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From the Editor's Desk

In an unprecedented act, on 12 January 2018, four seniormost judges of the Supreme Court went public and held a press conference to voice their concerns about how the Supreme Court of India was being administered by the Chief Justice, especially the manner in which he was assigning cases having far-reaching consequences for the nation, to selected benches without any rationale or rule, and in total disregard of well-established conventions. The last straw was the Loya case, wherein a judge looking into a very sensitive case died in mysterious circumstances. If the impression gains ground that judges looking into cases where powerful politicians are involved are vulnerable, their safety is not assured, then the entire judicial system collapses.

The charges being voiced in the media by some that they should have kept the matter within the Supreme Court fraternity, and by going public they have maligned the judiciary, is utter nonsense. The judges made it clear in their press conference that they had been raising these issues with the Chief Justice for months, but when it became clear to them that nothing was going to change, they were left with no option but to go public. As the judges made it clear in their press conference, the very “integrity of the institution” (the judiciary) was at stake.

The fact of the matter is, under the Modi-led BJP Government, it is not just the integrity of the Supreme Court that is being compromised, but all constitutional institutions are under threat. That is because the BJP does not respect the customs and conventions that allow these institutions to function properly.

Here are a few examples to illustrate this. There is no official leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha. Legislatures, especially in the states, are in session for ever fewer days. Important bills are being pushed through without scrutiny by parliamentary committees. Since the BJP presently does not have a majority in the Rajya Sabha, it is trying to weaken the federal structure and bypass the Rajya Sabha. In March 2017, the BJP ramrodded

the Finance Bill through Parliament without giving much time for debate—the Bill had more than 40 amendments moved by the finance minister himself; several of these amendments involved very important issues, and a separate amendment should have been moved for each specific law in both houses of Parliament; such a finance bill has not been heard of in Indian legislative mechanism. Worse, the BJP got the Aadhar Bill passed by the Lok Sabha as a money bill, which means that it did not require to be passed by the Rajya Sabha. While on the one hand, Modi talks big about zero corruption, the government is quietly weakening anti-corruption institutions: though the Lokpal Act was passed by Parliament in 2013, not a single Lokpal has been appointed in the last four years; on top of it, the government is attempting to dilute the Act through amendments; similarly, the Whistleblowers' Act has not been operationalised; the BJP after coming to power has made a U-turn on the issue of bringing political parties under the RTI Act; on top of it, the government has made corporate funding of political parties more opaque! The Modi-Shah duo have launched a no-holds barred campaign to destroy state-level parties like the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi, Janata Dal (United) in Bihar and Trinamool Congress in Bengal that have the capacity to form an alliance to defeat the BJP in 2019. Lt. Governors have made it nearly impossible for elected governments to function. Throwing propriety to the winds, former judges are being appointed to politically sensitive posts.

Although every government has breached such conventions in the past, the scale and frequency of recent breaches is alarming.

Much more dangerous than this breach of constitutionalism is that the BJP does not believe in the ideals embodied in the preamble of the Indian Constitution. It does not believe in democracy. It has launched a brutal offensive to silence its political opponents as well as secular and Left intellectuals, labelling all opponents of the regime as anti-nationals, hounding them through a

pliant media and getting a docile police force to arrest them under false charges of sedition. It does not believe in equality. It in fact believes in resurrecting all the traditional hierarchies of the past, including both the caste system as well as gender inequality, as sanctioned by the infamous law book of ancient India, the Manusmriti. It does not believe in secularism too; BJP leaders have made no secret of their desire to remove the word

'secularism' from the preamble of the Indian Constitution. The BJP is the political arm of the RSS, and the RSS is committed to transforming secular and democratic India into a Hindu Rashtra.

It is not just constitutionalism, but the very Constitution of India, that is under threat.

-Neeraj Jain

WITH BEST COMPLIMENTS

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Such Significance of Secularism being a Pillar of the Indian Constitution

Rajindar Sachar

The Preamble of Our Constitution mandates. WE THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN SOCIALIST SECULAR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC.

It is well settled that the Preamble is the key to the Constitution and the objectives mentioned in the Preamble, namely the ideals of Socialism, Secularism and Democracy, must govern any programme of the governments.

It is self evident that secularism as a philosophy as highlighted in the Preamble is one of the working foundations of the Indian Constitution.

It is implicit in the secular character of the Indian State that no religion can claim superiority of status on any other religion. All religions under our Constitution have equal acceptance and status. A single citizenship is assured to all persons irrespective of their religion.

Secularism does not signify anti-religion. In India people fervently believe in their respective religions and an overwhelming number of persons of all communities give equal respect to the religion of others. Secularism signifies giving equal dignity and respect to all religions. Of course it goes without saying that the Indian State has no religion of its own, nor for that matter can any religion claim superiority over another religion such as by resorting to the false premise that it is indigenous while others are foreign. This is heresy not permitted by our Constitution, which gives equal reverence to all the religions practiced by the various communities of India. The Supreme Court too has declared that the concept of secularism is that the State will have no religion of its own.

All religions have the same message. Thus *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the world is one family) shows the spirit of tolerance in Hinduism. The same message of humanity and common good runs through all religions. Thus the Holy Quran proclaims, "All the created

ones belong to the family of God . . . so, an Arab has no precedence over a non-Arab, a White over a Black". And Christ said succinctly, "All are children of God."

It is a truism that in any country the faith and the confidence of the minorities in the impartial and even functioning of the State is the acid test of being a civilised State. This is accepted wisdom, and was succinctly expressed by Lord Acton as follows:

A state which is incompetent to satisfy different races condemns itself; a state which labours to neutralise, to absorb or to expel them is destitute of the chief basis of self-government.

We need only substitute minorities for races in the above quotation to apply the test to India.

But much earlier, the founding fathers/mothers of Indian Constitution with their vision to secure to all citizens justice, liberty, equality and fraternity provided these rights for the minorities. Thus the Fundamental Rights Chapter in Part III of our Constitution specifically provides, vide Articles 25 to 30, various rights and privileges for the minorities such as:

- i. Freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion.
- ii. Freedom to manage religious affairs.
- iii. Freedom as to payment of taxes for promotion of any particular religion.
- iv. Freedom as to attendance at religious instruction or religious worship in certain educational institutions.
- v. Protection of interests of minorities.
- vi. Right of minorities to establish and administer educational institutions.

Supreme Court and Secularism

However, mere provision of Rights can give no

assurance by itself. It is for this reason that Article 32 guarantees to every citizen the right to move the Supreme Court for the enforcement of Fundamental Rights. This article gives an assurance to the minorities that in case of apprehension that the political process is not giving them justice, they are not without remedy. The Supreme Court has upheld secularism in no uncertain terms. In the words of Chief Justice S.R. Das in the case pertaining to the Kerala Education Bill 1957 [AIR 1958 SC 956]:

We the people of India have given unto ourselves the Constitution which is not for any particular community or section but for all. Its provisions are intended to protect all, minority as well as majority communities. . . . It is, we conceive, the duty of this Court to uphold the fundamental rights and thereby honour the sacred obligation to the minority communities who are of our own.

The same sentiment was expressed by the Supreme Court when it said [Dr. Ismael Faruqui vs. Union of India, 1994 (6) SCC 360]:

It is clear from the constitutional scheme that it guarantees equality in the matter of religion to all individuals and groups irrespective of their faith emphasising that there is no religion of the State itself. The Preamble of the Constitution read in particular with Articles 25 to 28 emphasises this aspect. . . . The concept of secularism is one facet of the right to equality woven as the central golden thread in the fabric depicting the pattern of the scheme in our Constitution.

The Court stressed that:

The purpose of law in plural societies is not the progressive assimilation of the minorities in the majoritarian milieu. This would not solve the problem; but would vainly seek to dissolve it.

Posing the question as to what is the law's purpose, it referred with approval to the test laid down by Lord Scarman of the House of Lords of the UK:

The purpose of the law must be not to extinguish the groups which make the society but to devise political, social and legal means of preventing them from falling apart and so destroying the plural society of which they are members.

Thus inclusive development in India and for that matter in any country is the only path to prosperity. It is an undeniable truth and needs to be irrevocably accepted by all in India, namely that the minorities, Muslims and Christians are not outsiders. They are an integral part of India. Let me quote what Swami Vivekananda, one of the greatest spiritual personalities of India, has to say of the intimate connection between the spirit of Islam and Hinduism. He told the Hindus not to talk of the superiority of one religion over another. Even toleration of other faiths was not right; it smacked of blasphemy. He pointed out that his guru, Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa, had accepted all religions as true. Swami Vivekananda in fact profusely praised Islam and in a letter to his friend Mohammed Sarfraz Hussain (10 June 1898) without any hesitation wrote:

Therefore I am firmly persuaded that without the help of practical Islam, theories of Vedantism, however fine and wonderful they may be, are entirely valueless to the vast mass of mankind. . . . For our own motherland a junction of the two great systems Hinduism and Islam—Vedanta brain and Islam body—is the only hope. I see in my mind's eye the future perfect India rising out of this chaos and strife, glorious and invincible, with Vedanta brain and Islam body.

There can thus be no real progress in India which does not include minorities, Muslims, Christians as equal stakeholders. It needs to be emphasised that development and growth in the country has to be all inclusive—the mode of development must necessarily take into account the needs and sensitivities of minorities, Dalits, tribals in India. This was reaffirmed and emphasised recently by the Socialist Party (India), which is inspired by and follows the philosophy and programme of Shri Jayaprakash Narayan and Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia, thus; “that they must be treated as a special trust and there is an urgent need to attend to their problems immediately.”

United Nations and Minorities

The UN Declaration of the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities 1992 mandates in Article 1 that States shall protect the existence of the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity.

The minorities, many a times, may feel that there is

discrimination against them in the matter of employment, housing, for obtaining loans from the public or private sector banks, or opportunities for good schooling. It is self evident that if minorities have these perceptions, law must provide an effective mechanism which should examine their complaints and be able to give effective relief.

In this connection it is heartening to find confirmation in the report of UN Human Rights Council, Forum on Minority Issues, on December 14–15, 2010 wherein it has made some significant recommendations on minorities and their effective participation in economic life, which each country is mandated to follow. The Council emphasises:

Consequently, the right of minorities to participate effectively in economic life must be fully taken into account by governments seeking to promote equality at every level. From implementing non-discrimination in employment and enforcing protection laws in the private sector to developing national economic development and international development assistance schemes, governments face the constant challenge of ensuring that the rights of minorities are protected and that they benefit as equal members in society. . . .

Governments can consider both targeted and inclusive approaches to addressing the economic and social exclusion of minorities. . . .

Governments should gather and regularly publicize disaggregated data to measure and monitor the effective participation of minorities in economic life. Improved data collection should be made a priority for the areas of employment and labour rights, poverty rates, access to social security, access to credit and other financial services, education and training, and property and land tenure rights.

In the report of the Working Group on Minorities formed by UN Sub Commission on Protection of Minorities, it was the unanimous view that the assimilative approach was not promoted by the United Nations, and that formal recognition of minorities is the first crucial step towards their effective participation in society. This means not only participation in governance, but also involvement in the economy. Also accepted was

the need for multi-lingual education and respect for cultural identity of minorities and the need to ensure fair representation of minorities within the law enforcement system and the workplace. The basic task is to reconcile the pluralism which then exists in that State, and the need to respect the identity of the various groups, with the overall concerns of non-discrimination, equality, national security, territorial integrity and political independence.

UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues has recently emphasised the following:

The outcome document of the 2005 World Summit of Heads of State and Government, approved by the General Assembly, notes that “the promotion and protection of the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities contributes to political and social stability and peace and enriches the cultural diversity and heritage of society.”

Respect for minority rights assists in achieving stable and prosperous societies, in which human rights, development and security are achieved by all, and shared by all.

Inclusive Development Sole Path to Prosperity

As a member of the United Nations, the Indian government has a legal obligation to give concrete shape to these requirements, if its claim to minority welfare is to have any meaning.

Amongst the various recommendations by the High Level Committee constituted by the Prime Minister on the ‘Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India’ (report submitted in November 2006), a very urgent recommendation dealt with the unfairness of divisions of electoral constituencies which results in lesser number of Muslims in the legislature as compared to what they are broadly entitled based on the population. This anomaly arises from the irrational demarcation of seats in the legislature.

Thus for instance, in UP there is abundant potential for a substantial number of Muslims to win seats. UP sends the largest number of members (80) to the Lok Sabha. There are 25–52% Muslim’s in 18 seats, in 23 seats Muslims are 15–24% and in another 18 seats Muslims are 10–14%. The demographic–electoral reflection is similar in most other states. However, the

constituencies with substantial number of Muslims have been reserved for Scheduled Castes, and constituencies with substantial number of Scheduled Caste voters are unreserved. This is unfair to both Muslims and the SC electorate. The Committee had concluded that Muslims were thus denied benefits in politics since assembly constituencies where the voter population from the community was substantial were reserved for scheduled caste candidates. It would therefore be more equitable to reserve those constituencies for SCs where their voter population is high, rather than those where it is low and the Muslims presence is higher.

The Committee had hoped that its report would receive the attention of the government immediately because the Delimitation Commission was at that time engaged in this exercise. However, the High Powered Committee's suggestion was ignored during the delimitation. This anomaly is a reason for the low representation of Muslims in the legislatures. How inequitable that important issues related to the community are ignored or don't get the desired priority! Somebody has to take the responsibility for taking concrete action on this issue; mere lip sympathy is a facade.

Inclusive development in the country alone is the path to prosperity. It is an undeniable truth and needs to be irrevocably accepted by all in the country that minorities, Muslims and Christians, are not outsiders. They are an integral part of India. There can be no real progress which does not include minorities, Muslims and Christians, as equal stakeholders. I cannot put it better than what Sir Sayyed Ahmed Khan, one of the greatest leaders of our country, had to say over a century back. Gandhiji repeated it in 1921, and also in another prayer meeting at Rajghat on 24 March 1947 thus:

In the words of Sir Sayyed Ahmed Khan, I would say that Hindus and Muslims are the two eyes of mother India. Just as the trouble in one eye affects the other too, similarly the whole of India suffers when either Hindus or Muslims suffer.

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's clarion call emphasises that composite culture is the bedrock of secularism pervading our country. He said thus:

Islam has now as great a claim on the soil of India as Hinduism. If Hinduism has been the religion of the people here for several

thousands. of years, Islam also has been their religion for a thousand years. Just as a Hindu can say with pride that he is an Indian and follows Hinduism, so also we can say with equal pride that we are Indians and follow Islam. I shall enlarge this orbit still further. The Indian Christian is equally entitled to say with pride that he is an Indian and is following a religion of India, namely Christianity.

Eleven hundred years of common history have enriched India with our common achievement. Our languages, our poetry, our literature, our culture, our art, our dress, our manners and customs, the innumerable happenings of our daily life, everything bears the stamp of our joint endeavour. There is indeed no aspect of our life which has escaped this stamp. . . .

