the earlier dirigiste regime. Under neololiberalism, however, matters are completely different. When tax revenue collections under the neo-liberal regime slow down because of the slowing down of the economy, the government can neither impose additional taxes on the capitalists (imposing additional taxes on the working people to finance its expenditure does not add to aggregate demand and hence does nothing to arrest the downturn), nor expand the fiscal deficit. This is because both these measures will be opposed by international finance capital which would start a capital flight within the liberalised regime, causing a hurtful financial crisis.

In fact, since virtually all countries with the exception of the United States have adopted laws restricting their fiscal deficits to 3% of gross domestic product or GDP (in India the Centre and the states have each a limit of 3%), with the slowing down of the economy there has to be a slowing down not only in the growth of the tax revenue but also in the fiscal deficit and hence in the total public expenditure.

Within a neo-liberal regime, therefore, public expenditure does not act as an automatic stabiliser, as it had done earlier. When the growth of the economy slows down, so does the growth of public expenditure, thereby further contributing to the slowing down of the economy. This is the crux of the perversity of the fiscal regime under neo-liberalism, namely, that it removes what otherwise would have been a bulwark against the slowing down of the economy, by enjoining so-called “fiscal responsibility” upon all governments; it thereby compounds the process of slowing down.

Against this basic background, governments, of course, resort to all manner of subterfuges to wriggle out of the predicament in which they find themselves. We are currently witnessing in India two such efforts. One is the Central government squeezing the states, passing on the burden of its own fiscal crisis on to the shoulders of the state governments, even violating its constitutional obligations; the other is its mad rush to privatisate the public sector, in an utterly reprehensible short-sighted bid to get some money within the constraints of a neo-liberal economy. Let us look at each of these seriatim.

One way in which the Centre is trying to squeeze the states, by off-loading a part of defence expenditure on to their shoulders. Defence is exclusively in the “Union List” of the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution, which means that the Centre has exclusive responsibility to spend on defence and to decide on all defence matters. But the Central government has asked the 15th Finance Commission to deduct defence expenditure from the divisible pool, which means that the state governments are being asked to bear a part of this burden, even though the constitutional arrangement with regard to the Seventh Schedule remains unchanged and all decisions regarding defence will continue to be taken by the Centre alone.

But this at least remains a threat until now. In another area, however, the Centre has already squeezed the states, and this relates to GST compensation. When the Goods and Services Tax (GST) was introduced, in order to persuade the states to agree to it, the Centre had promised to compensate them for a period of five years for any revenue loss that they may face. The revenue loss was to be calculated by taking a base revenue level and applying to it a 14% annual rate of growth in nominal terms; whatever was the shortfall from the revenue estimated in this manner was to be compensated by the Central government. This was to happen every two months and a Compensation Cess Fund was set up for this purpose into which the
revenue from certain taxes was supposed to go.

But the Central government has stopped making any such compensation payments August onward. Its argument is that there is not enough money in the Compensation Cess Fund. The states, however, point out, very correctly, that the promise to pay compensation to the state governments was not linked in any way to the size of the Compensation Fund; it was a stipulation contained in the Constitution Amendment Bill. If there is no money in the Compensation Fund, or not enough, then the Centre should pay compensation out of its own share of the GST revenue.

It is well known that there has been a substantial revenue shortfall on account of the GST, with the monthly revenue falling below Rs 1 lakh crore for most months of the current financial year. This shortfall is both because of the flawed nature of GST itself and also because of the slowing down of the economy. The fact that GST collections for November, which falls within the festive season, were marginally in excess of Rs 1 lakh crore is because GST revenue is closely related to the magnitude of business turnover, and hence to the level of activity in the economy.

Faced with this revenue loss, the Central government is squeezing the states, going back on its own promise of making good the revenue shortfall for the states, and enlarged the fiscal deficit for this purpose (the fact that it never had the gumption to tax capitalists is amply shown by its recent measure to actually give them tax concessions). An enlargement of the fiscal deficit would have boosted aggregate demand and hence employment and output, without having any inflationary consequences.

