Vol. 74 No. 48
December 22, 2019

Stand Up for the Constitution!
Scrap CAA! No NRC!
Citizens for Justice and Peace

Partition Lies and Amit Shah’s
Theatre of the Absurd
Prem Shankar Jha

The Spectre of Jamia:
Violation of a Safe Space
Ushosee Pal & Sanchari Basu Chaudhuri

If a Private Player Can Revive
a PSU, Why Can’t Govt?
Prabhat Patnaik

How Did Savarkar, a Staunch
Supporter of British Colonialism,
Come to Be Known as ‘Veer’?
Pavan Kulkarni

We Will Continue to Work for a
More Just and Sustainable World
Jeremy Corbyn

Misleading Narratives on Labour’s
Defeat Have a Purpose
Gawain Little

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Editorial

Unite – To Fight the Nefarious Schemes of the
Modi-Shah Government

G.G. Parikh, Neeraj Jain

Being a citizen is the supremest identity that a person has; in contrast, being declared non-citizen (or a foreigner) effectively means the person becomes stateless, which condemns him/her to civil death—a person becomes deprived of almost all his civil rights. The Indian Constitution granted citizenship by birth to all people; after 1987, exceptions were introduced, and the citizenship status of the parents also became important.

Secularism is one of the foundations of the Indian republic. Hence, religion was never the basis of citizenship. Citizenship rules in India were equalising—whatever be the religion, caste, community, gender or social status of a person, all had equal citizenship.

Now, this is being completely overturned by the Modi government. Using brute majority, it has got the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha to pass the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) within just three days. The CAA, together with the National Register of Citizens, strikes at the very roots of secularism in India.

This subversion of the Constitution by the BJP is not surprising. The BJP is only implementing one of the key agendas of the RSS, its parent organisation—the RSS does not believe in secularism and secular nationalism and instead believes in religious nationalism.

On December 13, soon after the President of India gave his assent to the CAA, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights released a powerful statement that criticised India’s new citizenship law. The UN said that not only does this law violate India’s obligations to conventions, treaties and compacts that it has signed at the global level, but also that it is in violation of its own Constitution.

People are not taking this assault on the fundamental values of the Indian Constitution lying down. From Assam to Delhi and Kerala, people, especially the students and youth, are out on the streets, protesting in tens of thousands.

Journalist Prem Shankar Jha writes that it is only the second time since Independence that virtually the entire political opposition has joined in the defence of the two core values of the Indian state: secularism
and equality governments before the law. Seven state governments—Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Punjab, Kerala, West Bengal and Bihar—have announced that they will not implement the CAA. Chief Minister Baghel of Chhattisgarh has declared that if the NRC is implemented, then he will not to sign it. In Tamil Nadu, the opposition DMK is leading protests against the law, and they are likely to spread because the 3,04,000 Tamil refugees who have been living as stateless citizens in India for as long as 36 years have not been included in the Act. In Maharashtra, the Shiv Sena is vacillating—it had voted for the Bill in the Lok Sabha, but boycotted the voting in the Rajya Sabha; and now, Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray has come out with a strong statement condemning police action on Jamia Millia students, comparing it to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

The BJP, as is only to be expected, is painting these protests in communal colours. This is being led from the front by the Prime Minister himself. Speaking at a rally in Jharkhand, in a speech which was relayed all over the country on TV, he stated, “Bhaiyo aur beheno, you can tell who the rioters are by the clothes they are wearing.” While Modi has made oblique remarks against Muslims in recent years, this is probably the first time the head of government in a democratic country has directly pointed fingers at a single community so blatantly. Home Minister Amit Shah has been even more openly communal in his statements criticising the protests—in a latest statement, he challenged those opposing the CAA to say publicly that they are ready to welcome ‘all Muslims to India’. BJP-friendly media and BJP social media have also been ridiculing these protests as ‘Muslim’ and ‘anti-Hindu’, including through the circulation of fake or misleading videos. It is also no coincidence that the police was particularly ruthless against student protests at two major universities Jamia Millia Islamia (New Delhi) and Aligarh Muslim University (Aligarh), both historically Muslim universities.

Indians have seen through this venal grand scheme of the BJP–RSS and are unitedly coming out to fight this assault on our country’s founding principles. For the present, these protests are continuing, growing and spreading.

But while all of this is heartening, it is not enough.

We not only need to fight this assault on our Constitutional fabric, we need to combine it with fighting against the other nefarious agenda of the Modi Government—the naked implementation of neoliberal policies that is resulting in the corporatisation of the entire economy. The entire wealth of the country, including our mineral wealth, our navratna public sector corporations and even our financial institutions, is being transferred to the hands of giant foreign and domestic corporations, which are controlled by some of the richest people of the world. Even the tax money collected by the government is being transferred to the coffers of these rich rich, under all kinds of guises. Simultaneously, the government has been squeezing its welfare expenditures on the poor, which have pushed our public health, education, ration, nutrition and pension systems into deep crisis. For the first time since independence, job creation in the economy has come to a complete standstill, pushing unemployment to record levels.

This is the real agenda of the Modi Government and the BJP–RSS combine ruling the country. Its push for a ‘Hindu Rashtra’ is only a cover—to delude the people into supporting it during elections, while it implements policies to impoverish the people and plunder public wealth and transfer it to the coffers of the country’s corporate elite, policies which have transformed India into one of the most unequal countries in the world. During just the first four years of the Modi regime, the number of billionaires in the country has more than doubled—from 56 in 2014 to 119 in 2018; the corporate houses have been able to indulge in such wanton profiteering that the wealth of the country’s billionaires increased by more than 35% in just one year (2017 to 2018).

We need to realise this real agenda of the Modi Government. We need to see through its schemes of dividing the country along communal lines, and build a united movement of all the people of the country across religion—caste—gender, and challenge the neoliberal model of development being implemented in the country. We need to come together and fight for a new India, which will genuinely uphold Constitutional values of secularism and equality and fraternity, and at the same time, which will ensure the implementation of the economic policies enshrined in the Directive Principles of the Constitution: that call upon the State to direct its policy towards securing adequate means of livelihood for all citizens, wherein the conditions of work are such that all citizens can enjoy a decent standard of living and have full enjoyment of leisure and social and cultural opportunities.
We, the people of India, protest against the move to question our citizenship. We believe that this is an attempt to divide India on religious lines. Our citizenship has been granted to us by law and constitution and we will defend it till our last breath.

Over the past six years, there are clear political moves to fundamentally assault and redefine this Constitutional basis of both Indian nationhood and citizenship. Especially now, with the just passed Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019, together with a hurried, and not thoroughly debated, all India-level National Population Register (NPR) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) process. The NRC was first experimented with in Assam. The people of Assam have been reeling under this assault on their citizenship for years. As a result of the NRC in Assam, 19 lakh people have been declared as non-citizens in the state. Now, the government is using the CAA 2019 to assure one set of Indians in Assam that they will be “saved” from exclusion from the NRC! Clearly the target is another set of Indians in Assam—the Muslims. Furthermore, the government has announced its intention to extend this process to all over India.

The fact is, once the exercise begins, no one (not even the Hindus) will be spared the trauma and hassle. India’s migrant labour, small farmer, Adivasi and forest dweller, the Dalit—Bahujan masses, all will fall victim to an unconstitutional process. Hundreds of thousands of India’s urban population, living after being displaced through displacement (project-related migration), man-made tragedies (like riots, pogroms) and natural disasters (floods, fires, earthquakes and worse) do not possess the birth-related or land/home registration documents to “satisfy” such an ill-thought out move.