This joint wealth is the heritage of our common nationality, and we do not want to leave it and go back to the times when this joint life had not begun. If there are any Hindus amongst us who desire to bring back the Hindu life of a thousand years ago and more, they dream, and such dreams are vain fantasies. So also if there are any Muslims who wish to revive their past civilisation and culture, which they brought a thousand years ago from Iran and Central Asia, they dream also and the sooner they wake up the better. These are unnatural fancies which cannot take root in the soil of reality. I am one of those who believe that revival may be a necessity in a religion but in social matters it is a denial of progress.

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Nehru, Ambedkar and Challenge of Majoritarianism

Subhash Gatade

The spectacle of what is called religion, or at any rate organised religion, in India and elsewhere, has filled me with horror and I have frequently condemned it and wished to make a clean sweep of it. Almost always it seemed to stand for blind belief and reaction, dogma and bigotry, superstition, exploitation and the preservation of vested interests.

– Toward Freedom: The Autobiography of Jawaharlal Nehru (1936), pp. 240–241.

If Hindu Raj does become a fact, it will no doubt, be the greatest calamity for this country. No matter what the Hindus say, Hinduism is a menace to liberty, equality and fraternity. On that account it is incompatible with democracy. Hindu Raj must be prevented at any cost.

– Ambedkar, ‘Pakistan or Partition of India’, p. 358.

Introduction

India’s slow ushering into a majoritarian democracy is a matter of concern for every such individual who still believes in pluralism, democracy, equality and a clear separation of religion and politics. The way people are being hounded for raising dissenting opinions, for eating food of their choice or entering into relationships of their own liking or celebrating festivals according to their own faith is unprecedented. The situation has reached such extremes that one can even be publicly lynched for belonging to one of the minority religions or for engaging in an activity which is considered to be ‘suspicious’ by the majority community.

No doubt there is no direct harm to the basic structure of the Constitution, its formal structure remains intact, *de jure* India does remain a democracy as well as a republic, but *de facto* democracy has slowly metamorphosed into majoritarianism and the *sine qua non* of a republic—that its citizens are supreme—is being watered down fast. It does not need underlining that this process has received tremendous boost with the ascent

of Hindutva supremacist forces at the centrestage of Indian politics.

The brazen manner in which a Union cabinet minister—who has taken oath to abide by the Constitution—declared in public that they have come to power to ‘change the constitution’ and the manner in which ruling party members preferred to remain silent about it can be seen as a sign of the crisis facing Indian society. Perhaps less said the better about the man who calls Constitution ‘the most sacred book’ and who loves to project himself as a disciple of Dr Ambedkar.

A sobering fact at this juncture is to remember that leading lights of the movement for political and social emancipation—which unfolded itself under British rule—definitely had a premonition of things to come and had rightly cautioned / underlined / warned the people of the bleak future which awaits them if they do not remain vigilant. As Patel’s biographer Rajmohan Gandhi points out:

Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru and Patel formed a crucial trimvirate that agreed that independent India would not be a Hindu Rashtra but one that offered equal rights to all. After Gandhi’s departure and until Patel’s death, Patel and Nehru differend on several matters but not on some fundamentals. With the help of others including Ambedkar, Maulana Azad, Rajendra Prasad and Rajaji, they entrenched secularism and equality in the Constitution.¹

An inkling of the collective thinking among them is evident if one looks at the Objectives Resolution moved in the Constituent Assembly by Pandit Nehru on 13 December 1946 and adopted unanimously by the Constituent Assembly on 22 January 1947. It declared its firm resolve not only to make India an independent sovereign republic but also to guarantee and secure for all the people of India

social, economic and political justice; equality of

status and opportunities and equality before law; and fundamental freedoms—of speech, expression, belief, faith, worship, vocation, association and action—subject to law and public morality;

and also ensure that adequate safeguards shall be provided for minorities, backward and tribal areas, and depressed and other backward classes.

The key importance of the Objectives Resolution (which was then called / moved as ‘Resolution on the Aims and Objects of the Constitution’) can be gauged from the fact that according to the Drafting Committee of the Constitution, it was the basis of the ‘Preamble of the Constitution’. The Chairman of the Drafting Committee was Dr B.R. Ambedkar, who was appointed to this post at the suggestion of Mahatma Gandhi possibly due to his scholarship in legal and constitutional matters.

One can take a look at the way Gandhi’s last struggle—the way he undertook fast unto death to stop the communal riots in 1947—unfolded itself, or the way Jawaharlal Nehru cautioned people about the possibility of India turning into a ‘Hindu Pakistan’² or the way he led the fight against danger of majoritarianism within the Congress itself. Describing communalism as an ‘Indian version of fascism’, Pandit Nehru said in 1947 that the tide of the fascism gripping the country was the direct consequence of the hate speeches given against non-Muslims by the Muslim League and its supporters.³

On the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi’s birth anniversary in 1951, Nehru said that if a person attacks another on the issue of religions, he will fight against that person till the end of his life both in his capacity of being the head of the government and as a true Indian. He advocated a ban on organizations based on religion and empowered the government by getting the Constitution amended to exercise restraining power to suppress communal writings and communally provocative speeches.⁴

One can look at his correspondence with chief ministers on various occasions or his instructions or his speeches in Parliament to know how he debunked ideas of special ‘protection for the majority’:

If I may venture to lay down a rule, it is the primary responsibility of the majority to satisfy the minority in every matter. The majority, by virtue of it being a

*majority, has the strength to have its way: it requires no protection.*⁵

Patel, the ‘Iron Man of India’, had declared in the Jaipur Session of the party that the Congress was dedicated to upholding secularism at any cost: ‘India is a true secular country’. He described the talk of ‘Hindu Rajya as an act of insanity’ in 1949.⁶

*That day Delhi caught Punjab’s infection. ‘I will not tolerate Delhi becoming another Lahore’, Vallabhbhai declared in Nehru’s and Mountbatten’s presence. He publicly threatened partisan officials with punishment, and at his instructions orders to shoot rioters at sight were issued on September 7. Four Hindu rioters were shot dead at the railway station in Old Delhi.*⁷

In a speech in Madras (1949), he underlined how apart from other challenges before the nation the government was dealing with the ‘RSS movement’:

*We in the government have been dealing with the RSS movement. They want that Hindu Rajya or Hindu culture should be imposed by force. No government can tolerate this. There are almost as many Muslims in this country as in the part that has been partitioned away. We are not going to drive them away. It would be an evil day if we started that game, in spite of partition and whatever happens. We must understand that they are going to stay here and it is our obligation and our responsibility to make them feel that this is their country.*⁸

Perhaps foreseeing that attempts would be made by interested quarters to drive a wedge between him and Nehru, he categorically stated in Indore on 2 October 1950, just three months before his death:

*Our leader is Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Bapu appointed him his heir and successor during his lifetime and even declared it. It is the duty of the soldiers of Bapu that they abide by his orders. One who does not accept this order by heart would prove a sinner before god. I am not a disloyal soldier. For me it is unimportant what my place is. I only know that I am at that very place where Bapu asked me to stand.*⁹

In the following writeup we do not intend to deal further with the role played by the likes of Nehru, Patel

or other leaders in giving a shape to the emergent republic. Our focus is rather limited. We focus attention in this article on how Dr Ambedkar perceived of a future roadmap for India, his perception of the dangers of a 'Hindu India' or the possibility of a 'majoritarian rule' emerging here.

It is a rather neglected theme because under pressures of political exigency, discussion is usually restricted to one or the other aspect of Dr Ambedkar's life and struggle, and his overall vision does not get the attention it deserves. The urgency of this intervention is because while the Hindutva Right is overenthusiastically appropriating Ambedkar for its cause, the response from the seculars as well as the left is less than expected.

A close look at the last decade of Ambedkar's eventful life (1946-56) can help us discern various threads in his worldview or vision of a new India.

I

The making of the Constitution itself was marked by pressures and counterpressures—from believers of radical change to the status quoists—and what came out can at best be called a compromise document between various contending forces and ideas. Dr Ambedkar's separation between the beginning of political democracy in India with the advent of the one-man-one-vote regime, and the long hiatus he saw before the ushering in of social democracy—the regime of one-man-one-value—while dedicating the Constitution to the nation was in fact a reminder of the fact that the struggle was still not over.

Without doubt he was the chief architect of the Constitution, and it was his interventions—of course with due support from Nehru and others—that led to the inclusion of important pro-people or pro-disprivileged provisions into it, but we should not be under any illusion that 'his vision' ultimately triumphed and was inscribed in the Constitution.

Ambedkar in fact was very aware of the limitations of such a constitutional exercise in a backward society like ours:

Indians today are governed by two ideologies. Their political ideal set in the preamble of the Constitution affirms a life of liberty, equality and

*fraternity, whereas their social ideal embedded in their religion denies it to them.*¹⁰

His 'vision' about a future India can be discerned from his less discussed monograph, *States and Minorities: What are Their Rights and How to Secure them in the Constitution of Free India* which was basically a memorandum on the safeguards for the Scheduled Castes that was submitted to the Constituent Assembly on behalf of the All India Scheduled Castes Federation that he led. This monograph does not limit itself to 'safeguards' but also talks of the danger of majoritarianism, incompatibility of Hinduism with any change, and also proposes a model of economic development that he himself described as 'state socialism'.

It is a monograph that would be quite enlightening for many of us. In it, he envisaged that the 'state shall not recognise any religion as state religion' and 'guarantee to every citizen liberty of conscience'. Simultaneously, on the aspect of protection against economic exploitation, he not only declared that 'key industries shall be owned and run by the state', but also that non-key but basic industries shall also 'be owned by the state and run by the state'. He was of the opinion that 'agriculture shall be state industry', where 'the state shall divide the land acquired into farms of standard size'; the 'farm shall be cultivated as a collective farm . . . in accordance with rules and directions issued by the government'; and the 'tenants shall share among themselves in the manner prescribed the produce of the farm left after the payment of charges properly leviable on the farm'.

He further explains this clause in the following words:

*The main purpose behind the clause is to put an obligation on the state to plan the economic life of the people on lines which would lead to highest point of productivity without closing every avenue to private enterprise, and also provide for the equitable distribution of wealth. The plan set out in the clause proposes state ownership in agriculture with a collectivised method of cultivation and a modified form of State Socialism in the field of industry. . . . State Socialism is essential for the rapid industrialisation of India. Private enterprise cannot do it and if it did it would produce those inequalities of wealth which private capitalism has produced in Europe and which should be a warning to Indians. Consolidation of Holdings and Tenancy legislation are worse than useless.*¹¹

Interestingly, he does not propose that the idea of State Socialism should be left to legislatures and instead wants it to be implemented by Constitutional law:

The plan has two special features. One is that it proposes State Socialism in important fields of economic life. The second special feature of the plan is that it does not leave the establishment of State Socialism to the will of the Legislature. It establishes State Socialism by the Law of the Constitution and thus makes it unalterable by any act of the Legislature and the Executive.

II

In the same monograph he clearly differentiates between ‘Untouchables’ and ‘Hindus’.

Gone were the days when he felt that Hinduism would reform itself from within. More than a decade had passed since his famous declaration at the Yeola conference that ‘I was born as a Hindu but I will not die as a Hindu’.

He is unequivocal about the ‘Hindu population which is hostile to them (Untouchables)’ and emphasises that it is ‘not ashamed of committing any inequity or atrocity against them’. He is also not hopeful about their situation under Swaraj:

What can Swaraj mean to the Untouchables ? It can only mean one thing, namely, that while today it is only the administration that is in the hands of the Hindus, under Swaraj the Legislature and Executive will also be in the hands of the Hindus, it goes without saying that such a Swaraj would aggravate the sufferings of the Untouchables. For, in addition to an hostile administration, there will be an indifferent Legislature and a callous Executive. The result will be that the administration unbridled in venom and in harshness, uncontrolled by the Legislature and the Executive, may pursue its policy of inequity towards the Untouchables without any curb. To put it differently, under Swaraj the Untouchables will have no way of escape from the destiny of degradation which Hindus and Hinduism have fixed for them.¹²

He was very much aware about the dangers of majoritarianism implicit in the way Indian nationalism had developed which according to him had

developed a new doctrine which may be called the Divine Right of the Majority to rule the minorities according to the wishes of the majority. Any claim for the sharing of power by the minority is called communalism while the monopolising of the whole power by the majority is called Nationalism.¹³

And so, to protect the rights of the minorities (remember that he does not restrict himself here to religious minorities but also includes the ‘scheduled castes’ in his definition) he proposes a form of Executive which could serve following purposes:

- i) To prevent the majority from forming a Government without giving any opportunity to the minorities to have a say in the matter.
- ii) To prevent the majority from having exclusive control over administration and thereby make the tyranny of the minority by the majority possible.
- iii) To prevent the inclusion by the Majority Party in the Executive representatives of the minorities who have no confidence of the minorities.
- iv) To provide a stable Executive necessary for good and efficient administration.

In fact, his fears vis-a-vis the majoritarian impulses were evident in the political manifesto of the Scheduled Castes Federation itself—the political organisation that was set up by him in 1942 which rejected the RSS and Hindu Mahasabha as ‘reactionary’ organisations:

The Scheduled Castes Federation will not have any alliance with any reactionary party such as the Hindu Mahasabha or the RSS.¹⁴

Anyone who has studied the making of the Indian constitution would tell us why Ambedkar considered the RSS and Hindu Mahasabha as ‘reactionary’ parties. History is witness to the fact that they opposed its making and suggested in their organs that instead of a new Constitution, the newly independent nation should adopt *Manusmriti*. A laughable suggestion today, but the fact is it was then seriously raised by its proponents:

The worst (thing) about the new Constitution of Bharat is that there is nothing Bharatiya about it. . . there is no trace of ancient Bharatiya constitutional laws, institutions, nomenclature and phraseology in

*it. . . . no mention of the unique constitutional developments in ancient Bharat. Manu's laws were written long before Lycurgus of Sparta or Solon of Persia. To this day his laws as enunciated in the Manusmriti excite the admiration of the world and elicit spontaneous obedience and conformity (among Hindus in India). But to our constitutional pundits that means nothing.*¹⁵

In his monograph 'Pakistan or Partition of India' he reiterates his fears vis-a-vis the possible majoritarian turn at the hands of those who vouched for 'Hindu Raj':

*If Hindu Raj does become a fact, it will no doubt be the greatest calamity for this country. No matter what the Hindus say, Hinduism is a menace to liberty, equality and fraternity. On that account it is incompatible with democracy. Hindu Raj must be prevented at any cost.*¹⁶

III

Much on the lines of lack of debate / discussion around *States and Minorities*, another important intervention of Ambedkar during that period has also received little attention. It was related to the struggle for Hindu Code Bill and happened to be the first attempt in independent India to reform Hindu personal laws to give greater rights to Hindu women. Through this, his attempt was to put a stamp on monogamy, also ensure separation rights for women and also grant them rights in property. We know very well that it was a key reason for Ambedkar's resignation from Nehru's Cabinet because he felt that despite lot of attempts not much headway was being made in granting these rights. In his resignation letter he underlined the importance he attached to the bill :

*To leave inequality between class and class, between sex and sex, which is the soul of Hindu society, untouched and to go on passing legislation relating to economic problems is to make a farce of our Constitution and to build a palace on a dung heap. This is the significance I attached to the Hindu Code.*¹⁷

How the Hindutva right and the conservative sections within the Congress coupled with the saffron-robed swamis and sadhus joined hands to oppose the enactment of Hindu Code Bill is well-known history. In fact, this motley combination of reactionary and status quoist forces

did not limit themselves to issuing statements. They also opposed the bill on the streets and led large scale mobilisation at pan India level against the bill. There were occasions when they even tried to storm Dr Ambedkar's residence in Delhi.