But such an enlargement of the fiscal deficit would be unacceptable to international finance capital; and the Narendra Modi government, with all its bluster against hapless minorities within the country, and with all its pretensions to machismo, has no stomach for standing up to finance capital. It would rather squeeze state governments, it would rather see a cut in welfare expenditure directed towards the poor, than take measures frowned upon by international finance capital. It is a mere conduit through which the dictates of finance capital are made to impinge on the economy, and the perversity of the neo-liberal regime makes itself felt.

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The major private operators in the telecom sector, along with the state-run ones, are currently reeling under a three-year price war with Reliance Jio. This has hit their profitability hard, with Jio buying its entry into the market with very low call and data charges, what others have termed as predatory pricing. This has been compounded—in the case of the private operators—by their not honouring the obligations of paying their license fees as a percentage of their revenue and the recent Supreme Court order.

The Supreme Court has ordered private operators to pay Rs 92,000 crore as license fees, creating a crisis for these companies. This is apart from spectrum usage charges, another Rs 41,000 crore, compounding their crisis.

The business papers are awash with tears for the plight of the poor telecom private players, who are now being forced to shell out these huge amounts when they are already in deep financial trouble. What they forget to mention is that the amounts over which these disputes arose were initially much smaller. The original amount was only Rs 23,000 crore, the rest of the Rs 92,000 crore being penalties and interest charges on the unpaid amount.

Even this Rs 23,000 crore accumulated over decades by not paying a small fraction of their revenue as license fees every year. This was trying to use clever—now shown to be too clever by half—accounting tricks with which the
Department of Telecom (DoT) did not agree, leading to the dispute. Instead of resolving this issue quickly, the private players first went to the Telecom Dispute Settlement Tribunal, then to high courts, and finally to the Supreme Court. All of this over what constitutes the Adjusted Gross Revenue or AGR, of which they had to shell out a small percentage.

From an accounting standpoint, the telecom players did something worse. They made no provisions in their balance sheets for these disputed amounts, meaning that they deliberately included the unpaid (or disputed amounts) in their profits, so that when they float shares in the stock market, they would look much more attractive. So a big part of their dazzling success story was built on deliberately withholding legitimate dues on account of license fees, and hiding these obligations from their shareholders.

Of course, as it always happens, if private players get in trouble, it is always the people who have to bail them out. The money is often siphoned off by private players through over-invoicing for capital goods, and the difference is transferred abroad into tax havens; services taken from the “founders” of other companies; and a variety of “smart” accounting practices. If the proverbial shit then hits the fan, the only losers are the banks and the general shareholders. And of course the subscribers of Airtel and Idea-Vodafone, the two major private players whose services are of course the subscribers of Airtel and Idea-Vodafone, the two major private players through over-invoicing for capital goods, and the difference is transferred abroad into tax havens; services taken from the “founders” of other companies; and a variety of “smart” accounting practices. If the proverbial shit then hits the fan, the only losers are the banks and the general shareholders. And of course the subscribers of Airtel and Idea-Vodafone, the two major private players whose services are of course the subscribers of Airtel and Idea-Vodafone, the two major private players whose services are of course the subscribers of Airtel and Idea-Vodafone, the two major private players.

Not that there are no winners from this telecom crisis, even if it is largely self-inflicted. Reliance Jio entered the telecom business late, and had the advantage of leapfrogging technology. It went straight to data as the primary telecom business of the future, which would subsume voice as well as messaging, which are clearly legacy businesses. Today we can carry voice and messages as mobile data, while the reverse—using voice services for mobile data—is much less efficient.

Second, Jio has huge profits and accumulated capital from its petroleum and gas business. It is this capital it has used to fund its initial foray into telecommunications. As a consequence, the share of accumulated dues that Jio has to pay due to the Supreme Court verdict is a measly Rs 13 crore, as against Airtel’s and Vodafone’s about Rs 22,000 crore and Rs 20,000 crore respectively. And it has very little loans, as the infrastructure has been largely created by or transferred to other Reliance companies.

The telecom mess has been a long time in the making. The revenue-sharing scheme, the cause of the current mess, started during former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s tenure. In 1998, after losing its majority, his caretaker government introduced this revenue share scheme. This allowed private players to pay a share of their revenue as license fee, instead of the lump-sum license fees that they had agreed to pay during the auction of licenses in 1994.