We need to say: #Scrap CAA 2019 #NoNRC NOW!

What is CAA 2019?

The Citizenship Act, 1955 enacted under Article 11 of the Constitution grants citizenship by birth, naturalisation, registration and annexation. For a person to be an Indian citizen by birth: i) he/she must be born in India between 1950 to 1987; ii) if he/she is born in India between 1987 and 2004, one of his parents must be an Indian citizen; iii) if he/she is born after 2004, in addition to one of the parents being born here, the other should not be an illegal migrant.

The 2019 amendment to the Citizenship Act (CAA 2019) makes a promise to entertain requests for refuge and citizenship to all the ‘persecuted minorities’ from three Islamic countries, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh who reached India before 2014. The amendment specifies that this special privilege is being extended only to Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jain, Parsis and Christians from these three countries, and thus it singles out Muslims for exclusion. For example, neither the Ahmadiyas or Sufis, or mere political dissenters, who are also undoubtedly persecuted in Pakistan, find a mention in the amendment. Nor do political dissenters or possible asylum seekers like the Rohingyas from Myanmar or Tamils from Sri Lanka have any place in it.

For the first time, there is a statutory attempt to not just privilege people from some faiths but at the same time relegate another, Muslims, to second-rate status. The CAA 2019 violates Constitutional secular principles and is a violation of Articles 13, 14, 15, 16 and 21 which guarantee the right to equality, equality before law and non-discriminatory treatment by the Indian State.

The government is implying that CAA 2019 will automatically offer citizenship to Hindus. But it is lying—even under CAA 2019, how can it offer citizenship to Hindus who are Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati or Tamil speaking since how can they justify that they have migrated from Pakistan, Afghanistan or Bangladesh?

The NRC in Assam

NRC is a document first prepared in Assam in 1951 on the basis of that year’s general census. For decades, Assam’s linguistic and religious minorities lived under the threat of being labeled “outsiders”, “foreigners”, “and illegal migrants.” The “outsider” problem in Assam is over a hundred-years-old and started when the British started bringing in poor Bengali labourers to cut forests and cultivate land in Assam. It was compounded by the British themselves who stoked the fires of division and violence in Assam under their policy of divide and rule.

Stand Up for the Constitution! Scrap CAA! No NRC!

Citizens for Justice and Peace
This led to mass movements against outsiders, widespread violence and riots which culminated in parallel, often conflicting official processes to detect foreigners.

After years of violence in which thousands of people were killed, the Assam accord signed in 1985 paved way for a register of citizens to be prepared and the NRC to be updated. It was seen as a document that will bring peace to Assam and once and for all end the question of who is an Indian and who is an outsider in Assam. Under the Supreme Court’s monitoring, the NRC was perhaps the only process that had the widest public support. This was achieved by involving all stakeholders—students unions, citizen’s groups and political parties—in deciding the modalities of NRC, i.e., what documents will be used and how.

And yet, the final NRC seems to have made everyone unhappy. Far from being “fair and inclusive”, the process has led the people of Assam to trauma and impoverishment. This list took five long years to complete, cost about Rs 1,220 crore and excluded—in the final list released on August 31, 2019—about 19 lakh people. Before that, at different stages, out of the 3.2 crore who applied, first 1.2 crore and thereafter 44 lakh were excluded. Despite detailed modalities prepared with different stake holders, as political winds changed the process was manipulated, so that documents agreed upon were rejected and hundreds of thousands of Indians—Bengali Hindus, Gorkhas, Hindi speaking peoples, Rajbanshis, Muslims—all today face the threat of being declared as non-citizens!

An All India NRC

Despite these terrible consequences, the government has now announced that it going to extend the NRC to all over the country. We need to oppose the NRC because it violates fundamental tenets of the Indian Constitution, that guarantees citizenship for all people, provided they meet certain criteria, irrespective of religion. Through CAA 2019 and the forthcoming NRC, the political aim is similar to the policy adopted by the British during the colonial days of ‘divide and rule’.

What will the all India NRC look like and why is it being done?

1. What is the need for an All India NRC?

There has not been a single comprehensive study by the government to determine the number of illegal immigrants living in India. In the absence of official numbers, what is NRC being based on? We already have the AADHAR card, before that the ration-cards. Why then are Indians being put through one more such exercise?

2. What documents will be required?

In a country where only 58 percent births are registered, 20 percent children are never enrolled in school and 30 percent of the population has migrated internally for work, documents are a privilege. How will all these people prove their birth and the presence of their ancestors from 40-50 years ago? The lack of documents proving unbroken lineage is particularly difficult for married women. Imagine the nightmarish scenario of a hundreds of millions Indians queuing outside Government offices, hospitals, district centres in order to obtain the required documents. The government will be doing nothing else for years. Like what happened in Assam, all of us will only be queuing up for documents!

3. What is the cut-off date going to be?

The cut-off date is the date before which you or your ancestor’s presence on the Indian soil needs to be proved. In Assam and Assam alone (due to the Assam Accord) the date was 1971. In the rest of India, will it be 1987 or 1950? Imagine looking for forty or seventy-year-old documents!

4. What is the cost going to be?

Remember that we are discussing this in 2019 when India is in the middle of a full-blown economic crisis. In Assam, the cost of examining the citizenship of 3.2 crore human beings came to Rs 1,220 crore for the state alone! Apart from this, those individuals who did not have the necessary documents often had to spend several thousand rupees to obtain the necessary documents, and in the process many have become economically crippled.

India has a population of 134 crore! This means that the government of India will spend no less than Rs 51,000 crore for examining the citizenship of all the people in the country. To put that in perspective—the Central Government’s budgetary allocation for the Ministry of Health and Family welfare is Rs 65,000 crore. Can India afford an All India NRC?

5. Can the government question our citizenship?

To grant a government, any government, the right to examine the citizenship of 134 crore human beings on the basis of a few documents is to grant it extraordinary
and undemocratic power, especially if there are no checks and balances. In Assam the modalities of implementing the NRC were discussed with ALL stakeholders (political parties, eminent citizens, students’ unions, citizen groups) and only then the process was started. Yet manipulations and perversions crept in. Can an all India process begin without transparent public consultations? Are we not living in a democracy?

6. Is the government competent enough to question our citizenship?

Who amongst us has our correct name written in all government identity documents? Which government department in India functions with empathy? In a country whose bureaucracy and government office system is known for its leakages, corruption and incompetence, how is the sensitive task of proving citizenship being left to the mercies of the ‘sarkari’ system? In Assam, Saken Ali was sent to a detention camp simply because an additional ‘h’ was added to his name in a few government documents. He spent 5 years inside. Several people have died inside foreigner detention camps in Assam while fighting their exclusion from the NRC in courts. The family of India’s fifth president, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, was excluded from the NRC. Former Indian army officer and Kargil war veteran, Mohd. Sanaullah, was also sent to a detention camp before he was released on bail.

7. What happens if you are excluded from the All India NRC?

The only way to answer these questions is to look at the experience of Assam. In Assam suspected ‘foreigners’ and those left out of the NRC have to go through a punishing legal process that begins with quasi-judicial bodies called ‘Foreigner Tribunals’. These tribunals are closed to public and journalistic scrutiny and their functioning is opaque. How these FTs declare someone or the other a ‘Foreigner’ is often arbitrary. Cases can drag on for years or be decided in a jiffy. Once declared a foreigner, you can be sent to a Detention Camp. The situation in these detention camps, where families are separated and living conditions are subhuman, is nightmarish. The question is, do you deserve such a treatment even if you are a foreigner?