Their main argument against Ambedkar was that the bill was an attack on 'Hindu Religion and Culture'. The enormous resistance to this bill becomes clear from this excerpt from Ramchandra Guha's book:

*The anti-Hindu code bill committee held hundreds of meetings throughout India, where sundry swamis denounced the proposed legislation. The participants in this movement presented themselves as religious warriors (dharmaveer) fighting a religious war (dharmayudh). The Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh threw its weight behind the agitation. On the 11th of December, 1949, the RSS organised a public meeting at the Ramlila grounds in Delhi, where speaker after speaker condemned the bill. One called it 'an atom bomb on Hindu society' . . . The next day a group of RSS workers marched on the assembly buildings, shouting 'Down with Hindu code bill' . . . The protesters burnt effigies of the prime minister and Dr Ambedkar, and then vandalised the car of Sheikh Abdullah.*¹⁸

Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, founder of BJP's predecessor, the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, declared that the Bill would 'shatter the magnificent structure of Hindu culture'.¹⁹

In his intervention in support of Ambedkar and the Hindu Code Bill during the debate in Parliament on this bill, Acharya Kriplani stated:

*Much has been said about Hindu religion being in danger. I am afraid I cannot see the point. Hindu religion is not in danger when Hindus are thieves, rogues, fornicators, black-marketers or takers of bribes! Hindu religion is not endangered by these people but Hindu religion is endangered by people who want to reform a particular law! May be they are over-zealous but it is better to be over-zealous in things idealistic than be corrupt in material things.*²⁰

In fact, like Mahatma Phule—whom he called the 'Greatest Shudra' and considered him his teacher along with Buddha and Kabir—the concern for women's

emancipation always existed in the movement led by Ambedkar.

IV

How did he envisage the idea of democracy ?

Perhaps his speech on the 'Voice of America' radio (20 May 1956) which he gave few months before his death could best summarise his ideas around this concept.

The first point which he makes is that 'Democracy is quite different from a Republic as well as from Parliamentary Government.' According to him:

*The roots of democracy lie not in the form of government, Parliamentary or otherwise. A democracy is more than a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living. The roots of democracy are to be searched in the social relationship, in the terms of associated life between the people who form a society.*²¹

He then goes on to explain the meaning of the word 'society'. He says:

When we speak of 'Society,' we conceive of it as one by its very nature. The qualities which accompany this unity are praiseworthy community of purpose and desire for welfare, loyalty to public ends and mutuality of sympathy and co-operation.

Examining Indian society, he questions whether 'these ideals are found in Indian society?' He says that Indian society is nothing but 'an innumerable collection of castes which are exclusive in their life and have no common experience to share and have no bond of sympathy', and concludes that:

*The existence of the caste system is a standing denial of the existence of those ideals of society and therefore of democracy.*²²

He goes on to say that 'Indian society is so embedded in the caste system that everything is organised on the basis of caste'. He shares examples of how the daily life of individuals revolves around the twin concepts of purity and pollution, then discusses how caste is prevalent in the social-political arena too, and wryly concludes that 'there is no room for the downtrodden and the outcasts in politics, in industry, in commerce and in education.'

Further he discusses other special features of the caste system which 'have their evil effects and which militate against democracy'. He particularly discusses the feature of 'Graded Inequality' wherein 'castes are not equal in their status' but rather 'are standing one above another' and form 'an ascending scale of hatred and descending scale of contempt' which has the most pernicious consequences as 'it destroys willing and helpful co-operation.'

Deliberating about the difference between caste and class, he takes up the second evil effect in the caste system which is 'complete isolation' which is not there in the class system. This manifests itself in the fact that 'the stimulus and response between two castes is only one-sided. The higher caste act in one recognised way and the lower caste must respond in one established way.' Such influences 'educate some into masters, educate others into slaves. . . . It results into a separation of society, into a privileged and a subject class. Such a separation prevents social endosmosis.'

The third characteristic of the caste system, that 'cuts at the very roots of democracy', is that 'one caste is bound to one occupation.' Ambedkar says 'there is in a man an indefinite plurality of capacities and activities. A society to be democratic should open a way to use all the capacities of the individual.' However, this binding of the individual to one occupation leads to stratification which stunts 'the growth of the individual and deliberate stunting is a deliberate denial of democracy.'

In the concluding part of his speech, Ambedkar discusses obstacles in the way to end caste system. He says that the first obstacle is 'the system of graded inequality which is the soul of the caste system.' The second obstacle is that 'Indian society is disabled by unity in action by not being able to know what is its common good. . . . Every where 'the mind of the Indians is distracted and misled by false valuations and false perspectives.' He ends his speech by emphasising that mere education cannot destroy the caste system: 'If you give education to those strata of Indian Society which has a vested interest in maintaining the caste system for the advantages it gives them, then the caste system will be strengthened. On the other hand, if you give education to the lowest strata of Indian society which is interested in blowing up the caste system, the caste system will be blown up.' And so he concludes: 'To give education to those who want to keep up the caste system is not to

improve the prospect of democracy in India but to put our democracy in India in greater jeopardy.²³

As opposed to the conservative notions about democracy that consider it to be an instrument to stop bad people from seizing power, Ambedkar considered democracy to be related to social transformation and human progress. He defined democracy as “a form and a method of government whereby revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of the people are brought about without bloodshed.”²⁴ The conditions for that are as follows:

*(1) There should not be glaring inequalities in society, that is, privilege for one class; (2) The existence of an opposition; (3) Equality in law and administration; (4) Observance of constitutional morality; (5) No tyranny of the majority; (6) Moral order of society; and (7) Public conscience.*²⁵

In his speech to the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949 he expressed three cautions and believed that paying heed to them was critical to ensure that our democratic institutions did not get subverted:

*(i) Constitutional methods; (ii) Not to lay liberties at the feet of a great man; (iii) Make a political democracy a social democracy.*²⁶

For Ambedkar, democracy and secularism are inseparable. Looking at the fact that India happens to be a multi-denominational society where the common denominator could be secularism which is understood as one of the pillars on which the superstructure of our democracy rests and is a unifying force of our associated life, he emphasised:

*The conception of a secular state is derived from the liberal democratic tradition of the West. No institution which is maintained wholly out of state funds shall be used for the purpose of religious instruction irrespective of the question whether the religious instruction is given by the state or by any other body.*²⁷

In a debate in Parliament, he underlined:

It (secular state) does not mean that we shall not take into consideration the religious sentiments of the people. All that a secular state means is that this Parliament shall not be competent to impose any

*particular religion upon the rest of the people. This is the only limitation that the Constitution recognises.*²⁸

At the same time, he emphatically states that it is the duty of the state to ensure that the minority does not become victim of the tyranny of the majority:

*The State should guarantee to its citizens the liberty of conscience and the free exercise of his religion including the right to profess, to preach and to convert within limits compatible with public order and morality.*²⁹

In an insightful article, Prof Jean Dreze argues that ‘Ambedkar’s passion for democracy was closely related to his commitment to rationality and the scientific outlook.’ Jean Dreze elaborates the connection. Rationality is necessary for democratic government since public debate (an essential aspect of democratic practice) is impossible in the absence of a shared adherence to common sense, logical argument and critical enquiry. And, scientific spirit is inherently anti-authoritarian, as a person then does not believe in authority, but in coherence of the argument and quality of the evidence. Dreze goes on to argue that Ambedkar shared this belief. This is evident from one of Ambedkar’s last speeches, ‘Buddha or Karl Marx’, wherein he summarises the essential teachings of Buddha as follows:

*Everyone has a right to learn. Learning is as necessary for man to live as food is. . . . Nothing is infallible. Nothing is binding forever. Everything is subject to inquiry and examination.*³⁰

Jean Dreze says that it is important to bring forth this relationship between democracy and rationalism / scientific outlook because of the ‘recent threats to Indian democracy (which) often involve a concerted attack on rationality and the scientific spirit.’ (Ibid.)

V

*I will accept and follow the teachings of Buddha. I will keep my people away from the different opinions of Hinayan and Mahayan, two religious orders. Our Bouddha Dhamma is a new Bouddha Dhamma, Navayan.*³¹

An important development in the last decade of Ambedkar’s life was his decision to embrace Buddhism

with lakhs of followers. Apart from his deep fascination for Buddhism from younger days, his conversion to Buddhism had also to do with his contention that the ‘untouchables’ were in fact former Buddhists. He elaborates it in his book *The Untouchables: A Thesis on the Origin of Untouchability* (1948).³² Thus it could also be said to be a return to ‘their’ original religion than a conversion. Interestingly one finds deep commonality between Dr Ambedkar and Jyothee Thass, the great Tamil-Buddhist Scholar, who also maintained that ‘Untouchables’ were early Buddhists.

His ‘conversion’ to Buddhism was also renouncement of Hinduism which according to him had

*proved detrimental to progress and prosperity of my predecessors and which has regarded human beings as unequal and despicable.*³³

If one refers to the 22 pledges he administered to his followers on the occasion then one can broadly categorise them into four parts: complete rejection of Hindu gods (for example, I will not accept Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh as Gods) and their worship and the related rituals (I will not perform *Shraddha Paksh* or *Pind Dana*, rituals to respect the dead); acceptance of the principles and teachings of Buddhism; declaration that ‘all human beings are equal’; and ‘no faith in divine incarnation’.

An important aspect of this ‘return’ or ‘conversion’ is the fact that it was also a reinterpretation of Buddhism which he described as *Navayan*—a new vehicle. Apart from a big monograph *Buddha and His Dhamma* where he tries to revisit Buddhism, one can get a glimpse of his reading of the Buddha and his teachings from the speech he delivered in Kathmandu merely a fortnight before his death which was posthumously published as *Buddha Or Karl Marx*.

Summarising the ‘Creed of Buddhism’, while on the one hand he underlines the necessity of ‘religion for a free society’, at the same time, he says many things which would be rather unacceptable to a scholar or follower of religion because he appears to reject the ‘necessity of God’ as well as *Shastras* and rituals. Thus for instance, he says:

- *Religion must relate to facts of life and not to theories and speculations about God, or Soul or Heaven or Earth.*

- *It is wrong to make God the centre of Religion.*
- *It is wrong to make salvation of the soul as the centre of Religion.*
- *It is wrong to make animal sacrifices to be the centre of Religion.*
- *Real Religion lives in the heart of man and not in the Shastras.*
- *Man and morality must be the centre of religion. If not, Religion is a cruel superstition.*
- *It is not enough for Morality to be the ideal of life. Since there is no God it must become the law of life.*³⁴

Ambedkar differentiates himself from popular definitions of religion first by criticising the way religions have tried to explain the origin and the end of world and says that its ‘function is to reconstruct the world and to make it happy’. He then goes on to explore the source of unhappiness, and does not talk about ‘sins’ or ‘otherworldly affairs’ but says that ‘unhappiness in the world is due to conflict of interest and the only way to solve it is to follow the Ashtanga Marga.’ Further elaborating on the ‘Creed of Buddhism’, he says that ‘private ownership of property brings power to one class and sorrow to another’ and ‘it is necessary for the good of Society that this sorrow be removed by removing its cause.’ While religions the world over have remained the basis of ‘othering’—which in extreme cases have resulted in genocides too—Buddhism as perceived by Ambedkar believes that ‘all human beings are equal’ and ‘worth and not birth is the measure of man’.

While supporting ‘war for truth and justice’ and also emphasising that the ‘victor has duties towards the vanquished’ in the last part of his summary of the ‘Creed of Buddhism’, he not only challenges the monopoly of a few over learning but also emphatically states: ‘Nothing is permanent or sanatana. Everything is subject to change. Being is always becoming.’

This speech—as the title shows—also throws light on his views about Marxism. Of course it is not for the first time that he had expressed his views on the theme. In his famous booklet *Annihilation of Caste* he had already made it clear that while he appreciates the goal of Marxism, he is repelled by its Indian practitioners. In this speech too, he declares that ‘Buddha is not away from Marx’ if ‘for misery one reads exploitation.’

For him non-violence is not an issue of principle: 'The Buddha was against violence. But he was also in favour of justice and where justice required he permitted the use of force.' Ambedkar further writes that:

Violence cannot be altogether dispensed with. Even in non-communist countries a murderer is hanged. Does not hanging amount to violence? Non-communist countries go to war with non-communist countries. Millions of people are killed. Is this no violence? If a murderer can be killed, because he has killed a citizen, if a soldier can be killed in war because he belongs to a hostile nation, why cannot a property owner be killed if his ownership leads to misery for the rest of humanity? There is no reason to make an exception in favour of the property owner, why one should regard private property as sacrosanct.

He goes on to assert that even Buddha established communism:

The Russians are proud of their communism. But they forget that the wonder of all wonders is that the Buddha established communism so far as the Sangh was concerned without dictatorship. It may be that it was a communism on a very small scale but it was communism without dictatorship, a miracle which Lenin failed to do.

Of course, he underlines that:

The Buddha's method was different. His method was to change the mind of man, to alter his disposition, so that whatever man does, he does it voluntarily without the use of force or compulsion.

The concluding remarks he makes while ending his speech seem to validate, in Anand Teltumbde's words, 'his decision as confirming to Marxism, minus violence and dictatorship in the latter.'³⁵

It has been claimed that the Communist Dictatorship in Russia has wonderful achievements to its credit. There can be no denial of it. That is why I say that a Russian Dictatorship would be good for all backward countries. But this is no argument for permanent Dictatorship. . . .

We welcome the Russian Revolution because it aims to produce equality. But it cannot be too much emphasised that in producing equality society cannot

*afford to sacrifice fraternity or liberty. Equality will be of no value without fraternity or liberty. It seems that the three can coexist only if one follows the way of the Buddha. Communism can give one but not all.'*³⁶

VII

These are no ordinary times to discuss the future of our republic.

We have before us an India where (to quote Prof Achin Vanaik):

The centre of gravity has shifted perhaps decisively to the right, in three crucial spheres: economy, secularism and democracy.

It is an India where the political dispensation at the centre is busy furthering the exclusivist/majoritarian worldview of Hindutva supremacism coupled with the neoliberal agenda under the glib talk of development and a concerted attack has been unleashed on (what Ambedkar defined as) minorities of various kinds and other deprived sections.

What can then be the contours of Dr Ambedkar's Vision for our times?

It will necessarily have to be: ensure that the 'state shall not recognise any religion as state religion' and 'guarantee to every citizen liberty of conscience'; stand against 'majoritarianism of every kind' and, more specifically, prevent the majority from forming a government without giving any opportunity to the minorities to have a say in the matter; stand up for women's emancipation, for state ownership in agriculture with a collectivised method of cultivation and a modified form of State Socialism in the field of industry; stand against inequalities of wealth which private capitalism produces. It will necessarily have to be for annihilation of caste as 'the existence of the Caste System is a standing denial of the existence of ideals of society and therefore of Democracy.'³⁷ It will be for reason and rationality and scientific temper and not for dumbing of minds.