The Delhi Science Forum—through this author—had challenged this decision of the government in the Delhi High Court. We had argued that the private players had secured their licenses with the full intention of not paying the license fees, and then holding the government to ransom, thereby diluting the license terms. The court gave only an interim order, and never a final verdict on this case, and it must be languishing still, in some judicial vault for such near-dead cases.

The issue of high initial license fees was “resolved” by the government by first fixing the license fee as 15% of AGR, then bringing it down to 12%, 10% and 8% for A, B and C-type circles respectively. It was later reduced to 8% for all circles. Having tasted blood—that the license-permit Raj had now become license-to-loot Raj—the telecom companies started a dispute over what should be included in the ‘adjusted’ part of their gross revenues, when they compute their AGR. They started this dispute even though the licenses issued by DoT had clearly stated what would, and would not, be included in AGR.

The Supreme Court’s verdict simply points out that a license issued and accepted by the company is a contract, and one party cannot ex post facto—after the fact—reinterpret the terms of the contract. The verdict reiterates that the adjustments as defined in the license have to be fulfilled and anything explicitly included as part of the AGR in the license has to be paid as license fee.

What now for the telecom sector? It is clear that the price war in the sector is over and we now have a clear cartel of three major private players operating together to jack up prices. They have raised the price of calls in tandem for both voice
and data after this judgement, while the government ponders over what further relaxations they will require to survive their self-imposed wound of non-payment of full license fees.

The announcements by all the private players have come on the same day; and though there are some differences in tariffs, they are all of the same order. This is clearly collusive behaviour. Jio has now emerged as the market leader with its share of subscribers overtaking Airtel and Idea-Vodafone. With its financial clout, it will now set the terms for the other two private players.

BSNL and MTNL, the state-run companies are in deep financial trouble with this government—after successive governments—running them to the ground and forcing them to offer benefits to private players. But if they also fold up, or follow the path of Air India, the people will have no protection from the new telecom cartel that has emerged after the price wars.

Jio’s telecom business model has been to use its huge cash reserves from other activities to create a new monopoly. It is banking not just on telecom subscribers but on other businesses that it wants to build on this infrastructure. It is planning to leverage its telecom infrastructure to create a new data and entertainment monopoly—think Netflix meets Amazon and Google. This will be a new data monopoly, built on its underlying telecom monopoly. This is the threat it poses to our future; that all our interactions with the outside world will pass through Jio. We will increasingly live through Jio. But that is a story for another day.

(Prabir Purkayastha is an activist for science and the Free Software movement.)

Why is the 'Israel Model' Bad for India

Siddharth Varadarajan

So deep does national sentiment in favour of the rights of the Palestinians run that regardless of which party is in power, the Indian government has so far remained formally committed to the cause of an independent, secure Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital.

India has excellent relations with Israel too, but that has not come in the way of the country taking a stand against Israel’s violations of international law.

Against this backdrop it is not hard to understand why the videotaped remarks of the Indian consul general in New York celebrating the so-called ‘Israel Model’ have proved so controversial.

Perhaps as a form of damage control, the Ministry of External Affairs quickly released an advance copy of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s statement marking the International Day for Solidarity with the Palestinians. Yet, the question remained—could it be that Modi’s letter of support for the Palestinians was just public posture and that what the senior Indian diplomat was caught saying on camera represented the real thinking of the Indian government? Or had the diplomat mis-spoken?

So far, the MEA has not clarified matters. The diplomat’s claim that his remarks have been taken “out of context” is not helpful since it was the context in which he was speaking which made his words so shocking. He was addressing a gathering of Kashmiri Pandits (KPs), lakhs of whom were driven from their homes in the Kashmir Valley following the onset of the armed insurgency in 1990. How could he or anyone imagine that the Israel Model—which is based on the eviction of the Palestinian people from their homes and the annexation of their land—can offer a solution to the plight of the KPs?