National Population Register (NPR)

The Government of India has declared that it will conduct a door to door survey to determine the usual residents of India from April 2020 to September 2020. Harmless as that may sound, the NPR is expected to become the basis on which the All India NRC will be drawn up. At the end of the door to door survey, a list of people who have made it to the list will be declared. People whose names do not appear in NPR will have to appeal against it and present relevant documents to the district registrar who will then take a decision whether the said person is a citizen or not. So what documents will these ‘sarkari’ officers ask of us when they come to our doorstep? What documents will satisfy the registrar?

As is its style, this government has not yet notified what modalities will this door to door enumeration use? What documents will be asked for? What documents will work and what won’t? How will such a significant exercise take place? What criteria will be used?

Who is an Indian?

Does the possession of a few pieces of paper make us Indian? Does being born in a particular religion make us Indian? Does our belief in one political ideology more than others make us Indian? Who decides who is an Indian?

Narrow definitions indeed for a people who take pride in being an ancient civilisation, where tongues and colours and tastes change completely every few miles, where some of the greatest philosophies of this world have been born and debated for a millennia. No single idea can lay claim to being the idea of India. No single definition exists that decides who is an Indian and who is not.

[Citizens For Justice and Peace (cjp.org.in) has been involved in a two-year-long volunteer led movement in Assam where it helped people fill out over 10 lakh NRC forms, got people released from detention camps, and filed intervention applications in the Supreme Court. Now it is conducting trainings all over the country on the countrywide NPR–NRC. For details, contact info@cjp.org.in.]

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Partition Lies and Amit Shah's Theatre of the Absurd

Prem Shankar Jha

During the Lok Sabha debate on the Bill amending the Citizenship Act, Union home minister Amit Shah suddenly lost his temper and blurted: “Is desh ka vibhajan agar dharma ke aadhar par Congress na kari hoi to is Bill ka kaam nahin hota (Had the Congress not partitioned this country on the basis of religion, there would have been no need for this Bill).”

His remark sent a shock wave through the Lok Sabha, provoking responses which were echoed within hours by civil society. But Shah, the master tactician, had got what he wanted—he had once again put India's secular intelligentsia and the increasingly befuddled Congress party on the defensive. And that might have been just the extra edge the BJP needed to get this monstrous Bill through the Rajya Sabha.

Shah’s obvious purpose always was to hustle it through, as he did with the Unlawful Activities Act Amendment Bill before the opposition had time to muster its full strength. And he did it with great aplomb.

What is depressing is the fact that even 48 hours after he made this outrageous claim, no one in the Congress, or for that matter the rest of the opposition and civil society, has pinned down the outrageous lie that Shah spoke in the august halls of Parliament on a Bill that, by changing the very basis of the Union of India, has begun the process of tearing it apart.

All have defended the Congress by saying that while it accepted the creation of two nations, it did not do so on the basis of the two-nation theory. To the vast majority of Indians, born well after Partition, this must sound like sheer sophistry. That is what Shah (who is only 55 years old) was almost certainly banking upon. It was up to the present leaders of the Congress party to checkmate Shah’s strategy. But that required an immediate command of history that Sonia Gandhi, who was sitting in the front opposition benches, did not have. So, in a manner with which we have grown wearily familiar, she stayed seated and remained silent.

It has therefore fallen to this 81-year-old former journalist to set the record straight. For what I know about the tumultuous last days of the British Raj and the first months of independence is not second-hand but living, first-hand knowledge. Shah’s knowledge is also necessarily second hand, may be able to fool others but he cannot fool me.

The Congress party’s resolution of 1947 accepting Partition gave a full explanation of why the party had felt itself left with no option. It restated in pain-filled detail why it had accepted Partition as the lesser of the two evils the country faced at the time (early 1947) despite its staunch and continuing opposition to the two-nation theory. Its reason was the urgent and imperative need to prevent the “poison of communalism” from spreading further and “tearing apart the social fabric of the country”.

The resolution reflects its leaders’ awareness that they were surrendering their own most cherished principle, but felt compelled to accept the lesser evil in order to avert a much greater one.

To understand why it felt this, it is necessary to go back in time to May 1946, when Viceroy of India Lord Wavell announced the Cabinet Mission Plan. The ‘communal poison’ to which the Congress was referring was the Muslim League’s ‘direct action’ plan following this announcement to deliberately inflame Hindu–Muslim animosity in order to garner support for its demand for partition. This had begun with the planned killing of Hindus in Calcutta of August 1946 that went on for two days, before the Hindu reaction engulfed Bihar in a bloodbath.

This was followed by a planned pogrom of Hindus and Sikhs in what was then the North West Frontier Province (now Khyber–Pakhtunkhwa) in December 1946. This was a Muslim League conspiracy in the most evil sense of the term, because it occurred in a province ruled by the Khudai Khidmatgars (also dubbed the Frontier Congress) which had been stoutly opposing partition ever since it was mooted in 1940. The two minorities made up only 6% of the province’s population, but they were the richest 6%, consisting of traders, moneylenders and rich landowners. The pogrom was therefore aimed both at seizing the assets of the Hindus and Sikhs and simultaneously de-legitimising the Khudai Khidmatgars. (This was a pogrom that the British government had tacitly supported and enabled. The evidence is in the Transfer of Power Documents, Volume 12.)

Those who escaped fled to
Rawalpindi, where they received little sympathy or support, and to Muzaffarabad where the Muslim inhabitants, despite the communal hysteria of those times, received them with open arms. But by then the Muslim League National Guard (modelled, like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, on Germany’s SA) had the bit between its teeth.

In January 1947, the League turned its attention to Punjab, where as in the NWFP, the Sikhs numbered 18% of its population but owned 30% of all the farmland and paid 50% of the land revenue to the British. Lahore, Amritsar and other cities were dominated by Hindu traders and moneylenders. So here too, the League used the lure of stolen wealth to start a series of communal riots and pogroms.

Like the NWFP, Punjab was also against the partition of India. It was ruled by the Unionist party, a party composed in more or less equal parts by Muslim, Sikh and Hindu feudals, under the prime ministership of Sikander Hayat Khan and after his death in 1942, by Sir Khizar Hayat Khan. Khizar Hayat Khan also opposed Partition but lacked the strength of his predecessor. As a result, the Unionist alliance had begun to fray at the edges when the Muslim League launched its communal riots in January 1947, following his resignation.

This brought the danger to the freedom movement posed by the poison of communal polarisation to the Congress’s doorstep. For Punjab stretched then from the Kabul river at the foothills of the Hindu Kush range till Delhi. If the capital went up in flames, then not only would freedom get indefinitely postponed, but the dream of a single independent country would be destroyed in the scramble by the rest of the country to prevent the poison from spreading into it.

It was to avoid this dire fate that the Congress accepted Partition. It reasoned that three quarters of a secular, multi-ethnic and multi-religious country was better than none. It was to save an inheritance of secularism that stretched from Gautama Buddha till Akbar and the Din-e-Ilahi, and embraced Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Parsis and Jews, in addition to Muslims, that it decided to cut that glorious India’s losses and accept Partition.