It does not need reminding that it will not be based on sanitisation or vulgarisation of Dr Ambedkar in any form as is being experimented with these days. While his appropriation by the Hindutva Right and its attempts to

carve out a 'suitable' Ambedkar for its project based on exclusion and hatred has been widely commented upon and exposed, much needs to be done to expose the projection of Ambedkar as a free market economist.³⁸ Scholarly sounding pieces have appeared based on selective quotes from his vast corpus of writings to project him as a 'Free Market Economist'.³⁹ In contrast to Ambedkar's views, there are also articles valorising capitalism for supposedly annihilating of caste.⁴⁰ This latter article by a noted columnist and an upcoming industrialist from the oppressed communities argues that:

Capital is the surest means to fight caste. In Dalit's hands, capital becomes an anti-caste weapon; little wonder that the traditional caste code prohibits dalits from accumulating wealth. Dalit capitalism is the answer to that regime of discrimination. The manifesto demands promotion of dalit capitalism through a variety of means-procurement, credit options and partnerships.

Last but not the least one will have to be wary of 'hero worship' or laying 'liberties at the feet of a great man' as it can culminate in 'subverting of institutions' in a democracy as Ambedkar has warned us. In fact he had this to say while dedicating the Constitution to the nation:

This caution is far more necessary in the case of India than in the case of any other country. For in India, Bhakti or what may be called the path of devotion or hero-worship, plays a part in its politics unequalled in magnitude by the part it plays in the politics of any other country in the world. Bhakti in religion may be a road to the salvation of the soul. But in politics, Bhakti or hero-worship is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship.⁴¹

Everybody can see that this caution has contemporary import. No month passes when some responsible member of the ruling dispensation compares the honourable PM to God or as 'God's gift to India'.

While *Bhaktis* can rejoice about this unique gift to India, every sensible person would agree that if this trend is allowed to continue then it is a 'sure road to degradation and eventual dictatorship.'

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Ambedkar's Prescient Warnings About the Constitution

Neeraj Jain

On November 25, 1949, in his last address to India's Constituent Assembly, Dr B.R. Ambedkar voiced two serious concerns about the future of the country. Unfortunately, both his warnings are proving to be prophetic today. Let us discuss his concerns.

On the Future of India's Independence

On 26th January 1950, India will be an independent country. What would happen to her independence? Will she maintain her independence or will she lose it again? This is the first thought that comes to my mind. It is not that India was never an independent country. The point is that she once lost the independence she had. Will she lose it a second time? It is this thought which makes me most anxious for the future.

What perturbs me greatly is the fact that not only India has once before lost her independence, but she lost it by the infidelity and treachery of some of her own people. . . . Will history repeat itself? It is this thought which fills me with anxiety.¹

Despite this grim warning, scarcely would Dr Ambedkar have apprehended that the Free India of his dreams would lose its freedom once again; that a mere 70 years after independence, Delhi's Moghuls would have pushed the Indian economy into such a crisis that they would be welcoming gigantic foreign multinationals with garlands and red carpets to invest, import, pollute our environment, ravage our natural resources, pillage the savings of our people, exploit our workers in the most inhuman ways, and inseminate our culture with violence and the invisible terrorism of America Inc.

This would sound surprising to many of our readers. But that is because they have been led to believe by India's treacherous intellectuals and sycophantic media that the foreign investment flows into the country (also called foreign direct investment or FDI) are an indicator of development, that the foreign corporations are coming

into the country to help us develop. If they are so good, why did we drive them out?

The truth is, these foreign capital inflows are not the result of deliberate policy by our ruling politicians and bureaucrats and are not taking place on equal terms, but are because our country has become dependent on foreign capital inflows to prevent our economy from sinking into external accounts bankruptcy. We explain this point briefly below.

The Indian economy was in crisis by 1991. Our external debt had gone up to \$84 billion, our foreign exchange reserves were insufficient to pay even the instalment on our external debt, and we were on the verge of external account bankruptcy. And so, in mid-1991, the Indian Government accepted the conditions imposed by India's foreign creditors and, in exchange for a huge foreign loan to tide over the foreign exchange crisis, agreed to a thorough restructuring of the Indian economy.² One of the important conditions accepted by it was to open up the economy to inflows of foreign capital and goods. It is this 'restructuring' of the Indian economy at the behest of the country's foreign creditors that has been given the grandiloquent name, globalisation. Since then, while governments at the Centre have kept on changing, globalisation of the Indian economy has continued unabated. The pace of implementing the economic reforms has accelerated under the new BJP Government at the Centre.

Nearly three decades after the beginning of globalisation, because of the very consequences of opening up the economy to unrestricted inflows of foreign capital and goods, India's external accounts are in a far worse state as compared to 1991.

- Our trade deficit, the difference between our merchandise exports and imports, has zoomed due to the huge inflow of foreign goods into the country. From \$2.8 billion in 1991–92, it has gone up to \$112.4 billion in 2016–17.

- Because of the huge rise in our trade deficit, our current account deficit (CAD), that is, the net deficit in our day-to-day transactions with other countries, went up from \$1.2 billion in 1991–92 to \$87.8 billion in 2012–13, before easing to \$15.2 billion for the financial year 2016–17 due to the fall in global oil prices. Indications are that it is going to rise again and is expected to go up to around \$30 billion in 2017-18.³

International trade takes place only in the currencies of the developed countries. Therefore, when a poor country like India runs up a current account deficit, it needs to attract foreign capital inflows to bridge the deficit. These can be either in the form of capital investment flows (either in the form of FDI, or investment in the stock markets) or more external borrowings.

The problem is:

- Capital investment flows result in profit outflows. The more the FDI, the more the profit outflows in the coming years.
- And, an interest has to be paid on external debt!

Both these therefore lead to a rise in CAD in the subsequent years, implying that in the coming years, the country will need even more capital investment inflows, or more external borrowings. It is a kind of debt trap!

Three decades of globalisation has pushed our economy into a far worse foreign exchange crisis than we faced in 1991. Our external debt now stands at an astronomical \$485 billion in end-June 2017,⁴ up by nearly six times from \$83.8 billion in end-March 1991!

The result is that the Indian economy has become totally dependent on foreign capital inflows, including foreign direct investment inflows and speculative capital inflows, as well as foreign debt flows, to stay afloat. All the glib talk about our large foreign exchange reserves is meaningless; as we have shown elsewhere, our foreign exchange reserves are much less than our 'vulnerable external liabilities' (foreign capital that has come into the country that can leave the country very quickly).⁵ This means that if foreign investors decide to pull out their money from India—which they can do at the tap of a computer key—our foreign exchange reserves are simply insufficient to prevent the economy from once again plunging into foreign exchange bankruptcy, similar to what happened in 1990-91.

This is the reason why India's Prime Ministers, from Manmohan Singh to Narendra Modi now, have been travelling to the capitals of the developed countries with a begging bowl—to entice foreign investors to invest in India, and promising them all kinds of incentives and concessions. The 'swadeshi' BJP Government is in fact implementing the World Bank dictated economic reforms at an even faster pace than the previous UPA Government.

During the past two years, the new government has twice announced huge liberalisation of FDI rules for foreign investors, in November 2015 and June 2016, such as permitting 100% FDI in several key sectors like defence, civil aviation and pharmaceuticals via the automatic route, that is, without being subject to government approval. More recently, on January 11, 2018, the newspapers reported that the Union Cabinet has unveiled a fresh round of liberalisation of our FDI policy and allowed 100% FDI in single-brand retail and real estate brokering services via the automatic route, and also allowed foreign airlines to invest up to 49% in Air India. This opening up of the retail sector to giant foreign retail corporations implies that the BJP has made a complete U-turn in its earlier opposition to FDI in Retail, a policy that will spell disaster for India's dynamic small scale retail sector. This sector is the second biggest employer after agriculture and employs nearly 4 crore people. Opening it up to investment by giant international retailers will push lakhs of small shopkeepers out of business.⁶

The Modi Government is bending over backwards to meet US objections to India's nuclear liability law, so that giant US corporations can set up nuclear power plants in India without having to worry about paying indemnities in case of design defects causing a nuclear accident—they are thus being encouraged to supply risky equipment, which is nothing but an invitation to disaster.⁷ The foreign corporations are keen to take over India's public sector insurance companies and banks, and thus acquire control over their huge premium income and deposits; bowing to their dictates, the BJP Government has taken the first steps to privatise these institutions. This is also the real essence of Modi's slogan *Make in India*—the 'swadeshi' government is inviting foreign corporations to manufacture in India and is promising them conditions in which they can produce in India at cheaper rates than China / Bangladesh / Vietnam, and thus make higher profits. For this, it is demolishing our

labour laws, so that MNCs can employ contract workers, pay them rock bottom wages, increase intensity of work to inhuman levels, force them to work 10–12–14 hours without paying overtime wages, and fire them at will. In a nutshell, they have put India ON SALE.⁸

On the Future of India's Democracy

The second warning delivered by Dr Ambedkar in his final address to the Constituent Assembly was with regards to the future of her democratic Constitution:

On the 26th of January 1950, India would be a democratic country in the sense that India from that day would have a government of the people, by the people and for the people. . . . What would happen to her democratic Constitution? Will she be able to maintain it or will she lose it . . . I do not know. But it is quite possible in a country like India . . . there is danger of democracy giving place to dictatorship. It is quite possible for this new born democracy to retain its form but give place to dictatorship in fact. If there is a landslide, the danger of the second possibility becoming actuality is much greater.

Ambedkar suggests that “if we wish to maintain democracy not merely in form, but also in fact”, we must “not to be content with mere political democracy.” He goes on to say:

We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognises liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life. . . . Liberty cannot be divorced from equality, equality cannot be divorced from liberty. Nor can liberty and equality be divorced from fraternity. . . .

Ambedkar says: “We must begin by acknowledging the fact that there is complete absence of two things in Indian Society.” And what are these two things:

One of these is equality. On the social plane, we have in India a society based on the principle of graded inequality which means elevation for some and degradation for others. On the economic plane, we have a society in which there are some who have immense wealth as against many who live in abject poverty.

On the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. . . . How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril. We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this Assembly has so laboriously built up.

The second thing we are wanting in is recognition of the principle of fraternity. What does fraternity mean? Fraternity means a sense of common brotherhood of all Indians—if Indians being one people. It is the principle which gives unity and solidarity to social life. . . . The realisation of this goal is going to be very difficult . . . (because in) India there are castes. The castes are anti-national. In the first place because they bring about separation in social life. They are anti-national also because they generate jealousy and antipathy between caste and caste. But we must overcome all these difficulties if we wish to become a nation in reality. For fraternity can be a fact only when there is a nation. Without fraternity, equality and liberty will be no deeper than coats of paint. . . .

Ambedkar's warnings on this aspect too are proving to be prophetic. Inequality in the country has grown hugely, especially since the beginning of neoliberal economic reforms in 1991, making India one of the most unequal countries in the world. In 2000, India's richest 1 percent held 36.8 percent of the country's total wealth; in 2014, when Modi came to power, this figure had gone up to 49 percent; and in just 2 years, by 2016, this figure has gone up to a mind-boggling 58.4 percent, according to a report by Credit Suisse Group AG, the financial services company based in Zurich. The richest 10 percent haven't done too badly either. Their wealth increased from around 66 percent in 2000 to 80.7 percent by 2016. In sharp contrast, the bottom half of the Indian people own a mere 2.1 percent of the country's wealth.⁹

While India now has the fourth largest number of billionaires in the world—the country now boasts of 101 billionaires, with a collective net worth of \$325.5 billion¹⁰—its human development indicators place it near the bottom in the list of the world's countries. Some indicators that highlight the terrible conditions in which

the vast majority of the Indian people are living:

- According to the latest available National Family Health Survey–4 data for 2015–16, 38.4% of children under the age of five are stunted (low height for age, indicating chronic malnutrition); India is home to one-third of the world’s malnourished children; malnutrition is more common in India than in sub-Saharan Africa.¹¹
- More than 40% of the children in the 6–14 age-group in the country have dropped out of school without completing even basic schooling. And for those going to school, the conditions in a majority of India’s schools is so abysmal who do complete basic schooling cannot read, write or do sums expected of children in Class 2 or 3!¹²
- Basing herself on official NSSO data, the noted economist Utsa Patnaik has shown that the percentage of persons in rural areas who could not consume enough food to obtain the minimum recommended calorie norm (2,200 calories/day) was 75.5% in 2009–10. In urban areas, the percentage who could not consume enough food to obtain the norm (2,100 calories/day) was 73%.¹³
- And so, it is not surprising that India’s hunger levels are among the worst in the world. The Global Hunger Index, a report published by the International Food Policy Research Institute, ranked India at 100 out of 119 countries in its latest report released in 2017.¹⁴

The coming to power of the BJP at the Centre in 2014 is rapidly worsening India’s social inequalities too. During the first few decades after independence, economic development had indeed led to a weakening of the link between caste and occupation. Nevertheless, the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes continued to face social, economic and institutional deprivations, and were also subjected to enormous atrocities. But with the coming of the BJP to power, these social inequalities are rapidly worsening. That is because the BJP—and more important, its parent, the RSS—does not believe in equality. On the contrary, BJP–RSS are firm believers in the caste system.