Either way, it is evident that the diplomat in question, like many people in India and around the world, is a victim of ignorance and disinformation about what exactly the ‘Israel Model’ is. So here, in 10 easy-to-understand facts, is a quick guide to this model.

1. Occupy the sovereign territory of others and turn them into refugees

The United Nations created Israel and Palestine on November 29, 1948 as two equal, sovereign states. Today, Israel is in occupation of Palestine. It has annexed East Jerusalem. It has blockaded the Gaza strip and filled the West Bank with its own outposts of settlers, and refuses to abide by the terms of either UN resolutions or negotiated accords it has signed to end this illegal occupation of Palestinian land. As part of this occupation, Israel also steals the water resources of the Palestinians, and will not allow the refugees who were forcibly driven from their land to return home.

2. Impose collective punishment on the occupied people

When the occupied people exercise their inalienable and legitimate right to resist, the Israel Model involves subjecting the entire civilian population of the Palestinian territories to collective punishment using such methods as a territorial blockade, mass arrests
and detentions, travel restrictions that can turn even the shortest of journeys into a nightmare lasting hours, the demolition of homes, fiscal pressure, the use of civilians and even children as human shields.

3. Illegally convert occupied territory into your own land

The third feature of the Israel Model is the conversion of Occupied Territory into Israeli land, first by building illegal settlements, then a massive wall (ostensibly to ‘protect’ the occupiers from the occupied but actually to grab more land), then roads to connect these illegal settlements. Israel has grabbed so much land already that the West Bank resembles a piece of Swiss cheese, full of holes. David Shulman, the noted Israeli academic, one of the world’s leading scholars of Telugu and Tamil, has been chronicling the hundreds of crimes, small and big, that are an integral part of the ‘Israel model’. Each story of the theft of land and water will break your heart.

4. Discriminate against your own citizens on the basis of religion or ethnicity

The Israel Model involves not just robbing the Palestinians of their land but also turning a section of Israel’s own citizens—especially those who are Palestinian—into second-class citizens. Reactionary politicians like Benjamin Netanyahu regularly speak of Arab Israelis and their representatives as if they are national enemies. Arabs are one-fifth of Israel’s population yet suffer from discrimination when it comes to the right to lease land, reunite their families, or the right to residency in Jerusalem.

5. Turn your courts into a rubber-stamp for the occupation

Fifth, the Israeli model requires that the judicial system, which is otherwise quite independent of the executive, serve as a rubber-stamp for the illegal occupation and for the violation of human rights by the Israeli security apparatus and military.

Palestinians whose homes are taken over illegally have tried in vain to get the Israeli courts to intervene on the side of justice, yet judgment after judgment has confirmed what the Israeli human rights organisation B’Tselem has said, that “those under occupation cannot seek justice in the occupier’s courts.”

6. Regularly attack your neighbours

The sixth element of the Israel Model is to regularly attack your neighbours—especially Lebanon—and breed violence and insecurity in the borderlands of all its neighbours. Israel has formally annexed the Golan Heights from Syria and for years had turned southern Lebanon into a hell-hole.

7. Violate international humanitarian law whenever you wage war

It is impossible to think of the Israel Model without its seventh element—the violation of international humanitarian law whenever the Israeli Defence Forces wage war. Even if we leave aside aggression as a war crime by itself, the actual conduct of military operations by the IDF, especially in Gaza in 2014 and most recently in 2018, and in Southern Lebanon, has involved war crimes such as the disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force, and the killing and maiming of civilians. All of this has been well documented by international human rights agencies but also by the United Nations.

8. Label your critics ‘terrorists’, terror sympathisers’, ‘anti-semites’ and anti-nationals

An integral part of the Israel Model is also the demonisation of critics as terrorists or terror sympathisers. Reactionary Israeli politicians and officials are quick to label the critics of Israeli policies towards the Palestinians as ‘anti-semitic’ or, if they are Jews or Israelis, as unpatriotic and anti-national.

9. Dishonour the memory of the Jewish victims of the Nazi Holocaust

The ninth element of the Israel model is the tendency of some politicians to dishonor the memory of the Jewish victims of the Nazi Holocaust by invoking their suffering to somehow justify what the Israeli state is doing to the Palestinian people. Using the suffering of one people to justify committing crimes against others is one of the most atrocious things a politician can do, and regrettably this has now become a tactic that is frequently resorted to.