And while the Congress was fighting this epic battle for an ideal, what was the RSS doing? From the Dandi Salt March in 1929 till Gandhi’s Quit India call in 1940, the RSS stoutly opposed every attempt to secure freedom through satyagraha and even offered its cohorts to the government to act as civil guards to quell the unrest that Gandhi’s call would generate. It maintained a monumental silence on the Muslim League’s direct action programme and while it may not have instructed Nathuram Godse to assassinate Mahatma Gandhi, according to Pyarelal, Gandhi’s secretary, “Members of the RSS at some places had been instructed beforehand to tune in to their radio sets on the fateful Friday for the ‘good news’."

For the RSS to claim that it is amending the Citizenship Act to complete the work that was left undone by the Congress is beyond calumny; it is sick comedy. Unfortunately, as Nagaland’s extension of the requirement to obtain an Inner Line Permit to the whole of Dimapur district has just shown, it is comedy that could turn in a flash into tragedy.

(Prem Shankar Jha is a Delhi-based journalist and writer.)

The Spectre of Jamia: Violation of a Safe Space

Ushosee Pal & Sanchari Basu Chaudhuri

Time and again, students have shown the way to dissent peacefully and demand change. And, Friday, the 13th of December, 2019, was no different.

Three to four teachers were giving a speech about NRC and CAB inside the campus while a number of students (around fifty) listened. It was peaceful inside the campus on that rainy December afternoon. We heard that there was going to be a non-violent protest against CAB inside the campus followed by a long march. Some scholars joined them. Meanwhile some of us went to our departments to carry out our examination hall duties. As the students wrote their exams, blasts were heard. In a few minutes, the classroom started filling up with an acidic smell burning our eyes, noses and throats. Many of us started coughing and gasping. While we were flummoxed by these noises and gases, it was the Kashmiri students who pointed out to us that tear gas shells were being blasted outside. We realised that the cops had already entered the campus to stop the unarmed march with weapons.

The staff members, the faculty present and the invigilating scholars...
sprang into action. We first closed the windows of the exam hall and shifted the more affected students to relatively safer air. We closed the gates of the department, manned continuously by staff members who decided not to allow groups inside to avoid any situation which may endanger the students by putting them at the receiving end of the frenzied mob. At the same time, affected persons were helped out with a continuous supply of drinking water. Also, some heavily affected individuals were brought inside despite the risk because, for us, in that moment, humanity came before safety.

While students were writing their exams, we could hear tear gas being shelled. We were terrified. The uncontrollable tears and the shaking hands of some students who resolutely managed to finish their paper in a panic-ridden state are the images that one experiences in a siege. These images remain elusive amongst the visuals of abject brutalities which surface and are played on loop on primetime media. The spectacle often makes up for dinnertime entertainment.

But not all Jamia students were out on the streets protesting. Many students, up until Friday, earnestly believed that education can give them entry into the system for an opportunity to bring about positive changes from within. And there were so many who continued to do their jobs despite the situation outside. The university and its scholars did not stop functioning when the police came in on Friday. It was forced to postpone exams after Friday because the cops came in.

In the recent times, many progressive, educated voices have questioned the need for a university catering specifically to minority groups. Some of us non-Muslim students, when we mention Jamia as our alma mater, notice faint change in the facial expressions of even the most progressive and politically correct individuals. No amount of argument convinces them that minority institutions such as JMI provide a space to the marginalised to feel at ease in their pursuit of knowledge. This is very relevant in a country where the dominant groups are steeped in prejudice, bigotry, suspicion and vitriolic hatred towards the minorities.

The JMI campus, up until Friday, was a safe space for its students. Many students from remote villages and marginalised sections are enrolled in the university, who aspire for socio-economic mobility. It provides a safe space to its female scholars from diverse sections without placing restrictions on their movement, day or night. In the context of minorities, a safe space is the cornerstone for their representation and facilitates communication, critical dialogue and sharing of learning experiences. Critical thinking and speech raises difficult questions and a university is supposed to provide space for diverse dialogue through which such questions can be addressed. A by-product is the ability to quickly identify socio-political undercurrents which shape state policies. Naturally, student protests are the vehicles through which these alternative thoughts have any chance of reaching the masses. These protests (which are largely peaceful and constitutional) become the medium for communicating dissent.

Jamia, on account of its minority status, also voices the concerns of the repeatedly silenced and marginalised groups. Its contribution to India’s commitment to secularism and inclusivity cannot be overlooked. Moreover, it also provides a platform for students from these communities who want to engage in purely academic endeavours but have limited access and resources to enter the mainstream academia otherwise.

Is this what new India looks like for us students? Why terrorise students out of education and critical thinking? The current crisis in our safe space has left us shattered. How, then, do we assure students that their safe space will be restored. Moreover, how do we continue with our tradition of inclusivity without feeling threatened?

The role of a university goes beyond education; it is also a conscience keeper. And the library is at the heart of it. It is representative of a meditative space where students can escape to, for the pleasure of reading. Vandalising the library, thus, symbolises an attack on students’ safe space. Seemingly, all of a sudden, the library has become a greater threat than protestors on the street.

(Ushoese Pal is a doctoral scholar and a UGC fellow at the Department of sociology, Jamia Millia Islamia. Sanchari Basu Chaudhuri is a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.)
Apart from defrauding the states of their legitimate share of resources, the second way in which the Centre is attempting to cope with the fiscal squeeze, which it has become subject to under the neo-liberal regime, is by privatising a whole range of public sector enterprises.

Not a day passes without the government announcing some measure of privatisation. Civil Aviation Minister Hardeep Puri claims that public sector Air India has to close down if it is not privatised—a remarkable statement by a senior government functionary for two reasons. First, if the private buyer is supposed to be able to revive the company (for otherwise why should anyone be buying it), then why can’t the government do the same?

Second, even if one accepts for argument’s sake that what Puri says is correct, his saying so is most bizarre because it amounts to a signal to potential buyers to scale down their bids for it.

A large number of public sector enterprises in the Asansol–Durgapur belt of West Bengal are being sought to be privatised, riding roughshod over the demands of the trade unions. Public sector telecom major BSNL’s employees are being more or less forced to accept voluntary retirement, so that the company can no longer remain viable and would have to be sold off. Such examples can be multiplied.

Of course, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, with its total lack of understanding of the significance of the public sector and also with its closeness to the corporate–financial oligarchy, is prone to dismantling the public sector anyway. But now it feels an added urgency for doing so in order to cope with the fiscal squeeze that the economic downturn has brought in its wake.

To stimulate privatisation, international finance capital (and its leading institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank) have resorted to a fiddle, namely, to exclude the proceeds from the sale of public sector assets from the fiscal deficit; the government can, therefore, show a smaller fiscal deficit figure, one conforming to the “Fiscal Responsibility” target, by selling public sector assets. This is a completely illegitimate practice, but it is done for ideological reasons, for effecting privatisation.

The reason why it is illegitimate is quite simple. A fiscal deficit of course has none of the ill-effects on the economy that spokesmen of finance capital claim it has, in a demand-constrained economy, i.e. in an economy where there is unemployment and unutilised capacity: it neither leads to any “crowding out” of private investment (since there is no “fixed pool” of savings from which, if the government borrowed more to finance a fiscal deficit, less would be left for the private investors, leading to a “crowding out”), this “fixed pool” will not increase an iota by the privatisation of public sector assets.