Thus, for instance, Guru Golwalkar, considered to be the most important ideologue of the RSS, in his treatise, *Bunch of Thoughts*, explicitly upholds the *Purush Sukta* of the *Rigveda*, wherein for the first time in Vedic literature the four varnas are mentioned and justified. The *Purush Sukta* justifies the caste system thus: Brahmin is the head, King the hands, Vaishya the thighs

and Shudra the feet. Golwalkar goes on to write that “the people who have this fourfold arrangement, i.e., the Hindu People, is our God. This supreme vision of Godhead is the very core of our concept of ‘nation’ and has permeated our thinking and given rise to various unique concepts of our cultural heritage.”¹⁵

One of the most important of the Hindu scriptures or dharma-shastras that sanctifies the caste system is the Manusmriti. The RSS is a firm believer in the Manusmriti. V.D. Savarkar, one of the most prominent of the RSS ideologues, expresses his affinity for the Manusmriti thus:

*Manusmriti is that scripture which is most worshippable after Vedas for our Hindu Nation and which from ancient times has become the basis of our culture-customs, thought and practice. This book for centuries has codified the spiritual and divine march of our nation. Even today the rules, which are followed, by crores of Hindus in their lives and practice are based on Manusmriti. Today Manusmriti is Hindu Law.*¹⁶

And so, after coming to power, while on the one hand the BJP is speedily implementing economic policies that are further deepening our economic crisis and worsening economic inequality, on the other hand, it is implementing a very regressive social agenda that is worsening social inequality. Caste atrocities in the country are on the rise. The latest NCRB data reveal that atrocities or crime against scheduled castes increased by 5.5 per cent in 2016 over 2015. A total of 40,801 cases of crime against scheduled castes were registered in the country in 2016 compared to 38,670 cases in 2015. The data also show that the five states that recorded the highest crime rate in the category of “crime/atrocities against scheduled castes” during 2014–16 (crime rate is defined by the incidence of crime recorded per one lakh population) were all ruled by the BJP directly or in alliance with other parties, with Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan at the very top.¹⁷

In Gujarat, where the BJP has been in power uninterruptedly for nearly two decades now, atrocities against Dalits are on the rise. The incident at Una on July 11, 2016, when seven members from a Dalit family were brutally beaten up with iron rods and sticks by *gau rakshaks* for skinning a dead cow, made national news after a video of the beating went viral on social media. Fed up with the daily atrocities, thousands of Dalits in Gujarat came together to take out a *Dalit Asmita Yatra*

and pledged never to pick up carcasses again. Yet, so emboldened have upper caste goons become under BJP rule that they attacked this *Yatra* too! In fact, this massive mobilisation of Dalits has not led to any reduction in atrocities on Dalits in Gujarat. In 2017, the newspapers reported several instances of Dalits being attacked even for sporting moustaches or watching garba.¹⁸

The RSS not only does not believe in democracy and equality (and secularism), all fundamental pillars of the Indian Constitution, after the BJP won the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, BJP and RSS leaders have publicly called for changing the Constitution.¹⁹

There is nothing new in this. The RSS has been opposed to the Indian Constitution from the very time of its drafting, because it was not based on Hindu scriptures, in particular the laws of Manu. Four days after the Indian Constitution was adopted by the Constituent Assembly on November 26, 1949, an editorial in the RSS organ *Organiser* complained:

*In our constitution there is no mention of the unique constitutional development in ancient Bharat. Manu's Laws were written long before Lycurgus of Sparta or Solon of Persia. To this day his laws as enunciated in the Manusmriti excite the admiration of the world and elicit spontaneous obedience and conformity. But to our constitutional pundits that means nothing.*²⁰

Guru Golwalkar, considered to be the most important ideologue of the RSS, also criticised the Indian Constitution in the following words in his most important treatise, *Bunch of Thoughts*:

*Our Constitution too is just a cumbersome and heterogeneous piecing together of various articles from various Constitutions of the Western countries. It has absolutely nothing which can be called our own. Is there a single word of reference in its guiding principles as to what our national mission is and what our keynote in life is? No!*²¹

And so, after the BJP first came to power at the Centre in 1998 under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, it had set up a commission headed by former Chief Justice M.N.R. Venkatachaliah to review the Constitution. But Vajpayee was heading a coalition government, and this effort could not go very far, and the report of the Commission was shelved.

Now, having come to power with an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha, the BJP and RSS are more emboldened, and are openly calling for changing the Constitution “in line with the value systems of the country”—and when Mohan Bhagwat, the RSS chief says this, he is obviously meaning the Manusmriti, and not the value systems of Buddha, Kabir, Tukaram and Basavanna.

Ambedkar's warning, that political democracy bereft of economic and social democracy, will ultimately threaten our democratic Constitution, is proving to be prescient.

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The Search for New Time

Dilip Simeon

The timing of death, like the ending of a story, gives a changed meaning to what preceded it.

—Mary Catherine Bateson

Nihilism¹ doesn't stand at the door, as Nietzsche told us over a century ago. It has entered the house. We now speak as if belief is the highest form of truth, feelings may freely be substituted for facts, truth is pure illusion and war an eternal condition. Examples of this are visible in all continents; indeed, we are reliably informed that ours is the post-truth era. Let us examine how we have arrived at this situation and what Mahatma Gandhi can tell us about it.

Permanent War

Speaking of Napoleon's place in the advent of modernity, Marx wrote: 'Napoleon was the last stand of revolutionary terrorism against the bourgeois society. . . . He perfected the Terror by substituting permanent war for permanent revolution.'² Two observations from this text are significant for our theme: the advent of permanent war; and the dual aspect of the state as an end in itself and as an instrument of conquest. The war unleashed by the French Revolution was the first total war of modernity, it was fought by ideologically motivated soldiers, and required total social mobilisation.³ The modern tendency towards totalitarianism became visible in the emergence of war as the centripetal force capable of galvanising social energy on an unprecedented scale. The democratisation of the polity was accompanied by the democratisation of the military. Over time, this would lead to the implosion of warfare into the social fabric, its about-turn from national frontiers into national societies.

It has been claimed that the arrangements of 1815 resulted in pan-European peace for most of the nineteenth century. This is correct only if we leave out the uprisings of 1848, the Crimean War and the wars over German unification that led to the bloody suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871. However, the French revolutionary

wars were global in their reach, because the powers involved were colonial empires.⁴ A broader view of the subsequent period shows the upsurge of war consuming the polities of India, China and Africa, with England, France, Belgium and Holland leading the charge. When combined with Russian expansion in central Asia and Siberia, the Taiping Rebellion of 1850-64, the Second Opium War of 1856-60, and the Indian rebellion of 1857, a picture emerges of a world plunged into a vortex of conflict whose locus was European militarism. Man-made famines and epidemics in India and China during the 1870s and 1890s resulted in the deaths of between 32 and 61 million people, a catastrophe that has been named 'late-Victorian holocausts'.⁵

The process continued with the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, the Balkan Wars of 1912-13 and the Great War of 1914-18, which was accompanied by the first modern genocide (of Armenians by their Ottoman rulers). The global influenza epidemic of 1918-20 cost 50 to 100 million lives, an impact accelerated by war-related human mobility. The spiral of war continued into the 1930s, with the Japanese invasion of Manchukuo, the Spanish civil war, the Sino-Japanese war of 1937-1945, and the Second World War—the end of which was marked by several partitions, which cost the lives of lacs of Indians, including Mahatma Gandhi. Thereafter it spilled over into Korea and Vietnam in the 1950s, the Arab world soon after, and carries on till this day. Depending on how it is calculated, the twentieth century has witnessed the unnatural deaths of between 175 to 250 million people. Frontiers have imploded; terror, war and revolution have merged into one another, as have international war and civil war, militaries and para-militaries, legitimate force and vigilante violence.

Today, language and power are being used to enforce the disappearance of these distinctions. As Orwell put it, war is not meant to be won, it is meant to be continuous. Global capitalism is a society in turmoil, geared toward perpetual conflict. State structures are torn apart by the

requirement of social stability and the magnet of militarism. The uneasy balance between capital accumulation and a world order founded on competing nation-states is under constant threat of violent disruption. Capitalism feeds on war, but is also threatened by it—the sobriety of accumulation cannot always accommodate the passions unleashed by organised killing.

Gandhi's Confrontation with Modern Nihilism

The nihilism of our time has three aspects: the annihilation of language, time and life. The three merge into one another in practical politics. It is against this backdrop—of life lived in the shadow of semantic disintegration and total destruction—that we need to assess once again Mahatma Gandhi's life and the message his life signifies. There are four dimensions through which we can re-appropriate Gandhi's political challenge and legacy.

Transformation Without Hatred

The first is reflected in his campaign for an end to colonial power without animus. When he was in London for the Round Table Conference in 1931, Gandhi decided to visit the mill areas of Lancashire. The police had warned he would be mobbed by angry workers who had lost jobs due to the boycott of English cloth. But he wanted to explain India's case to them. The American journalist William Shirer reported the workers' reactions to Gandhi in the town of Darwen—they instinctively recognised in him "a man who had devoted his life to helping the poor. They gave him a tumultuous welcome." Gandhi was mobbed, but by people filled with admiration, not anger.⁶ A photograph from that day shows a smiling Gandhi in his dhoti surrounded by joyous women workers whose faces shine with love. Other photographs from this trip show similar images of the common English people's love for the man whom their government portrayed as the Empire's chief trouble-maker. There are few, if any, examples of the leader of an anti-colonial struggle whom the citizens of the colonial power held in such affection.

Thus in contra-position to the political tradition exemplified by Machiavelli and Robespierre, for which violence was essential to the act of political foundation, Gandhi made the prescient observation that 'what is granted under fear can be retained only as long as the fear lasts'. This is an insight into the nature of the modern state; but it also questions the assumption of Western political science wherein the foundation of a new order is necessarily marked by violence. Gandhi dispensed with

the justification of originary violence, the teleological suspension of ethics. This was a radical departure from the revolutionary political theory of the Jacobins and Bolsheviks and a unique attempt at self-assertion combined with respect for the opponent. Gandhi implanted love at the centre of the new beginning, and he kept this flame alight in the midst of enveloping darkness. His faith in the persistence of human capacity and need for love and mutual respect was something that transcended the boundary of religion and politics.

Theology and Civil Religion

Flowing from this was his creative challenge to traditional theology and his implicit but radical renovation of civil religion theory. As regards the first, Gandhi is misunderstood because of his refusal to separate religion from politics. This confusion is due to the fact that religion nowadays is treated as a flag of political identification, rather than as a source of philosophical and moral standards. If we used the terms *ethics* in place of *religion*, and *power* for *politics*, the matter would become clearer. Should power be free of moral guidance? Gandhi regarded political activity as the highest sphere of social action, and insisted on informing this action with moral guidelines. Truth for him included *moksha* and self-knowledge, as also justice and social integrity. This is why he refused to separate means and ends—evil means would corrupt the best of ends. For him, ahimsa was the means and truth was the goal. Religion and spirituality were not instruments for the pursuit of political power; rather, political activity had to be informed by the best spiritual ideals.

Over centuries, the ancient debate between reason and revelation has acquired a nihilist dimension in the quest for a civic religion. Must political life be governed by divine or human guidance? For centuries philosophers dodged this far-reaching and intractable query via their focus on the utility of religion rather than its truth—an area of inquiry also known as political theology. The use of religion by the state (civic religion), the use of the state by the priesthood (theocracy), and the elevation of science to an object of belief ('scientism') tend to strengthen ethical nihilism. This tendency is highlighted by the emergence of propaganda, which makes knowledge and goodness slaves of the state. Often even the high-priests of religion use the separation of religion and politics as a convenient excuse to condone crimes committed by their co-religionists, thus undermining public morality. In stressing the healing power of religion Gandhi

challenged theologians to translate their fine-sounding doctrines into reality.

Gandhi addressed these issues directly and from within his faith—which underwent transformation with time and experience. His approach to the relationship between reason and revelation is contained in a response he made in 1936 to the query ‘where do you find the seat of authority?’ Pointing to his breast, Gandhi said: ‘It lies here. I exercise my judgment about every scripture, including the Gita. I cannot let a scriptural text supersede my reason. Whilst I believe that the principal books are inspired, they suffer from a process of double distillation. Firstly, they come through a human prophet, and then through the commentaries of interpreters. Nothing in them comes from God directly.’⁷ As his career progressed he came to the view that ‘it is more correct to say Truth is God than to say God is Truth.’ With Tagore he could make the distinction between the all-encompassing religion of humanity and the several faiths which were manifestations of it. That is what he meant when he said ‘I have made the world’s faith in God my own.’ This is why the separation of religion and politics was incomprehensible to Gandhi. Answering a query on this issue in 1940, he remarked: ‘Indeed religion should pervade every one of our actions. Here religion does not mean sectarianism. It means a belief in ordered moral government of the universe. It is not less real because it is unseen. This religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc. It does not supersede them. It harmonises them and gives them reality.’⁸

This stance is a clue to Gandhi’s implicit belief that given the plethora of faiths, there could be no singular civil religion in India. For him, the issue was not the separation of religion and politics, but of religion and nationalism. This is also the clue to his ecumenical *pravachan sabhas*, where he read passages from all major religious texts, doing his best to convince his fellow Indians that they need not be divided, but in fact could be united by their religious beliefs. It is significant that he continued this practice to the last day of his life. I note in passing that the Pakistan ideal was grounded in the conviction that Islam could function as a civil religion. And for its part, Hindutva resembles State Shinto in Japan. Gandhi’s name for communalism was ‘irreligion’, and he believed these versions of utilitarian religiosity to be perversions of faith and harbingers of disintegration. Gandhi’s instincts on this score were correct: it was not possible to establish a stable polity in India based on a ‘national’ religion. The attempt to enforce a civic

religion—the ‘nationalisation of religion’ as it were, could ignite a colossal legitimisation crisis for the Indian state. This has been borne out by the history of partition and its aftermath.

Ideology vs Truth and Ahimsa

In current usage the word ideology denotes political belief, the ‘party line’. But the matter is far more complicated. Since the 1790s when it first appeared, the word has acquired meanings that serve political purposes, and for that very reason carries the burden of deceit. Ideologies are mixtures of facts, half-truths and convictions, and have emerged as political substitutes for religion. Hannah Arendt called ideology the most devilish form of lie, and described ideological (totalitarian) regimes as being ‘secret societies established in broad daylight.’⁹

Ideological systems treat truth as pliable to political convenience: ideology is a corruption of truth. Religion too has succumbed to ideology or ideological manipulation. As a genuinely religious person, Gandhi saw this very clearly. It is worth reflecting that hardly any leading Indian religious personages today show any interest in healing the wounds of communal divisions. In an essay titled *Politics and the Devil*, Leszek Kolakowski referred to ideological states—states whose legitimacy derives from the claim that their rulers are owners of truth—as ‘caricatural imitations of theocracy.’¹⁰ Such states dispense with any distinction between secular and religious authority, concentrating both spiritual and physical power in one place, including the nation itself. Given the authoritarian impulse of ideology, (the beliefs of pacifists or Quakers are not, generally, referred to as ideologies), there has always been a link between ideology and violence. Ideological movements tend to carry a seamless connection, overt or covert, with controlled mobs and private armies. Ideological thinking signifies the end of the dialogic pursuit of truth—it is the marker par-excellence of the age of permanent war. It would not be far-fetched to say that we live in an ideological era; and for that reason have voluntarily imprisoned ourselves in an ‘enemy system’.

Gandhi’s challenge to ideology arose out of the connection he made between ahimsa and truth. In the face of hostile sloganeering in Bengal in 1940, he remarked, ‘I love to hear the words “Down with Gandhism”. An “ism” deserves to be destroyed. It is a useless thing. The real thing is non-violence. It is immortal. It is enough for me if it remains alive. I am

eager to see Gandhism wiped out at an earlier date. You should not give yourselves over to sectarianism. I do not belong to any sect. I have never dreamt of establishing any sect. If any sect is established in my name after my death my soul would cry out in anguish.” On ahimsa too, Gandhi was reluctant to provide a theory: ‘To write a treatise on the science of ahimsa is beyond my powers. . . . Let anyone who can systematise ahimsa into a science do so, if indeed it lends itself to such treatment.’¹¹ His approach to non-violence was not tactical or ideological, but metaphysical. One scholar describes it thus: ‘Being a manifestation of Brahman, every living being was divine. Taking life was therefore sacrilegious and a form of deicide.’¹² It was his sense of being at one with all Indians—indeed, all humanity—that lay at the root of Gandhi’s charisma.¹³ There was never such a thing as Gandhian ideology—nor is it proper to call anyone a Gandhian.