10. Use war and the threat of terror for domestic political gains

The tenth element of the Israel model is one which has come into starker relief these days, given Benjamin Netanyahu’s failure to form a coalition government in the face of the challenge from Benny Gantz in the September 2019 election to the Knesset.

Israel’s attorney general managed to block Netanyahu’s plans to launch an intensive bombing campaign against Gaza just before those elections but as Israel prepares for a third election early next year, the Palestinian territory has emerged as a convenient punching bag.

Over 30 Palestinian civilians
were killed in Israeli bombings in Gaza last month and the fear is that there will be more aggression as Netanyahu seeks to push a reluctant electorate into giving him a majority.

Emulate at your own risk

So there, in a nutshell, is the Israel Model, in 10 atrocious parts. I cannot think of a single redeeming feature of this model. It is a curse for the people of Palestine, of course, but it is also a curse for the people of Israel, who are condemned by this model to live lives of perpetual insecurity, enmeshed in conflict and injustice. Anyone who thinks Israel can serve as a guide for India is either ignorant, or mad.

(Siddharth Varadarajan is journalist, political analyst and academic. He is a Founding Editor of The Wire. He was earlier the Editor of The Hindu.)

Venezuela’s Civilian Militia Reaches 3.3 Million Members

Paul Dobson

“Venezuela’s Bolivarian Militia has grown to 3.3 million men and women, surpassing the target for 2019. The body is due to be legally incorporated into the Armed Forces as a ‘combat unit’.”

This announcement was made during activities held over the weekend for the Day of Loyalty, which commemorates the last public speech given by late President Hugo Chavez in 2012 before he passed away from cancer in 2013.

Speaking from La Guaira State on Sunday, with 30,000 militia members in attendance, President Nicolas Maduro told the country that 2020’s goal has been established at four million enlisted members.

“Today is a day of victory, the Day of Loyalty and love towards Chavez,” Maduro said in a televised address, adding that the 3.3 million members had expressed their pride and patriotism by joining the militia.

During the event, the President also informed that his government has prepared a reform to the 2008 Law of the Bolivarian Armed Forces, which will see the Militia formally incorporated as a “combat unit” into the Armed Forces and will have constitutional recognition.

The militia is currently classed as an “auxiliary” branch of the Armed Forces.

“The Bolivarian National Militia is the people in arms, it is the genuine expression of civic-military union,” Maduro explained upon unveiling the document.

The activity also saw Maduro swear in thousands of new militia members, as well as awarding numerous decorations and promotions.

Similarly, Militia members and workers of the heavy industries of Venezuela’s eastern region gifted him a 7.62 mm Mosin-Nagant rifle.

Venezuela’s Bolivarian Militia was formed in 2005 and granted autonomy in 2008 by Hugo Chavez. During the successive governments of Maduro and under growing foreign military threats against the country, it has expanded rapidly both in numbers, scope, and importance, attracting millions of civilians. During 2019, it has been granted a number of new tasks and responsibilities.

According to the president, the Bolivarian Militia is now conformed of 1,141 territorial Popular Defence Groups (ADI’s) and operates out of 14,383 Popular Bases of Integral Defence.

According to statements made in November, the organisation possess 321,433 firearms. However, Maduro indicated on Sunday that he will increase this amount, pledging that every militia member should be assigned a weapon.

Last month, 6,950 militiamen and women were deployed to safeguard electrical installations following government claims of “sabotage.” The militia members were also charged with cleaning, maintenance, and forest fire prevention in areas around the installations as Venezuela enters its dry season.

The government likewise announced that thousands of militia members would be deployed on the streets until December 31 to “keep the peace” alongside forces from the
police and the Bolivarian National Guard during the holiday period.

Likewise in November, Maduro ordered Militia members be incorporated to the Armed Forces’ Bolivarian Military University, as well as the creation of an “Anti-Imperialist School” for all of the country’s militia members to train them as “professionals.”