Likewise, suppose the fiscal deficit would indeed be causing inflation by creating excess demand, then privatising public sector assets would not reduce this excess demand an iota, since the buyers of these assets would not be skimping on their demand for goods and services for purchasing public sector assets.

Thus, the sale of public sector assets does not actually close any fiscal deficit; and yet finance capital, which vigorously opposes a fiscal deficit, is perfectly willing to accept the sale of public sector assets as a means of closing it, i.e. as being on a par with taxation.

Put differently, there is a distinction in economics between “flows” and “stocks”. A fiscal deficit, which is the difference between the government’s income (a “flow”) and expenditure (another “flow”), is itself a “flow” item; it can be closed through some “flow” adjustment,
either larger tax revenue (a “flow”) or reduced “flow” of expenditure.

On the other side, the sale of public sector assets refers to a “stock” transaction, involving a property transfer and hence balance sheet adjustments all around, which does not impinge on any “flows”, and, therefore, cannot possibly mitigate any ill-effects of a fiscal deficit.

The fact that IMF and other institutions of finance capital accept the sale of public sector assets as a supposedly legitimate means of closing a fiscal deficit only shows their bad faith, the fact that their intellectual position is dictated not by any scientific considerations, but rather by an opportunistic desire to push the ideological agenda of privatisation.

The intellectual dishonesty does not end there. When a private company buys public sector assets, it does so not with resources raised through skimping on its expenditure, like some petty shop-keeper, but through borrowing or through foregoing the purchase of some other assets, all of which amount to balance sheet adjustments.

Now, if the government has a fiscal deficit of Rs 100, then it would be borrowing this sum from, say, a bank to finance this deficit. But if it privatises public sector assets to the same extent, then the private buyer of these assets would instead be borrowing Rs 100 from the bank to purchase these assets.

To say that a fiscal deficit is “bad” for the economy but the sale of public sector assets is “okay”, amounts therefore to saying that expenditure financed by the government’s borrowing Rs 100 from the bank is “bad” but the same expenditure financed by a private entity borrowing from the bank is “okay”! This is totally without any economic rationale whatsoever.

The matter can be looked at in yet another way. A fiscal deficit entails an increase in government debt; it is financed by selling IOUs by the government. Privatisation of public sector assets entails selling government equity to private entities. To say that privatisation is harmless but a fiscal deficit is not, amounts, therefore, to saying that selling government equity is harmless while selling government bonds (IOUs) is not, which again is totally without any justification, a mere ideological ploy to effect privatisation.

The public sector was set up as a bulwark against the hegemony of metropolitan capital. It was a part of the agenda of unshackling the economy from imperialist domination. Under the neo-liberal dispensation, of course, governments go wooing metropolitan capital; nonetheless the public sector can still play a role by way of putting a limit to the extent to which metropolitan capital and the domestic corporate-financial oligarchy utilise their monopoly position to fleece the country.

A government concerned with the interests of the nation, even when it gets caught in the web of neoliberalism, would nurture the public sector to defend national interests against the depredations of foreign and domestic monopoly capital; but not so our Hindutva votaries who denounce all their critics as “anti-national” but hold dear the interests of precisely these monopolists, against the nation. They have no compunctions about dismantling the public sector built up with such effort in the teeth of fierce opposition from imperialism.

The modus operandi of neoliberal fiscal policy is clear from all this. Neo-liberalism makes fiscal policy “pro-cyclical” rather than “anti-cyclical”. Revenues drop when the economy experiences a downturn. And to maintain its expenditure, the Central government can neither tax capitalists (even though doing so would not hurt post-tax profits one iota compared with what it would otherwise have been if government expenditure had been cut), nor enlarge the fiscal deficit; it resorts to squeezing the states, with dangerous consequences for federalism, and to privatising the public sector which makes the nation further vulnerable to the depredations of foreign and domestic monopoly capital.

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Articles Put on Janata Blog (December 8, 2019)

1. Subhash Gatade, “Ambedkar For Our Times!” (full article)
2. Countercurrents Collective, “Argentina’s President Fernandez Rejects Remaining IMF Money”
3. Tanya Wadhwa, “Colombian National Strike Continues”
4. Fabio Resmini, “The Long Coup in Ecuador”
5. Alison Bodine, “The Rising Fight Against Neo-Liberalism in Chile”
6. Fr. Cedric Prakash, “Have We Really Done Away with Our Constitution?”
9. Ian Angus, “Superbugs in the Anthropocene: A Profit-Driven Plague”
Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966)—mythologised in popular imagination as ‘Veer Savarkar’—not only refrained from participating in the freedom struggle after the British released him from prison on account of his relentless pleas for mercy, but also actively collaborated with the English rulers to whom he had declared his loyalty.

At the time when Subhas Chandra Bose was raising his Indian National Army to confront the British in India, Savarkar helped the colonial government recruit lakhs of Indians into its armed forces. He further destabilised the freedom movement by pushing his Hindutva ideology, which deepened the communal divide at a time when a united front against colonial rule was needed. Post independence, Savarkar was also implicated in Mahatma Gandhi’s murder.

Such is the man who was declared by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to be “the true son of Mother India and inspiration for many people”, in his Twitter salutation to Savarkar on his birth anniversary on May 28 last year. In 2015, commemorating Savarkar on his 132nd birth anniversary, the prime minister bowed before a portrait of the Hindutva icon in remembrance of “his indomitable spirit and invaluable contribution to India’s history”.

And somewhere in the stream of Twitter accolades from numerous BJP ministers that followed, the TV anchor Rajdeep Sardesai joined the chorus, albeit with a caveat. While he disagreed “with his ideology”, Sardesai said he honoured Savarkar’s “spirit as freedom fighter”.

A freedom fighter he definitely was, for a certain period in the first decade of the previous century, long before he’d begun articulating the notion of Hindutva. Savarkar was then an atheist and a rationalist, who had started out on a revolutionary road to rid India of her colonial yoke. On sailing to England to study law in 1906, Savarkar founded the Free India Society to organise Indian students studying in England to fight for independence. In a famous declaration before the society, he said:

“We must stop complaining about this British officer or that officer, this law or that law. There would be no end to that. Our movement must not be limited to being against any particular law, but it must be for acquiring the authority to make laws itself. In other words, we want absolute independence.”

However, when the time came to pay the price for being a revolutionary under an oppressive colonial government, Savarkar found himself converted and transformed into “the staunchest advocate of loyalty to the English government”, to use his own words. This was after he was arrested and sentenced to serve 50 years in the infamous Cellular Jail on the Andaman islands after he was found guilty of supplying the pistol that a member of the Abhinav Bharat Society used to assassinate the then collector of Nasik, A.M.T. Jackson, in 1909.

‘Veer’ Savarkar pleading with the British for mercy

Barely a month into the hardships of prison, Savarkar wrote his first mercy petition, which was rejected in 1911. In the second mercy petition, which he wrote in 1913, he confesses that he was misguided into taking the revolutionary road because of the “excited and hopeless situation of India in 1906–1907.” He concluded his November 14, 1913 petition by assuring the British of his conscientious conversion. “If the government in their manifold beneficence and mercy release me,” he wrote, “I for one cannot but be the staunchest advocate of… loyalty to the English government.”

“Moreover,” he went on to say, making an offer which few freedom fighters could even think of making, “my conversion to the constitutional line would bring back all those misled young men in India and abroad who were once looking up to me as their guide. I am ready to serve the Government in any capacity they like, for as my conversion is conscientious. The Mighty alone can afford to be merciful and therefore where else can the prodigal son return but to the paternal doors of the government?”