Gandhi’s Recuperation of the Present

An essential feature of future-oriented ideological thinking is the abolition of lived time as the locus of politics. With their bent towards the future, ideologies convert presence into transience. With their promise of a glorious future that never appears, ideologies are a mode of rendering permanent what economists call deferred gratification. Because of their focus on an ever-retreating horizon of the future, ideologies reduce presence to evanescence. If ‘being is becoming’, where are we? Hence Gandhi’s challenge to ideology was also a manifestation of his political resuscitation of the Present. His apparent disregard of ‘history’ was a reflection of this approach. Asked by an imaginary interlocutor (in *Hind Swaraj*) for historical evidence on what he called soul-force or truth-force, Gandhi replies that the continued existence of human life despite incessant wars was proof enough. It was war and violence that made news, not the everyday love and co-operation that characterised the lives of millions. History was a record of interruptions; of ‘every interruption of the even working of the force of love or of the soul. . . you cannot expect silver ore in a tin mine.’ He also clung to his belief in the human capacity for betterment: ‘To believe that what has not occurred in history will not occur at all is to argue disbelief in the dignity of man.’¹⁴

Conclusion

Amidst the never-ending debate about the nature and origins of modernity, it is sometimes forgotten that criticisms of modernity have emanated from both right

and left, from the side of nostalgia for tradition, as well as that of the supremacy of science and reason. I will not enter that debate, except for one point that is relevant to our theme. In his focus upon violence and ahimsa Gandhi had grasped the central feature of modernity viz., militarism. Militarism was not only the basis of the colonial system that had subjugated India, but had seeped into the very bowels of society, corrupting its thought processes as well as its capacity to sustain itself and maintain an ecological balance between humans and nature.

Gandhi was a Mahatma, but one who was never at peace with his own people, nor they with him. But he manifested what was best in them, so much that even those who celebrate his assassination are obliged deceitfully to own him. Many of his contemporaries were pessimists even when there was hope. But Gandhi spoke of love and mutual respect in the midst of carnage and hatred; he gave people hope in the midst of despair; he appealed to their better instincts at the worst of times. The message of his fast in January 1948 is a message from a man of extraordinary strength and courage. After he died, politicians argued about whether he was the father or the son of the nation. It would be more accurate to say that the Mahatma’s last sacrifice became the foundation of India’s secular constitution.

As to whether ahimsa is bound to fail, it is sufficient to recall the words of Martin Luther King: ‘the choice today is not between violence and non-violence; it is between non-violence and extinction.’ Could it be true that harmony and goodness are independent of violence, and exist on their own? Here is what Gandhi said about this: ‘Good is self-existent, evil is not. It is like a parasite living in and around good. It will die of itself when the support that good gives it is withdrawn.’ We may also remember Edmund Burke: ‘The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.’ The Mahatma is not just an icon of the good man in an age of genocide and utter barbarity. His steadfastness and love for truth will, like that of Socrates, shine for centuries. Those who hate and slander him are spitting at the moon. They will disappear into the mists of time. Gandhi will never be forgotten.

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References

- 1 The indications of nihilism lie in everyday life. They include the sense that all opinions are equally valid, that there are no standards of truth, that life is meaningless and ethical judgements pointless. It appears in the replacement of dialogue by cynicism; the evaporating distinctions between Right and Left, and the religious character of ideologies. All these indicate an erosion of meaning and the decline of language. Some outstanding features of this reality are as follows– the concept of truth is seen as irrelevant, powerless, or rendered subject to interest groups or historical context (relativism and historicism). In each case truth is replaced by, or subordinated to utility, ie its efficacy in the quest for power. This results in alethiological nihilism, or the denial that truth possesses reality.
- 2 ‘He understood that the essence of the modern state was based on the unhampered development of bourgeois society, of private interest... at the same time he still regarded the state as an end in itself and civil life only as a treasurer and his subordinate which must have no will of its own. He perfected the Terror by substituting permanent war for permanent revolution... He fed the egoism of the French nation to complete satiety but demanded also the sacrifice of bourgeois business, enjoyments, wealth, etc., whenever this was required by the political aim of conquest... In his home policy, too, he combated bourgeois society as the opponent of the state which in his own person he still held to be an absolute aim in itself.’ Taken from: “The Holy Family”, *Marx & Engels, Collected Works*, Vol 4, p. 123.
- 3 Referred to as the *levee en masse*, the ‘democratic’ mass conscription of French citizens for service in the Revolutionary War; issued by the National Convention in August 1793.
- 4 English colonial expansion in India acquired momentum during 1790-1818; followed by incessant annexations and conquest in Punjab and the North West including Afghanistan until 1877. The Government of India’s budgetary allocation for the Army grew from 33% in 1863 to 45% of revenue in 1891. European dominion over Africa grew from 10% of the land area to 90% in 20 years from 1875 to 1895.
- 5 Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, Verso, London, 2002; p 7.
- 6 William Shirer, *Gandhi: A Memoir*, London, 1979, p180.
- 7 CWMG, Vol 64 p 71; Discussion with Basil Mathews and others (November 24, 1936).
- 8 CWMG, Vol 71, p 177-178; *Harijan*, February 10, 1940.
- 9 Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. 606-607. She named three features of ideological thinking; the element of motion, of emancipation from reality, and of logical consistency deriving from an assumed first premise.
- 10 Leszek Ko Bakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, Chicago, 1990, p 189.
- 11 “To write a treatise on the science of ahimsa is beyond my powers... Action is my domain, and what I understand, according to my lights, to be my duty, and whatever comes my way, I do. All my action is actuated by the spirit of service. Let anyone who can systematise ahimsa into a science do so, if indeed it lends itself to such treatment.. The world does not hunger for shastras. What it craves, and will always crave, is sincere action.. No man has ever been able to describe God fully. The same is true of ahimsa.” *Harijan*, March 3, 1946.
- 12 “Gandhi rejected violence on four grounds: the ontological, the epistemological, the moral and the practical. Being a manifestation of Brahman, every living being was divine. Taking life was therefore sacrilegious and a form of deicide.” Bhikhu Parekh; *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform*; New Delhi, 1989, p 155.
- 13 “There can be no rule-books of Gandhian policy. There are no easy Gandhian formulae. This, however, does not necessarily reduce the value of Gandhi’s teaching in the contemporary political situation. After all, the indication of direction that a compass-needle gives is of some value in itself, even if it takes no consideration of the terrain through which we must pass.” Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, in *Gandhi and the Nuclear Age*, 1965, p130.
- 14 M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj, or Indian Home Rule* (1909), Ahmedabad, 2003, pp. 67 and 57.

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Gandhi, the Eternal Translator

Apoorvanand

The relationship between Gandhi and colonialism is complex. He is responsible for the dismantling of the British empire. It started a process of creation of independent nation states. Also a different way to look at the world. Even before that, while fighting with the British, whom he berated for keeping unwilling populations under their dominance, Gandhi had already turned into the lens through which the world had started looking at itself. But before that he had to cover a long path.

Before we talk about his path let me share with you an incident from the life of Gandhi. The year was 1912. Gopal Krishna Gokhale was visiting South Africa and meetings were being held for him. Gandhi had already established himself as a tall leader in South Africa. He had travelled from one colony that India was then to another colony as a professional. But he was destined to transform himself into a crusader for the rights of the immigrants, initially Indians. He had trained himself in the language of law. In South Africa it became his job to translate and interpret this language for the benefit of his fellow countrymen and women who had settled there in various professions but were kept firmly out of the realm of rights which were legitimately available to the whites. Gandhi asserted that his and his fellow countrymen and countrywomen's rights be respected as they were legitimate subjects of the British empire.

D.G. Tendulkar describes the role of Gandhi in these meetings. Gokhale was a giant figure for the Indians and even the colonial masters paid deference to his position. In Johannesburg a mass meeting was held for the Indians. Gandhi requested Gokhale to speak in Marathi as there were several Konkani Muslims and some Maharashtrian Hindus among the audience. When Gandhi said that he would translate his Marathi speech into Hindi, Gokhale burst into laughter and remarked, 'I have quite fathomed your knowledge of Hindi, an accomplishment upon which you cannot exactly be congratulated. But now you propose to translate Marathi into Hindi. May I know where you acquired such knowledge of Marathi.'

Gandhi replied, 'What is true of my Hindustani is equally true of my Marathi. I cannot speak a word of Marathi but I am confident of gathering the purport of your Marathi speech on a subject with which I am quite familiar. In any case you will see that I don't misinterpret you to the people.' Gokhale fell in with Gandhi's suggestion and from Johannesburg right up to Zanzibar he always spoke Marathi, and Gandhi served as interpreter. On the whole Gokhale was gratified by the results of the experiment and Gandhi was pleased that an Indian language was given its place in South Africa.

The audacity of Gandhi is remarkable. But there is much more to this issue than just his desire to host an Indian language in a land which was not very hospitable to languages which belonged to the immigrants. He himself was an immigrant there, not only fighting for the rights of Indians but also advocating dignity for other linguistic groups.

Margaret Chatterjee writes in her book *Gandhi and his Jewish Friends* about an incident of 1911. A Russian Jew Jack Gerber was restrained from disembarking from the ship on the ground of deficient education. Gandhi took note of this injustice and wrote in the *Indian Opinion* that had Mr. Gerber been an immigrant from any other part of Europe and had he belonged to a different denomination, he would not have been subjected to the harsh treatment that was his lot.

There was more to it. Education was being defined by the competence of the immigrant in a language of the choice of the coloniser. The draft immigration bill had dropped Yiddish as a qualification for entry, the proposed new law prescribed a dictation test in a language of the choice of the immigration officer.

The apathy of the administrator Jan Smuts towards languages like Yiddish led Gandhi to reproach him. All the more so because Smuts was no ordinary administrator. He had written an essay on 'The Conditions of Future

South African Literature' and loved Taal, a local language. He had this to say about Taal: 'For expressing wit or humour as well as the ordinary emotions of the human heart—and in this it reveals the character of the people—it is scarcely second to any other language with which we are acquainted.'

Smuts could see the value of Taal but found no value in Yiddish.

Chatterjee writes that what Smuts felt about Taal and the Russian Jewish immigrants felt about Yiddish, Gandhi felt in the first place about Gujarati. He chose it as a family language, and later in the Phoenix settlement and the Tolstoy farm he made it a mission to translate many of the works that had influenced him into that language and write his own work first in Gujarati for publication before translating it into English.

Let us return to the Gokhale–Gandhi interaction. What was Gandhi trying to do there? He was proposing that the act of translation is a pointer towards our inadequacy. While we desire to interpret each other in our own languages, we also need to admit that there would always remain a gap, a lack and both the sides have to recognise this as a fact. With this recognition arises the issue of difficulty. The difficulty in knowing the other facing me and talking to me. The act of decipherment is a never ending one. This can thus be understood as a principle Gandhi was trying to initiate for co-habitation in which there would always come moments of unfamiliarity with the other and one will have to grapple with them with the resources available. But inadequacy of resources should not be an excuse to postpone the task. This is an act to create relationships in which I accept my inability to completely grasp or capture you.

I have tried to think deeper about the reluctance of Gandhi in accepting English as the language in which an Indian leader like Gokhale should be talking to his own people. Was it a nationalist act or something else?

Rajmohan Gandhi in one of his tellings of the life of Gandhi titled *The Good Boatman* recalls one of the South African moments of Gandhi. Again it is about a bill, which was going to impact the life of immigrant Indians. The lawyer Gandhi retires to a hill near his house and translates the whole draft bill into Gujarati. Rajmohan writes that this was entirely an unnecessary exercise. The case against the draft bill had to be built in English only. But he would understand the full import of this bill

on the lives of the Indian immigrants only when the law is transferred to the realm of their own language, in which the ordinary emotions of their heart are held and expressed, to recall Smuts. The act of translation is then an act of achieving justice. The injustice ingrained in the law would be revealed only by a language in which he lives and breathes.

Gandhi, as Chatterjee shows, probably did not know that Yiddish had a rich repository of literature, but that did not prevent him from supporting its cause in his own way: 'Jewish scholars have succeeded . . . in giving their masses a language of which they may feel proud . . .'

Gandhi's support to the cause of Yiddish is again, as Chatterjee rightly notes, an act of justice. Also about its being a people's matter. She writes, 'With his unflinching ear for what was "of the people" he could recognise its folk quality, and furthermore he saw the justice of the cause of those who were promoting it.' Justice, she points out was never for Gandhi a function of numbers.

Talking about numbers, one would see later that he always sided with those who were smaller in number or in other words, were a minority anywhere. Minority is not again a matter of numbers. It is always a relational thing. Those with greater political power should be deemed as majority and those who have less power should be treated as minorities. His defence and advocacy of Urdu had something to do with this idea of smaller numbers. His insistence on creating a new variety of Hindi and Urdu which he called Hindustani is again to be seen as an act of creating relationships between Hindi and Urdu, which were demanding their own rights from the colonisers. He proposes a third way or middle path of Hindustani. This was not to deprive any of the two of the script in which they were written. Linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterjee expressed his reservation about this insistence of Gandhi. He told him that it would be very difficult for the common masses to practice and master both the scripts. He recalls the firmness with which Gandhi rejected him, 'Do please give a trial to what I say. I am firmly of the belief that this will be quite practical.' Hindustani had to be practiced in both the scripts. The question of Hindi and Urdu had already acquired a divisive character, a matter of Hindu and Muslim rights. Gandhi wanted to forge a nationalism on the bedrock of Hindu–Muslim unity. If Hindus were giving up what was theirs—and he saw Urdu as theirs too—he had to persuade them to re-adopt it.

It has been pointed out and rightly so that while being partial to Hindustani, Gandhi was imposing a north India centric view on the rest of India. This is not the place to go into this debate. What is interesting for me is Gandhi's relational approach.

When Gandhi planned to return to India, he started learning Bengali. His biographers note that one of his first destinations in India was the abode of Rabindranath Tagore, Shanti Niketan. Tagore, poet and thinker of Bengali, was not a nationalist. The relationship between the Mahatma and the poet has been a subject of study for many scholars. In their mental and philosophical outlook, they were very different. Yet none wanted the other to lose his voice. One is seen as an aesthete and the other a utilitarian. Their ideas on education and agitation differ. But they are ready to reach out to each other and make efforts to understand each other. That this dialogue, in which disagreement is an essential element, took place in a colonial setting is no deterrent.

Gandhi, the relationist, supports Shanti Niketan and collects funds for it. This is despite the fact that his educational philosophy as expressed in his experiments of Buniyadi Shiksha or Nai Taleem are at divergence from Tagore's educational philosophy. Gandhi's practice of Bangla continues even after the death of the poet. His companions report that when Gandhi is in Noakhali, a place in East Bengal, dousing the flame of violence by Muslims against their Hindu neighbours, he carries with him a slate on which he keeps practicing Bengali.

On his last day, the evening which witnessed him being killed, he carried on his daily practice of Bengali.

Gandhi is seen as a person who started the dismantling of colonialism. He is thus the most significant personality of the 19th and 20th centuries who changed the emotional geography of the 20th century. His struggle began in South Africa and thus his principles and method of agitation took shape on what would be called a foreign soil. But even before that, right in the formative years of his life, he had decided to move to London. London is the heart of the colony of which he is a subject. Even before reaching London, he had a London of his imagination. It was an abode of poets and philosophers. He was thus not going to a foreign land. His biographers have noted the doggedness of his will to go to London. He begs for money and fights with his community against its religious prejudices and persuades his reluctant mother to be able to go to his dream land. He just could not bear the thought

of not being able to achieve this dream.