The militia was also incorporated into the CLAP subsidised food distribution program in May as part of efforts to crack down on corruption, distributive irregularities, and reselling of the subsidies food products. The CLAP program benefits over six million Venezuelan families and has been targeted by US sanctions.

Apart from its military responsibilities, including training and education, the organisation is also carrying out a National Population and Housing Census, working alongside the Productive Workers’ Councils, and embarking on a series of agricultural projects to grow fruit and vegetables.

(Paul Dobson is from Britain. He has lived in Venezuela since 2006, and writes for Venezuelanalysis.com.)

French Unions and Yellow Vests Converge, Launch General Strike

Richard Greeman

On the eve of an “unlimited” (open-ended) General Strike called for December 5, more and more unions and protest groups are pledging join it.

Two things are unusual about this strike. The first is that it is open-ended, rather than the usual one-day of ritualistic protest marches, and may be prolonged from day to day by workers’ assemblies. The second is that the Yellow Vests, the self-organized, horizontal, social movement that sprung up spontaneously just over a year ago and is still popular despite severe repression, have decided to converge with the strike, and that the CGT’s Martinez, who had originally spurned the Yellow Vests, immediately welcomed them, making for a heady mix. For the union leaders, who try to control their followers tightly, the Yellow Vests are like a loose canon on the deck of a ship. Who knows what may result?

The nation-wide strike was originally proposed by Philippe Martinez, Secretary General of CGT, France’s largest union federation, in response to the Macron Governments’ proposed neoliberal “reform” of the France retirement system. Macron’s reform would essentially gut France’s solidarity-based retirement system. Even more than U.S. Social Security, which even Trump and the Republicans don’t dare touch, retirement over here is a sacred cow. It was established at the end of WWII when the Resistance and the Communists were influential and the business class was in disgrace, having collaborated with the Nazis. Under Macron’s proposed new ‘point’ system, many will lose up to 30% according to estimates, and future governments could arbitrarily decide how much money each point is worth!

The Camel’s Back

This latest, and most sweeping of Macron’s two years’ string of neo-liberal attacks on social welfare may prove to be the straw that breaks the camel’s back; and camels are dangerously irascible animals known to bite or kick their masters to death when mistreated.

The French were already in an angry mood in the Spring of 2018 when Macron started pushing through his reforms, but they were disappointed when the CGT and other union leaders imposed only stop-and-go, limited, local strikes and failed utterly to counter-attack. It was on the grave of those defeats that the spontaneous Yellow Vest movements sprung up like mushrooms all over France last November, supported by over 70% of the French.

Although justifiably suspicious of unions, especially of the union leaders, the Yellow Vests, after suffering a year of police brutality and prejudiced media coverage, came around to the need for convergence. Thus, at our fourth national Assembly of Assemblies on November 3, 2019, we voted to join and “be at the heart” of the December 5 movement in the hope that “a defeat for the government would open the road to other victories for our camp.”

Will the union leaders like Martinez stay the course? If they try to settle with Macron piecemeal and divide the movement as they have in the past, will the workers’ assemblies be able to stop them? Will the strike over retirement benefits develop along broad social revolutionary lines like similar horizontal movements in South America, the Middle East and elsewhere? Will these international movements finally connect, as the
Yellow Vests’ Assembly of Assembly proposed when it dedicated our first anniversary to social movements around the world?

The following leaflet, developed by the Yellow Vests of Uzès and Montpellier, expresses the hopes and fears of the Yellow Vests on the eve of this open-ended struggle.

* * *

“One for all and all for one!”

For the past two years, a government of the rich has been imposing “reforms” designed to deprive the French people of all the advantages won by several generations of workers. For the past two years, Macron, “President of the rich,” following the rules laid down by the European Union of bankers and in defiance of the people, has been using police-state methods to increase the inequality of an already unequal society for the benefit of his Stock Market cronies through tax advantages and privatizations.

Today, by attacking their retirements, this would-be Jupiter has succeeded in uniting the French people—against him! United, we have the power to make him withdraw his so called « reform » of our pensions. That’s obvious. But we must not stop there. We must stick together and make use of our united strength to impose all our demands: wages, unemployment benefits, public services, hospitals, schools, agricultural lands, ecological justice, public services, hospitals, schools, agricultural lands, ecological justice, safety, fiscal justice …

Macron has sowed the wind.