In his fourth mercy petition, dated March 30, 1920, Savarkar told the British that under the threat of an invasion from the north by the “fanatic hordes of Asia” who were posing as “friends”, he was convinced that “every intelligent lover of India would heartily and loyally co-operate with the British people in the interests of India herself.”

After reassuring the colonial
government that he was trying his “humble best to render the hands of the British dominion a bond of love and respect,” Savarkar went on to exalt the English empire: “Such an Empire as is foreshadowed in the Proclamation, wins my hearty adherence”. “But”, he added:

“If the Government wants a further security from me then I and my brother are perfectly willing to give a pledge of not participating in politics for a definite and reasonable period that the Government would indicate… This or any pledge, e.g., of remaining in a particular province or reporting our movements to the police for a definite period after our release—any such reasonable conditions meant genuinely to ensure the safety of the State would be gladly accepted by me and my brother.”

Finally, after spending ten years in the cellular jail and writing many mercy petitions, Savarkar, along with his brother, was shifted to a prison in Ratnagiri in 1921, before his subsequent release in 1924 on the condition of the confinement of his movements to the Ratnagiri district and his non-participation in political activities. These restrictions were lifted only in 1937.

Self-glorification of a defeated man

One might have argued in 1924 that the promises he made about his love and loyalty to the British, about his readiness to serve the government in any capacity required and so on were a part of a tactical ploy employed to make his way out of prison so that he could continue his freedom struggle. However, history has proven him to be a man of ‘honour’, who stood by the promise he made to the colonial government. How then, one might wonder, did Savarkar acquire the title ‘Veer’?

A book titled Life of Barrister Savarkar authored by Chitragupta was the first biography of Savarkar, published in 1926. Savarkar was glorified in this book for his courage and deemed a hero. And two decades after Savarkar’s death, when the second edition of this book was released in 1987 by the Veer Savarkar Prakashan, the official publisher of Savarkar’s writings, Ravindra Ramdas, revealed in its preface that “Chitragupta is none other than Veer Savarkar”.

In this autobiography masquerading as a biography written by a different author, Savarkar assures the reader that:

“Savarkar is born hero, he could almost despise those who shirked duty for fear of consequences. If once he rightly or wrongly believed that a certain system of Government was iniquitous, he felt no scruples in devising means to eradicate the evil.”

Without mincing words in the name of modesty or moderating the use of adjectives in the name of literary minimalism, Savarkar wrote that Savarkar “seemed to possess no few distinctive marks of character, such as an amazing presence of mind, indomitable courage, unconquerable confidence in his capability to achieve great things”. “Who,” he asked about himself, “could help admiring his courage and presence of mind?”

Perhaps in polite society, we ought to quietly look the other way with an embarrassed smile when an ex-revolutionist, after breaking down in prison, indulges in self-glorification under the cover of a pen name after his release. And, indeed, no one who did not suffer the conditions the inmates of that infamous prison on the Andaman islands had to endure, can claim the right to castigate Savarkar for refusing to contribute to the freedom movement after he was released from jail.

But his purporting of an ideology which destabilised the freedom movement by deepening the divisions along sectarian lines and his active rendering of support to the British government—which was determined to subdue the anti-colonial struggle—was a betrayal that must be hard to forgive, especially for a ‘patriot’ and a ‘nationalist’.

Derailing the freedom movement with his Hindutva ideology

The sectarian mindset, which eventually culminated into the articulation of Hindutva ideology, was evident—as Jyotirmaya Sharma has demonstrated in Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism—in the early Savarkar, that too from a tender age. Only a boy of 12, Savarkar, leading a pack of his schoolmates, attacked a mosque in the aftermath of the Hindu–Muslim riots in Bombay and Pune in 1894–95. Holding back the Muslim boys of the village using “knives, pins and foot rulers”, Savarkar and his friends mounted their attack, “showering stones on the mosque, shattering its windows and tiles”. Recollecting the incident, Savarkar later wrote, “We vandalised the mosque to our heart’s content and raised the flag of our bravery on it.” When the news of Hindus killing Muslims in the riots and its aftermath reached him, little Savarkar and his friends “would dance with joy”.

While the seeds of communalism had been sown in his mind at a very young age, the poison fruit of Hindutva ideology was to blossom
only in his late 20s, after Savarkar’s will to fight the British had been defeated during his imprisonment. It was during his last few years of imprisonment that Savarkar first articulated the concept of Hindutva in his book, Essentials of Hindutva, which was published in 1923 and reprinted as Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu? in 1928. This ideology was a deeply divisive one which had the potential to distract attention from the British and cast it on Muslims instead.

While he was careful to specify that Hindutva, or ‘Hinduness’, was different from Hinduism and encompassed a wide range of cultures including, among others, the “Sanatanists, Satnamis, Sikhs, Aryas, Anaryas, Marathas and Madrasis, Brahmans and Panchamas”, he nonetheless made it a point to warn that it “would be straining the usage of words too much—we fear, to the point of breaking—if we call a Mohammedan a Hindu because of his being a resident of India.”

“Mohammedan or Christian communities”, he argued, “possess all the essential qualifications of Hindutva but one and that is that they do not look upon India as their Holyland.” A cohesive nation, according to Savarkar, can ideally be built only by those people who inhabit a country which is not only the land of their forefathers, but “also the land of their Gods and Angels, of Seers and Prophets; the scenes of whose history are also the scenes of their mythology.”

The love and loyalty of Muslims, he warned, “is, and must necessarily be divided between the land of their birth and the land of their Prophets… Mohammedans would naturally set the interests of their Holyland above those of their Motherland.” One might wonder whether this line of reasoning implies that Muslims cannot be nationals of Pakistan or Afghanistan either, because they would place the interests of Saudi Arabia, wherein lie Mecca and Madina, above the interests of their own country.

Back in the 1920s, the damage that could be done to the freedom movement by his ideology did not fail to come to the notice of the colonial government. Even though Savarkar was released on condition that he should not participate in political activities, he was allowed by the British to organise the Ratnagiri Mahasabha, which undertook what in today’s lingo is called “Ghar Wapsi” and played music in front of mosques while prayers were on.

He was also allowed to meet K.B. Hedgewar, a disillusioned Congressman, who, inspired by his ideology of Hindutva, intended to discuss with him a strategy for creating a Hindu Rashtra. A few months after this meeting, in September 1925, Hedgewar founded the RSS, a communal organisation which, like Savarkar, remained subservient to the British.

In spite of the blanket ban on political participation, Shamsul Islam, in his book Religious Dimensions of Indian Nationalism: A Study of RSS points out:

“The British rulers naturally overlooked these political activities as the future of colonial rule in India rested on the communal divide and Savarkar was leaving no stone unturned in aggravating the Hindu–Muslim divide.”

Collaboration with the colonial government

Savarkar was elected as the president of Hindu Mahasabha in 1937, the year when the Indian National Congress won a landslide victory in the provincial elections, decimating both the Hindu Mahasabha and the other communal party, the Muslim League, which failed to form a government even in Muslim-majority regions. But just two years later, the Congress relinquished power in protest when, at the outbreak of the Second World War, the viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, declared India to be at war with Germany without any consultation.

In September 1939, the working committee of the Congress declared that it would render support to Britain’s war efforts in her time of crisis only if the colonial government recognised India’s independence and “the right of her people to frame their constitution through a constituent assembly”. When dominion status was the last concession Linlithgow was willing to grant to India, the ministers of the Congress resigned in protest.