It is not very difficult to see that Gandhi would not have been what he ultimately became had he not gone to London. London became a location or a geography where Gandhi found his tongue. His first interaction in London is with the societies advocating vegetarianism. As novelist Naipaul says, an instinctive habit turns into an informed choice. Gandhi finds the support of science to what was largely a matter of culture.

Gandhi is seen grappling with the question of power and violence when discussing vegetarianism. Are vegetarians less strong and courageous than those who eat meat? This is a question he had been facing since his childhood when his friends used to taunt him for not eating meat. Gandhi finds an intellectual and scientific basis for his dietary choice in England and through Western sources. While in London, he wrote a lot on this subject and participated in meetings meant to discuss vegetarianism. But it does not make him a fanatic.

When the son of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan shows his impatience with the vegetarian food regime of the Sevagram Ashram, Gandhi laughs and is ready to arrange his favourite dish of chicken for him.

Gandhi's ashrams are again a result of his dialogue with Western traditions. His vegetarianism and ashrams are seen as directly descending from Indian sources. But without Tolstoy or Thoreau his ashrams would not have been conceived.

Gandhi in a way crafts his unique Indianness from his interaction with the West. His stay in London not only brought him close to the Bible, it was the circle of his Western friends which motivated him to read and study *The Song Celestial*, the translated version of Gita. He felt greatly ashamed that he had not read Gita in the original but this encounter led to a lifelong relationship with the Gita. He produced an interpretation of the Gita which unseated the interpretation of Gita as given by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the protagonist of militant nationalism in India. It also inspired Vinoba Bhave to write another interpretation of the holy book.

Gandhi was not interested in placing Gita above books from other religions. In fact, even before becoming a devotee of Gita, he had developed a kind of affection with *The Sermon on The Mount*. He famously said that even I forget every word of Gita and the book itself is

lost or destroyed, and if I still have the Sermon on the Mount, it would give me the same solace as Gita gives, nothing less.

And then while accepting the greatness of the *Bible* or *Quran*, he is not ready to leave his dharma. On the other hand, he does an innovation by creating a unique prayer which includes verses and words from nearly all religions. The idea of it came from an incident during one of his sea voyages. The ship was caught in a storm. Passengers were frightened. Gandhi with the captain of the ship was trying to calm them. He noticed that all of them, Hindus, Muslims and Christians, were crying out to their Gods to help. From here the idea of this prayer emerged in his mind.

Gandhi's germinal contribution to modern human thought was made in the form a small book, titled *Hind Swaraj*, or Self Rule. It is again the result of his interaction with Western traditions of Tolstoy, Emerson, Thoreau and Ruskin, and also after his encounter with some Indian youth in London who, though fighting the British, were in his opinion only following the Western path which led to violence.

Is it the West he is fighting with or, as Rajmohan Gandhi in his new biography of Gandhi says, its arrogance and dominance? Gandhi, on more than one occasion, praises the courage of the British. He has not forgotten his 'dear London' even when fighting against it.

In the First World War Gandhi is enlisting Indians to fight on the side of the empire. Thirty years later he is adamant not to send a Bhai or a Pai to the war unless the British left India.

Even then, while talking to a correspondent from the *Daily Express*, Gandhi remembers his dear London thus, "I know every nook and corner of London where I lived for three years, so many years ago, and somewhat of Oxford and of Cambridge and Manchester too, but it is London I specially feel for. I used to read in the Inner Temple Library and used to attend Dr. Parker's sermons in the Temple Church. My heart goes out to the British people, and when I heard that the Temple Church was bombed, I bled. And the bombing of the Westminster Abbey and other ancient edifices affected me deeply."

Gandhi asks his colonisers to leave India. He challenges them from the standpoint of Christianity.

Beginning from *Hind Swaraj* to his last days, he laments that what the colonisers are doing is a clear betrayal of Christian principles. Gandhi says that his struggle is to help them, to remind them of their forgotten Christian values.

It is remarkable the way Gandhi made friends in London, South Africa, all over the continent and in the United States of America. He won for the cause of India the affection of the best from that race and language, which considered itself superior to India and its languages. It could happen because Gandhi remained all his life a translator, an interpreter and an interlocutor between the West and the colonies. He started his life as a petitioner and practised this art to perfection seeking to appeal, persuade the best in the opponent. This art he learnt as a colonial subject seeking his rights from the Empire.

Gandhi, in this process, developed a unique non-violent language. It is full of Biblical references. He often invokes Christian motifs when in dilemma or agony. These are the lines he found most apt to describe his mental and emotional state when in his free nation, Hindus and Muslims were at the throats of each other:

It is by my fetters that I can fly
It is by my sorrows that I can soar
It is by my reverses that I can run
It is by my tears that I can travel
It is by my cross that I can climb
into the heart of humanity
Let me magnify my cross, O God.

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Gandhiji and Nehru on Economic Policies on the eve of Independence and After

Sudarshan Iyengar

Jawaharlal Nehru was the most prominent national leader after Gandhiji on the eve of India's Independence. Gandhiji saw Nehru as the leader of the country in Independent India. On many matters both agreed, but on certain matters they did not. One area of major disagreement was the economic system and policies. Gandhiji wanted to be certain that Nehru would try to reconstruct the nation according to his vision of *Swaraj*. But Nehru had made his position and thoughts on the subject abundantly clear that he did not agree with Gandhiji. Essentially the perspectives and therefore visions differed significantly. A short debate ensued between the two on the eve of Independence. To understand the ideas of both, a brief recount of it would be an appropriate start. We may then delve somewhat deeper into their concepts and visions.¹

On 5 October 1945, Gandhiji wrote a letter to Nehru in Hindustani in which he wanted to clarify what he considered a big difference of opinion. It appears that this was on his mind for quite some time. Gandhiji wrote that the delay in his writing was also because he was not sure whether he should write in English or Hindustani and that he finally chose to write in Hindustani.² He perhaps wanted to make a heart to heart to talk and therefore he chose to write in Hindustani. Nehru answered in English. Thus, in a way it was two civilisations talking. Gandhiji also appeared to be absolutely clear that both of them owed it to the people of India to share their thoughts and perspectives and if there was any deep difference it should be made public. Gandhiji made a reference towards the end of the letter that he was prompted to write because some debate had taken place in the Congress Working Committee Meeting held in Mumbai (then Bombay) during September 22-24, 1945 which Gandhiji had attended despite his indifferent health³. India was to gain political independence soon and Gandhiji wanted to be sure what kind of *Swaraj* was being visualised by Nehru who he thought would be leading Independent India. It is in this letter that Gandhiji made clear that he saw Nehru as his heir. It should be

clarified here that it did not necessarily mean that Gandhiji wanted Nehru to be the Prime Minister of Free India. Let us see why he thought Nehru as his heir.

*Our bond is not merely political. It is much deeper. I have no measure to fathom that depth. This bond can never be broken. I therefore want that we should understand each other thoroughly in politics as well. The second reason is that neither of us considers himself as worthless. We both live only for India's freedom, and will be happy to die too for that freedom.... Though I aspire to live up to 125 years rendering service; I am nevertheless an old man, while you are comparatively young. That is why I have said that you are my heir. It is only proper that I should at least understand my heir and my heir in turn should understand me.*⁴

In the letter Gandhiji wanted to know from Nehru whether he agreed with his idea of *Swaraj*. Gandhiji wrote that he still stood firmly by the system of government he had envisaged in *Hind Swaraj* in 1909. That was his realisation of truth that had not changed all these years and he would stand by it all alone if it came to that. He then drew the picture anew in his own words and said that he was not out to prove that what he had said then was right but to express and share with Nehru what he felt while writing in the present time. Gandhiji wrote,

I believe that if India, and through India the world, is to achieve real freedom, then sooner or later we shall have to go and live in the villages—in huts, not in palaces. Millions of people can never live in cities and palaces in comfort and peace. Nor can they do so by killing one another, that is, by resorting to violence and untruth. I have not the slightest doubt that, but for the pair, truth and non-violence, mankind will be doomed. We can have the vision of that truth and non-violence only in the simplicity of the villages. . . . The sum and substance of what I want to say is that the individual person should have control over

*the things that are necessary for the sustenance of life. If he cannot have such control the individual cannot survive.*⁵

Gandhiji was not referring to an ancient thought and a dark, depressed, diseased and dull village society. He was able to relate to modernity to an extent.

*While I appreciate modern thought, I find that an ancient thing, considered in the light of this thought looks so sweet. You will not be able to understand me if you think that I am talking about the villages of today. My ideal village still exists only in my imagination. . . . In this village of my dreams the villager will not be dull—he will be all awareness. He will not live like an animal in filth and darkness. Men and women will live in freedom, prepared to face the whole world. There will be no plague, no cholera and no smallpox. Nobody will be allowed to be idle or to wallow in luxury. Everyone will have to do body labour. Granting all this, I can still envisage a number of things that will have to be organized on a large scale. Perhaps there will even be railways and also post and telegraph offices. I do not know what things there will be or will not be. Nor am I bothered about it. If I can make sure of the essential thing, other things will follow in due course. But if I give up the essential thing, I give up everything.*⁶

In the picture that Gandhiji draws in the letter he is clear that modern thought according to him was relevant for education, science, hygiene and sanitation. The mode of production was to be decentralised and labour intensive. Self-sufficiency in basic needs was the model. He did envisage modern amenities such as post and railways. He also conceded the point that it was likely that in such a rural society some production will also be undertaken on large scale. But most important was that it will be a village based rural society with truth and non-violence as non-negotiable values in the economic system as well.

Nehru responded rather hurriedly promising that he would write or engage in discussions later. Nehru did not have any problem with the basic values of truth and non-violence, but he expressed his inability to understand the content and ways of doing to form a society that was practising true cooperation and peaceful methods. His major problem was the village or the rural society. Responding to Gandhiji's letter of 5 October, Nehru wrote on October 9, 1945:

*I do not understand why a village should necessarily embody truth and non-violence. A village, normally speaking, is backward intellectually and culturally and no progress can be made from a backward environment. Narrow-minded people are much more likely to be untruthful and violent.*⁷

Nehru also differed on ways to achieving the objective of providing basic needs to the growing population of India. A rural and agrarian society was not an answer, according to him. Urbanisation and industrialisation was his vision for solving the poverty problem in the country. In his idea the State had a far bigger and important role in shaping the destiny of the last man. He made it clear in his letter,

*Then again we have to put down certain objectives like a sufficiency of food, clothing, housing, education, sanitation, etc. which should be the minimum requirements for the country for everyone. It is with these objectives in view that we must find out specially how to attain them speedily. Again it seems inevitable that modern means of transport as well as many other modern developments must continue and be developed. . . . If that is so, inevitably a measure of heavy industry exists. How far will that fit in with a purely village society? . . . If two types of economy exist in the country there should be either conflict between the two or one will overwhelm the other.*⁸

Nehru also categorically brought in the point about foreign aggression and wrote,

*The question of independence and protection from foreign aggression, both political and economic, has to be considered in this context. I do not think it is possible for India to be really independent unless she is a technically advanced country. I am not thinking for the moment in terms of just armies but rather of scientific growth. In the present context of the world we cannot even advance culturally without a strong background of scientific research in every department.*⁹

Nehru emphasised the need for urbanisation although he was aware about urban areas growing very big and the problems which arose due to it. He wrote,

There is no question of palaces for millions of people. But there seems to be no reason why millions

*should not have comfortable up-to-date homes where they can lead a cultured existence. Many of the present overgrown cities have developed evils which are deplorable. Probably we have to discourage this overgrowth and at the same time encourage the village to approximate more to the culture of the town.*¹⁰

Apart from deeper difference on how society should be formed in free India, Nehru clearly admitted that *Hind Swaraj* as a treatise on vision of free India had never registered in his mind. He had thought that even Gandhi had grown beyond it and hence a convinced reference to it again in Gandhi's 5 October 1945 letter had surprised Nehru. In his response he said,

*It is many years ago since I read Hind Swaraj and I have only a vague picture in my mind. But even when I read it some 20 or more years ago it seemed to be completely unreal. In your writings and speeches since then I have found much that seemed to me an advance on that old position and an appreciation of modern trends. . . . As you know, the Congress has never considered that picture, much less adopted it. . . . It is 38 years since Hind Swaraj was written. The world has completely changed since then, possibly in a wrong direction. In any event any consideration of these questions must keep present facts, forces and the human material we have today in view, otherwise it will be divorced from reality. You are right in saying that the world, or a large part of it, appears to be bent on committing suicide. That may be an inevitable development of an evil seed in civilization that has grown. I think it is so. How to get rid of this evil, and yet how to keep the good in the present as in the past is our problem. Obviously there is good too in the present.*¹¹

Gandhiji was not apparently satisfied with what he read in Nehru's letter. He did not respond immediately. However, it appears that Gandhiji and Nehru had an opportunity to meet and interact fairly leisurely. The itinerary of Gandhiji shows that he was in Pune (then Poona) for the whole of October and until 17 November 1945. There is a letter of 13 November 1945 in which Gandhiji refers to the meeting of 12 November and summarises his understanding gained in the meeting. He wrote,

The talks we had yesterday have given me the impression that there is not much difference in our

outlooks or the way we understand things. I want to tell you how I have understood you. If there is any difference you will let me know.

- 1) *The crucial question according to you is how to ensure man's mental, economic, political and moral development. That is my position too.*
- 2) *And in doing so every individual should have equal right and opportunity.*
- 3) *From this point of view there should be equality between villages and cities. And therefore their food and drink, their way of life, their dress and their habits should be the same. If such a condition is to be brought about people should produce their own cloth and food and build their own houses. So also they should produce their own water and electricity.*
- 4) *Man is not born to live in the jungle; he is born to live in society. If we are to make sure that one person does not ride on another's back, the unit should be an ideal village or a social group which will be self-sufficient, but the members of which will be interdependent. This conception will bring about a change in human relationship all over the world.*¹²

Two basic differences are discernible from the debate above. One was the economic system and second was the political system for supporting the economic system. Gandhiji believed firmly and argued for a decentralised village society that was self-sufficient in fulfilling basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. The political system that could support such an economic system would also be decentralised with most power resting with a village body, a panchayat or what is now called a Gram Sabha after amendment of the Constitution. Nehru was also very clear in his vision in which economic well-being for all citizens in the country could be achieved through industrialisation which brought with it urbanisation. In the modern world that was emerging after the Second World War, the state had to be strong and had to be controlling defence of the nation. Science and technology were the vital components that were to be used to produce armaments and equipment and which were also to help in building modern techniques to gain economic independence. Modernity was to be embraced only in this form and it was inevitable.