On December 5 he will harvest the whirlwind:

An Unlimited General Strike to take back our France

Don’t let them divide us! Let no branch, no trade, no sector return to work until everyone’s demands have been satisfied. Let us stick together, for we all depend on one another. Leave no one behind!

The nurses and doctors of the emergency rooms and hospitals are struggling for all of us. They are demanding more beds, more personnel, more materials and of course decent salaries and breaks. They just made a pact with the firefighters: a fine example of solidarity between respected professionals. These are the people who look after us when we are most vulnerable. Should we leave them behind?

Working women earn only 4/5 of the wages of men doing the same work, and they do 4/5 of the unpaid labour of homemaking, cooking and child-rearing. They are the true basis of civilization, yet many women are beaten, murdered, raped or trafficked in France—all too often with impunity. They are asking for justice. Should we leave them behind?

The majority of working people have long been financially insecure. Even when they work full time or do extra jobs. Although the productivity of their labour and the profits of their bosses have not stopped increasing, the men and women who create this wealth live in fear of the end of the month, in permanent worry of unemployment, anxious about their employers closing shop and moving to poor countries where labor is cheaper. The workers are fighting for decent wages and stable employment. Should we leave them behind?

Students and teachers are demanding less over-crowded classrooms, aids and assistance for handicapped and special students, the right to participate in developing curriculums that correspond to the needs of the young and not to the demands of employers. They are our children. Should we leave them behind?

Small farmers work hard to feed us and get back only 2–3% of the price their produce sells for at Carrefour. Young people who want to raise organic crops and develop permaculture are unable to find agricultural lands to buy or rent, while real-estate speculators are paving over fertile soils. On the other hand, our government is subsidizing big land-owners and agro-businesses who stuff us with chemicals and Frankenfoods. Obesity is on the rise. The French peasantry, the salt of the earth, is in crisis. Should we leave them behind?

Macron wants to privatize the French National Railways (SNCF) for the benefit of his cronies, who have already taken over the National Highway System which we had already paid for tenfold. Today, trains are more and more expensive and less and less. The government is closing smaller stations, isolating the people in the countryside and forcing everyone to buy cars. The railway workers are defending these public goods on which we all depend. Should we leave them behind?

The planet is on the brink of climate catastrophe, while the government goes on subsidizing the oil, coal and chemical companies that are raking in billions. We must immediately cut these gifts to the rich and use that money for ecological purposes, for example helping the inhabitants of Rouen who have been poisoned by industry. Should we leave them behind?

Immigrants and ethnic minorities do the most grueling work in France without enjoying the rights of citizens, while French imperialist companies are getting
Raja Dhale: A Renaissance Figure in Dalit Literature and Art

Yogesh Maitreya

If there is one man who deserves to be called a renaissance figure in dalit literature and art, it is Raja Dhale. Many may have heard of him only recently, when he passed away in July, 2019. Dhale was a remarkable poet; an occasional but refined translator; a fiery yet incisive critic of the subject at hand; a radical Buddhist philosopher; and a ruthless advocate of ethical politics. But most people know him as a co-founder of the Dalit Panthers, formed in 1972. They also know him as the author of “Kala Swatantrya Din” (Black Independence Day, 1972), the article that sent shivers down the spine of the brahminical literary circle in Maharashtra. But Dhale needs to be remembered for much more.

J.V. Pawar, eminent historian and co-founder of the Dalit Panthers, says: “If Dhale had not been at the forefront when dalit literature emerged, if he had not stood there with a naked sword in his hand, dalit literature would have been killed in its infancy. Even ‘experts’ on dalit literature agree on this.” Dhale’s collected works were compiled for the first time by J.V. Pawar; and in 1990, on Dhale’s 50th birthday, the collection was published in a book entitled Astitwachya Resha (The Lines of Existence). This significant book provides insights into Dhale’s meticulous understanding of various subjects, and introduces us to the many unexplored aspects of his personality—the writer, the artist, the literary theorist and the political visionary.