Quick to grab the opportunity, the very next month, Savarkar, in his capacity as president of the Hindu Mahasabha, met Linlithgow. In the report about the meeting sent to secretary of state, Linlithgow wrote:

“The situation, he [Savarkar] said, was that His Majesty’s government must now turn to the Hindus and work with their support…. Our interests were now the same and we must therefore work together… Our interests are so closely bound together, the essential thing is for Hinduism and Great Britain to be friends and the old antagonism was no longer necessary. The Hindu Mahasabha he went on to say favoured an unambiguous undertaking of Dominion status at the end of the war.”

Two months later, addressing the Mahasabha’s Calcutta session, Savarkar urged all universities, colleges and schools to “secure entry
into military forces for youths in any and every way.” When Gandhi had launched his individual satyagraha the following year, Savarkar, at the Mahasabha session held in December 1940 in Madura, encouraged Hindu men to enlist in “various branches of British armed forces en masse.”

In 1941, taking advantage of the World War, Bose had begun raising an army to fight the British by recruiting Indian prisoners of war from the British army held by the Axis powers—efforts which eventually culminated in his invasion of British India with the help of the Japanese military. During this period, addressing the Hindu Mahasabha session at Bhagalpur in 1941, Savarkar told his followers:

“. . . it must be noted that Japan’s entry into the war has exposed us directly and immediately to the attack by Britain’s enemies… Hindu Mahasabhaites must, therefore, rouse Hindus especially in the provinces of Bengal and Assam as effectively as possible to enter the military forces of all arms without losing a single minute.”

In one year alone, Savarkar had boasted in Madura, one lakh Hindus were recruited into the British armed forces as a result of the Mahasabha’s efforts.

In reciprocation, the British commander-in-chief, “expressed his grateful appreciation of the lead given by Barrister Savarkar in exhorting the Hindus to join the forces of the land with a view to defend India from enemy attacks,” according to Hindu Mahasabha archives perused by Shamsul Islam.

In response to the Quit India Movement launched in August 1942, Savarkar instructed Hindu Sabhaaites who were “members of municipalities, local bodies, legislatures or those serving in the army… to stick to their posts,” across the country.

**In coalition with the Muslim League when Pakistan resolution was passed**

That Savarkar and the Hindu Mahasabha actively collaborated with the British may not be difficult to comprehend, since it is widely known that the Hindutva groups regarded Muslims, and not the British, as their primary enemies. What is likely to raise more eyebrows today is the collaboration of the Hindu Mahasabha with the Muslim League.

When the Congress leaders were arrested during the Quit India movement, the Hindu Mahasabha, still presided over by Savarkar, entered into a coalition with the Muslim League to run the governments in Sindh and Bengal—a move Savarkar justified as “practical politics” which calls for “advance through reasonable compromises”.

After all, in spite of the deeply-held conviction by Savarkar and his party that the Muslims—whose holy land lies in a foreign country—cannot be regarded as Indian nationals, the Hindu Mahasabha nevertheless had a great deal in common with the Muslim League. Both parties made no contribution to the struggle for independence from the colonising empire and both were communal parties whose ideologies antagonised the prospects of India remaining undivided after independence.

Even after the Sindh Assembly passed a resolution in 1943 demanding that Pakistan be carved out of India as a separate state for the Muslims, the Mahasabha ministers continued to hold their positions in the coalition government. Not entirely surprising, given that Savarkar had put forth his two-nation theory “a clear sixteen years before the Muslim League embraced the idea of the Hindus and the Muslims as two distinctive nations and demanded the division of India.” And when India was eventually partitioned, Savarkar blamed Gandhi for allowing Pakistan to break away from India, an accusation that stoked the fires of hatred against Gandhi among many of his close devotees, including his ‘lieutenant’—Nathuram Godse.

*(Note: For sources of all quotations given in the above article, see the original article published in *thewire.in* dated 28 May 2019 - Editor.)*

(Pavan Kulkarni is a freelance journalist.)

### Articles Put on Janata Blog (December 15, 2019)

1. Valay Singh, “Ayodhya’s Forgotten Mahant and His Message of Peace”

2. Ishmeet Nagpal, “Ludhiana is Where the Heart Still Beats, Simple Tales of Humanity and Brotherhood”

3. Peter Koenig, “China Breaks the Western Debt Stranglehold on the World”

4. Léon Crémieux, “France has Once Again Entered a Phase of Large-Scale Social Confrontation”


We are living in highly volatile times. Two-and-a-half years ago, in the first general election I contested as Labour leader, our party increased its share of the popular vote by 10 percentage points. On Thursday, on a desperately disappointing night, we fell back eight points.

I have called for a period of reflection in the party, and there is no shortage of things to consider. I don’t believe these two contrasting election results can be understood in isolation.

The last few years have seen a series of political upheavals: the Scottish independence campaign, Labour’s transformation, Brexit, the Labour electoral surge, and now Johnson’s “Get Brexit Done” victory. None of that is a coincidence.

The political system is volatile because it is failing to generate stable support for the status quo following the financial crash of 2008. As Labour leader I’ve made a point of travelling to all parts of our country and listening to people, and I’ve been continually struck how far trust has broken down in politics.

The gap between the richest and the rest has widened. Everyone can see that the economic and political system is not fair, does not deliver justice, and is stacked against the majority.

That has provided an opening for a more radical and hopeful politics that insists it doesn’t have to be like this, and that another world is possible. But it has also fuelled cynicism among many people who know things aren’t working for them, but don’t believe that can change.

I saw that most clearly in the former industrial areas of England and Wales where the wilful destruction of jobs and communities over 40 years has taken a heavy toll. It is no wonder that these areas provided the strongest backlash in the 2016 referendum and, regrettably for Labour, in the general election on Thursday.

In towns where the steelworks have closed, politics as a whole wasn’t trusted, but Boris Johnson’s promise to “get Brexit done”—sold as a blow to the system—was. Sadly that slogan will soon be exposed for the falsehood it is, shattering trust even further.

Despite our best efforts, and our attempts to make clear this would be a turning point for the whole direction of our country, the election became mainly about Brexit.

A Conservative party prepared to exploit divisions capitalised on the frustration created by its own failure to deliver on the referendum result—to the cost of a Labour party seeking to bring our country together to face the future.

The polarisation in the country over Brexit made it more difficult for a party with strong electoral support on both sides. I believe we paid a price for being seen by some as trying to straddle that divide or re-run the referendum.

We now need to listen to the voices of those in Stoke and Scunthorpe, Blyth and Bridgend, Grimsby and Glasgow, who didn’t support Labour. Our country has fundamentally changed since the financial crash and any political project that pretends otherwise is an indulgence.

Progress does not come in a simple straight line. Even though we lost seats heavily on Thursday, I believe the manifesto of 2019 and the movement behind it will be seen as historically important—a real attempt at building a force powerful enough to transform society for the many, not the few. For the first time in decades, many people have had hope for a better future.

That experience, shared by hundreds of thousands of people, cannot be erased. Our task as a movement, and a party that has more than doubled in size, is not over: it now has the urgent task of defending the communities that will come under sustained assault from Boris Johnson’s government and the toxic deal he wants with Donald Trump.

And it must set about ensuring that sense of hope spreads and deepens. As socialists we seek to raise people’s expectations. People in our country deserve so much more—and they can have it, if we work together to achieve it.