Literary renaissance has one crucial requirement. Old literary values need to be refuted; and new values—that connect to contemporary society and advocate justice in social life, have to be vehemently propagated. For this to happen, an understanding of the relationship between society and literature is essential. Raja Dhale not only had this understanding; he also had the vision to develop it.
Just as “literature is a part of our personality,” says Dhale, “it is part of our existence. This means (that) as literature shapes our existence, our existence shapes our literature.” Dhale captured the objective of literature at the theoretical level. But he did more. He developed the objective into a literary framework to resolve the tussle between Marxism and Ambedkarism. He spoke of this as early as 1976 in a speech delivered at a convention of dalit literature. This speech also marked the arrival of revivalist understanding of dalit literatures, inspired by the thoughts, teachings and literary vision of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. Dhale’s speech shed light on literary aspects which had, till then, been matters of confusion and conflict in Indian literary spheres:

“The concept of ‘Marxist literature’ originated from a theoretical understanding of society. But the concept of dalit literature originated directly from lived experience.

“Today there are writings which can be said to be inspired by Marxian thought. But there is nothing that can be described as Marxist literature. Because of this, literature inspired by Marxian thought attempts to seize the field of ‘dalit literature’. Therefore, dalit literature should be called the literature of Ambedkar Pranalee (Ambedkarite ideology).

“Till now, our literature has been that of Ambedkar (Ambedkarite) ideology. Because dalit literature emerges from life itself, it acquires social significance—which manifests as dalit social consciousness. This social consciousness of dalit life is shaped by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and his battles. Hence the social significance of dalit literature, is Ambedkari.

“The vision of dalit literature is infused with its social consciousness—this is why dalit literature acquires social significance. But ‘Marxist literature’ has neither social consciousness nor significance; it has a theoretical significance. Just as its origin is theory, its eventual form too is theoretical, not social. The names Marxist literature goes by underline this. ‘Progressive literature’, for example: which social group does this literature refer to? Where exactly does it lead? Towards the social or the theoretical? Another example is ‘parallel literature’. The term does not clarify which social group and which social consciousness it is ‘parallel to’.

“When we call ourselves litterateurs of Ambedkari ideology, and when we describe our literature as the literature of Ambedkari ideology, our objective of social revolution becomes clear. Likewise, our ‘place of work’ is also clear; it is the dalit community …”

A skillful artisan gives shape to his artefacts, stroke after stroke, with persistence and patience. Like that artisan, Dhale’s meticulous study of literature and his understanding of theories of art and aesthetics shaped the discourse of dalit literature—which he preferred to call the literature of Ambedkar ideology—and the dimensions of its theory. Whether he was writing his literary essays, articles, stories or his few but significant poems, logic was never absent from his words. For example, in his poem “Eka Panther Che Manogat”, he says:

Each man is the last one. If he sees that clearly, why should he not fight each battle as if it is the last one.

I don’t understand it—because the end is decided.
Either the battle will come to an end
Or we will die.

If death is certain, why shouldn’t the battle for equality be certain?

As part of social movements, Dhale’s words and actions were directed by his commitment to truth, justice and the creation of a casteless society, whether in the realm of the imagination or in the real world. His life showed that he never bowed down before power. His literary and artistic talents gained strength from his unique imagination, which, in turn, was fed by Ambedkar’s thoughts and vision. This is why he found his reference in social history, the history of his community and in the vision of Ambedkar, rather than foreign theories on art, literature and movements. His contributions to literature and art are unparalleled in the legacy of dalit literature. He wrote short stories, literary essays, critical reviews, songs for adults and children and introductions to books. What he chose to translate is also telling: he translated Zen short stories, Egyptian poems and poems by African American poets such as Langston Hughes, Samuel Allen and Robert Hayden into Marathi. As for his art, its idea of beauty is not sensual, but charged with sense, with sensibility. His illustrations reveal an artistic sensibility that suggest future directions for the anti-caste struggle. They also indicate why the appreciation of beauty requires the creation of a just and equal world.

(Yogesh Maitreya is a poet, translator and founder of Panther's Paw Publication, an anti-caste publishing house.)
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