I am proud that on austerity, on corporate power, on inequality and on the climate emergency we have won the arguments and rewritten the terms of political debate. But I regret that we did not succeed in converting that into a parliamentary majority for change.

There is no doubt that our policies are popular, from public ownership of rail and key utilities to a massive house-building programme and a pay rise for millions. The question is, how can we succeed in future where we didn’t this time?

There is no quick fix to
overcome the distrust of many voters. Patronising them will not win them over. Labour has to earn their trust. That means the patient work of listening and standing with communities, especially as the government steps up its assault. And it means ensuring that the working class, in all its diversity, is the driving force within our party.

The media attacks on the Labour party for the last four and a half years were more ferocious than ever—and of course that has an impact on the outcome of elections. Anyone who stands up for real change will be met by the full force of media opposition.

The party needs a more robust strategy to meet this billionaire-owned and influenced hostility head-on and, where possible, turn it to our advantage.

We have suffered a heavy defeat, and I take my responsibility for it. Labour will soon have a new leader. But whoever that will be, our movement will continue to work for a more equal and just society, and a sustainable and peaceful world.

I’ve spent my life campaigning for those goals, and will continue to do so. The politics of hope must prevail.

(Jeremy Corbyn is a democratic socialist serving as the leader of the British Labour Party.)

Misleading Narratives on Labour’s Defeat Have a Purpose

Gawain Little

Last night, Labour suffered a stunning election defeat, losing seats in its traditional heartlands and handing a substantial majority to a hard-right Tory government.

Cue the multitude of voices clamouring for Jeremy Corbyn to resign, holding him solely responsible for the result, calling for a shift to the back to the “centre ground” (for which read the dominant narrative that only neoliberal market solutions and mass privatisations can gain any traction with the electorate) and for a new leader from the liberal-right Remain wing of the party.

The problem with this analysis is that the facts of the election simply don’t support what effectively amounts to a call for more self-harm by the Labour Party.

Labour’s defeat was fundamentally about Brexit—and if you don’t believe me, just look at the seats Labour lost and the marginals it failed to gain in the Midlands, in Wales, in northern England. And for anyone arguing that there was a drop in the Labour vote in Remain-supporting constituencies as well, albeit a less pronounced one, yes, there are Leave voters in these constituencies too!

The fact is that working-class Leave voters (by no means all of the working class, as many also voted remain in 2016, but a significant section none the less) felt entirely ignored and betrayed by Labour’s position on the EU. These are people whose communities have been destroyed by 40 years of rampant neoliberalism, while for most of that time, the Labour Party simply stood by and said there was no alternative to the market and progress must run its driven course.

Rightly, they hold the European Union partly responsible for this, as an integral element of the neoliberal framework that enforced privatisation, the export of jobs and the financialisation of economy, which destroyed Britain’s mining and industrial sectors.

Finally presented with a Labour leadership which claimed to stand for the many, not the few, which put forward a radical programme to rebuild Britain in the interests of working people, they expected to be listened to. And they weren’t.

Many former MPs in Leave-voting constituencies argued that the gradual shift from respecting the result of the referendum to eventually calling for a second vote would cost the party dearly. They were proved right and, in a cruel twist of fate, many of them lost their seats as a result.

The blame for this lies squarely with the liberal-right of the party, who forced the left leadership, against their will, to adopt a stance closer and closer to Remain, culminating in the conference motion which tied Labour to a second referendum, and yet these are the very people now calling for Jeremy’s head. At the time, Jeremy and the left were criticised for being unwilling to adopt a Remain policy, for being out of step with the membership; now they are being blamed for the results of that policy.

This is not an accident, or merely a move to shift the blame
for a misguided policy. It is a deliberate attempt to use the crisis to reverse Labour’s shift to the left, to undermine the radical programme put forward at this election.

It should be clear to all that the overt aim of the Remain campaign, led by Alastair Campbell and other remnants of Blair’s cronies, is a dead end, but it must not be allowed to succeed in its other objective—to smash the Labour left and return Labour to the centre-right policies of New Labour.

However, Brexit was clearly not the only factor in this election. From the moment Corbyn became leader, every element of the state, the media, and the entire political edifice has been involved in an unrelenting war to try to destroy “Corbynism” and the shift to the left in Labour.

We have had senior military personnel threatening “mutiny” in the event of a Corbyn victory, threats of foreign intervention by the U.S. government, anti-Corbyn briefings by civil servants, Labour MPs and Labour Party staff, and constant newspaper smears, including false accusations that Corbyn condones anti-semitism and/or supports terrorism.

Yet the scale of media manipulation and lies in the few weeks of the 2019 election has been unprecedented, from false websites and social media accounts spreading deliberate falsehoods to multiple cases of prime-time news footage being manipulated to advantage the Conservative Party.

This is an important reminder of the limited, distorted and precarious nature of our capitalist democracy. As Lenin argued almost 100 years ago to the day, how can freedom of assembly and freedom of the press truly be democratic rights when the capitalists, exploiters, landowners and profiteers own the meeting halls and the printing presses? “Freedom of assembly and of the press is false and hypocritical [under capitalist ‘democracy’], because in fact it is freedom for the rich to buy and bribe the press, freedom for the rich to befuddle the people with the venomous lies of the capitalist press, freedom for the rich to keep as their ‘property’ the landowners mansions, the best buildings etc.”

Our job, argues Lenin, is to “emancipate humanity from the oppression of capital, from the lies, falsehood and hypocrisy of capitalist democracy—democracy for the rich—and establish democracy for the poor, that is, make the blessings of democracy really accessible to the workers.”

So what conclusions can we draw for the future?

Firstly, the immediate battle within the Labour Party will be the battle to retain Labour’s transformative manifesto, which provides an alternative to the rule of the market and puts society before profit, whilst resisting an attempt to continue or deepen the Remain line within the party. If Labour is to re-engage working class voters, it needs to start by listening to them, by offering a transformative programme which they have ownership of and which takes account of their priorities, including the result of the 2016 referendum.

Secondly, we must acknowledge that the sustained attacks the party faced from the media and the state were not specific to Corbyn, they were not a reflection of a weakness of personality or an inability to lead.

Quite the opposite, they were a recognition of the danger a radical Labour programme posed to the status quo of neoliberal capitalism. Any leader of the Labour Party committed to a similar transformative programme would face the same.

The rich and powerful in our society think that, by attacking Corbyn, they can neutralise the movement but, as Jeremy himself has said, “It is not me they fear, it’s you!” We must prove that correct by defending the leftward shift in Labour and ensuring that any leadership transition is a managed process of succession, not a lurch to the right.

Finally, we need to recognise that the electoral arena is only one part of the class struggle. Engaging with working-class communities to build a transformative programme is not something that should simply be done by the Labour Party at election time. We need a much broader movement, with much deeper roots in our diverse communities, and the struggle needs to continue all year round.

We need to be building effective union and political groups in workplaces and communities right across Britain, led by workplace and community reps who see their role as bringing together workers to build power, both to win the defensive battles we will need to fight against the Tory onslaught, and to extend their rights and their control over their workplaces and their communities.

We need a return to whole worker organising, across workplaces and communities, to build an integrated movement, not based simply on a core of politicised activists but on deep roots within the class which can mobilise organised workers, in elections and on the streets, to defend their communities.

(Gawain Little is a British socialist and trade unionist.)
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