Why did Gandhiji gain an impression that there was not much difference in their outlooks and the way they understood things is not known. It is certain that Gandhiji read Nehru wrong as they thought fundamentally differently on the form and content of the state and economy notwithstanding the similarity in basic values. Nehru had embraced modernity in the way it had evolved in the West. He was worried about the ills of it to an extent and this was where he came closer to Gandhiji's thought. He conceded in the letter quoted above that there was in the world a tremendous acquisitive tendency both in individuals and groups and nations, which lead to conflicts and wars. Our entire society was based on it more or less. But such an admission did not help him come close to Gandhi, for the roots of Nehru's differences with Gandhi lay elsewhere. Bhikhu Parekh has given an excellent and elaborate analysis on this subject. He argues that Nehru's was highly critical of India's past. In Parekh's words, "he thought that apart from a couple of brief periods in ancient India, the rest of its history was a story of degeneration and decline."¹³ Nehru's upbringing perhaps led to him to develop great faith in the traditions and values of the West in polity and economy. Parekh notes that Nehru believed that India needed to follow a path of comprehensive modernisation. Nehru harboured deep fear that if India did not industrialise, it would be highly vulnerable to foreign aggressions again, just as in the past it had fallen an easy prey to Britain because it had remained scientifically and technologically backward. Parekh points out that Nehru had visualised seven basic goals: national unity, parliamentary democracy, industrialisation, socialism, cultivating scientific temper, secularism and non-alignment.¹⁴ He further notes that for Nehru, agriculture was primitive and a culturally inferior activity; it lacked the power and energy to haul the country out of its 'traditional grooves' and 'propel' it along the path of modern ways of life and thought. If one wove the economic system around it, the country would remain scientifically and technologically backward.

Nehru's overly concern about the vulnerability of India to foreign aggression and perhaps undue hurry to industrialise and thus rid the nation of its poverty and 'superstitions' had blurred his vision because of which he was unable to appreciate Gandhiji's perspectives on the state and economic system. Here are some excerpts from the thoughts expressed by Nehru at a gathering of prominent associates of Gandhiji at Sewagram just six weeks after Gandhiji's assassination, which show how

confused he was:

Major issues confront us – fundamental questions. Things like Khadi are secondary; they are branches of the tree, not the root of the matter. . . . Some essential things have been said about khadi and village industries, and we should keep this separate from some other questions. The matter of a 'competitive economy' and a new social order have been raised . . . my interpretation of a competitive economy is something a little different; the economy you put forward should be self-supporting. . . . The government has to help it get going; but the fundamental question is whether it will be strong enough to stand on its own feet or not. . . . This is not a question of competition with cottage industries. We have to build a framework of industrialisation separate from the home industries . . . the fundamental problem is that the whole world is moving towards centralisation both politically and economically. We too want to give our central government greater authority and make it more powerful.¹⁵

That Nehru differed from Gandhiji in a significant way has been commented upon by various scholars at different times. Paying rich tributes to Nehru soon after his death, eminent economist Prof. M.L. Dantwala noted the following:¹⁶

Nehru's biggest contribution to economic strategy was in committing the nation to a policy of planned economic development. This was by no means the easiest thing to do. Within the country, he had to contend with his Gandhian colleagues who saw in this imposition of Centralised Statism, while they were emotionally committed to village self-sufficiency. . . . Another equally important, though somewhat controversial, element of our economic policy, which but for Nehru's support would not have passed muster, is the launching of the modern type of industrialisation with its emphasis on heavy industries. . . . There was another section—well-meaning and sincere—in the country which felt that such a pattern of industrialisation was wholly contrary to what Gandhiji would have wished. . . . The emphasis on heavy industries has been variously presented as tantamount to neglect of agriculture, death-knell of Khadi and Village Industries and callousness towards the problem of unemployment. . . . As is being increasingly realised, the antithesis sought to be drawn between the development of

industries and that of agriculture is totally false.

It may be recalled that Prof. Dantwala was a Gandhian in many ways and he did not agree with the view that India was heading towards becoming a totalitarian state and that Nehru would end up neglecting agriculture and khadi and village industries. Dantwala had produced the draft document of Trusteeship that Gandhiji had approved. Thus, Dantwala was able to visualise integration between what Nehru did which he felt was the need of the times and Gandhi's approach of developing a decentralised economy.

In another tribute that appeared in *The Hindu* on 29 May 1964, H. Venkatsubbiah, a senior bureaucrat and author, clearly expressed the view that Nehru differed in his economic vision from that of Gandhiji:

Wedded to scientific rather than a vaguely humanitarian socialism, as he was, Gandhiji's economic ideas did not make much impact on Mr. Nehru. . . . He also rejected Gandhiji's theory that the rich are the trustees of the poor. Nehru's formal education was in the natural sciences. In the social sciences, he was a self-educated man. This amalgam produced the scientific-humanist temper which characterised Nehru's economic philosophy. . . . It cannot be said that he took much interest in the Khadi and Village Industries movement. That was largely looked after by other associates of Gandhiji.¹⁷

In more recent times, economist Laveesh Bhandari has brought out the basic difference between Gandhiji and Nehru well.¹⁸ He terms the difference between the ideas of the two as a rich dialogue

of ethics and dharma, responsibilities and rights, and the roles of individual, community and the state. There is a deep layer of disagreement between the two which reflects a clash of two civilisations—an Indian ethic reflected in Gandhi's thought versus a Western one that India's first prime minister had embraced. . . . The core of this silent debate has to do with the importance of personal morality and the creation of a social milieu that supports such behaviour. . . . All other elements—swadeshi, swaraj, Khadi, panchayati raj, enlightened anarchy, etc.—were rooted in this element. . . . While Gandhi was dreaming of a utopia where the individual was so responsible that there was little need for a strong state, Nehru was imagining another where the state would create a fair and

prosperous world for all. While Gandhi wrote about self-realised individual responsibility when he held forth on redistribution through trusteeship, Nehru created a mechanism forcing the individuals and businesses to conform to a state determined planning process.

Nehru and most others perhaps failed to understand Gandhi's position. Gandhi parted company with standard economics as he has an important element in his worldview not fully shared and appreciated in the Western thought. To quote Dasgupta, 'This is his conviction that one's behaviour as an economic agent cannot be isolated from one's behaviour as an autonomous moral agent.' Ethical considerations and individual moral values have to inform the choices of an individual.¹⁹

In the present times both Gandhiji and Nehru are not fashionable in the intellectual world. Nehru was, in his times. But now neoliberalism seems to rule. Free market is considered to be the best agency which would provide equal opportunity to all, thus optimising individual and social welfare simultaneously. In such a system, much of the government's role is assumed by civil society. The neo-liberal thesis assumes that these virtues and characteristics of civil society continue to be relevant in today's world. Giddens quotes David Green who lists some of its features thus: 'The virtue of civil society, if left to its own devices, are said to include "Good character, honesty, duty, self-sacrifice, honour, service, self-discipline, toleration, respect, justice, civility, fortitude, courage, integrity, diligence, patriotism, consideration for others, thrift and reverence."' ²⁰ But neo-liberalism is already in trouble. Giddens draws attention to the paradox that has become apparent in the neo-liberal worldview. The transformation in our personal life is a case in point. In the contemporary world, one sees the emergence of an individual far more self-centred and self-absorbed than existed in earlier generations. It is difficult to know which way this individualistic society with its new moral concerns will turn. Neither neo-liberalism nor neo-socialism seem to be sure about the direction to take. Further, both systems fail to ask some fundamental questions that matter for societies to be sustainable. The issue of sustainability is raised only in the context of the environment and there too there is no clear or common vision about the threat facing our world. What is the way out? This ideological gridlock seems to call for a fundamental change of perspective.

Those who seek it will find in Gandhi a thinker whose

insights on economic matters were based on a broader critique of the pervasive materialism of modern civilization. He questioned the rationale of viewing progress in purely materialistic terms, of measuring development exclusively in terms of growth of material wealth, and of excluding from consideration questions of ethics and morality. Most of all, he helps us trace the roots of many seemingly intractable problems facing economists and policy makers to the need for the moral transformation of individuals. It is not difficult, for example, to see how the Gandhian values of *aswada* or 'control over palate' (implying mastery over animal impulses), *asteya* or 'non-stealing' (implying honesty and truthfulness), *aparigraha* or 'being a trustee of wealth and embracing voluntary poverty', *shram* or 'bread labor' (implying disciplined hard work) and *ahimsa* or 'non-violence as a principle governing one's life and one's interactions with others' would provide long term remedies to the problems of insatiable aggregate demand, monopolistic practices, abnormal profit appropriation and environmental degradation. Gandhi takes us back to the profound yet simple truth that the betterment of the world cannot be separated from the moral edification of human beings. We cannot have a happy, just and united world if we believe that human nature is incapable of rising above self-interest or the pursuit of power. The path that Gandhi beckons us towards, and one which he himself followed, was a move away from self-indulgence towards disciplined effort aimed at the realisation of our innate nobility. As he put it in a 1916 lecture, it is a "straight narrow way" that one needs to walk—"slowly indeed, but surely and steadily".

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Deepening Economic Crisis and Policy Paralysis

Arun Kumar

The ruling dispensation in India is facing a crisis of low growth, protests by major sections of the population—farmers, youth and traders—and criticism about non-fulfillment of the many promises it has made. It has announced many policies, but not only is their implementation tardy, many of them are a continuation of the past policies under different names. This is another kind of policy paralysis, like what UPA II was accused of. To counter these criticisms, the government has been highlighting its achievements by comparing the present performance of the economy with that of the last few years of UPA II.

No doubt the situation is not what it was in 2012-13, when there was a macroeconomic crisis. But presently also a crisis confronts the nation, triggered by two shocks to the economy—due to the demonetisation announced on November 8, 2016 and implementation of GST from July 1, 2017. The present crisis is a different macroeconomic crisis than the earlier one because it is policy induced—that is the damaging part. It is brought about by ill thought through policies.

The crisis during the UPA regime was largely triggered by international factors, like high crude oil prices. By the time the NDA came to power, the economy was emerging from that crisis with inflation moderating, the current account deficit declining and growth rate rising. Crude oil prices had moderated, and the advanced countries growth had started picking up so that exports again became buoyant.

The PM has been reeling off statistics to support his contention that the economy is strong. But that is the role of a finance minister. A PM should assure the public that there is a responsive government in place that would look into the present crisis and find solutions to it.

Be that as it may, the data presented by the PM does not address the main points highlighted by the critics. For instance, growth rate of the economy has been

declining, unemployment remains high, rate of inflation has increased, investment rate remains low and credit off take is at a historic low. A total view cannot emerge from citing growth of some sectors like sales of automobiles and air travel. If they are growing fast in a slowing economy then other sectors must be declining even faster. The poor in the unorganised sectors do not buy automobiles or travel by air. It is these sections that have been hit hard by both demonetisation and GST. It is the impact on the unorganised sectors that has led to the decline in the rate of growth of the economy and this is not captured in the official data.

The Prime Minister has been stung by the criticism emanating from within his party. That rings alarm bells in a party that is run on a tight leash where criticism till now was not tolerated. Two former ministers of the previous NDA government have come out openly and criticised the economic policies. They have also challenged the way decisions are made in the government, where a few decide everything. This again hurts the ruling dispensation.

Two former finance ministers have also spoken earlier about the looming crisis in the Indian economy. Both have identified demonetisation and the poorly executed GST as the cause. In a political twist they have blamed the current finance minister. Since both had pushed for GST during their times in power, they now do not admit that it is not suitable for India but blame its implementation. The adverse impact of both demonetisation and GST on the unorganised sectors of the economy and the consequent crisis in the economy needs to be understood. The problem is not just of faulty implementation of GST but its inappropriate design.

A key problem facing the Indian economy for the last 3 years is that the data on the basis of which policy is being made does not reflect reality. Mr. Yashwant Sinha has alluded to it by saying that the rate of growth is artificially boosted by 2% due to change in methodology.

In other words, the actual crisis is being hidden behind the smokescreen of data. But this change in methodology was initiated by the UPA itself. That is why even the low rate of growth during the last years of the UPA regime was also boosted by 2%.

If the current rate of growth is more than 6%, it is nothing to sneeze at. It is a healthy rate of growth by international comparisons and also by India's own historical yardstick. So, if true, no drastic steps need be taken to boost the economy further. An increase in the fiscal deficit by 0.5% of GDP would be enough to raise the rate of growth further.

However, if the actual rate of growth of GDP is close to 1% and falling then a small increase in the fiscal deficit would not do and one would have to raise it by a much larger percentage to raise the rate of growth to 6%. The purists suggest that this would dent private investment. That would have been true for an economy where credit off take was robust and the economy was running at full capacity. But that is not the situation in India so a higher fiscal deficit would be alright.

The present situation in India is similar to the one during the global crisis of 2007-08 when the world economy went into a recession and was prevented from going into a depression by the major economies raising their fiscal deficits. The US raised its fiscal deficit from 3% to 12%. China went in for a \$600 billion package of expenditure on rural infrastructure. India escaped the recession and had a healthy rate of growth of 5% because of the large package of spending in rural areas based on a large increase in its fiscal deficit. The FRBM act was put on hold.

What is the evidence that the actual rate of growth is around 1% and not 6%? The quarterly rate of growth of the economy is estimated by resorting to data largely from the organised sectors of the economy. The data for the unorganised sector constituting 45% of the GDP comes with a time lag based on surveys conducted periodically. Since no comprehensive official survey has been done during the period of demonetisation or in the first few months of implementation of GST, the impact of these two on the unorganised sectors will never be captured in the official data.

Private surveys done in the midst of demonetisation found the impact to be consistently dramatic. They showed an impact of between 60 to 80% and an increase

in unemployment. This is significant since 93% of the workforce is in this sector. This led to a drastic fall in demand. According to the RBI, capacity utilisation in organised industry fell. Even before demonetisation, capacity utilisation was hovering at between 70 and 75%—a low figure. Demonetisation led to a further fall in investment, slowing down the growth of the economy even after the immediate period of notes shortage was over. It is this slowdown that is manifesting itself in the economy.

The introduction of a faulty GST and its poor implementation has also had a deep adverse impact on the unorganised sector. The organised sector which was expected to gain from GST has also been hit hard for the same reason. Instead of 'Ease of doing Business', doing business has become more difficult. There is utter confusion, massive increase in paper work and increase in compliance costs. This has adversely impacted the investment climate and further contributed to the slowdown in the economy.

In short, the data is inadequate to assess the actual performance of the economy. Government will keep claiming that things will improve on the basis of the limited data it has—as usual, the golden period is always ahead. The international agencies, like the World Bank, IMF, ADB and Moody's, who are supporting the government's contention of a high growth rate, do not collect data independently and depend on government data. So their assessment is not an independent view.

One of the ministers has claimed that the Indian economy is so robust that it has become the engine of growth for the world economy. But the Indian economy is only about 3% of the world GDP? Such statements are only an indication of the government's desperation given that the situation on the ground does not support its contention that there is no crisis.

The drastic slowdown in the economy is also indicated by the collapse in credit off-take. Low credit off take suggests that production and investment have slowed down. In October 2016 it was already at its lowest point in the last 50 years, and it fell to its lowest level in 60 years after demonetisation was announced. Worse followed with negative growth in July and August 2017. This has never happened before in the Indian economy.

Interest rate cuts have been suggested as a panacea but this is not going to work when demand is depressed

and capacity utilisation low. Will demand pick up with cut in interest rates? It is argued that the demand for white goods bought on loan (via EMI) can rise and so can the demand for housing. But these are discretionary purchases and will only be undertaken if the sense of crisis in the mind of the public is overcome. In times of crisis, the public becomes cautious and does not increase its purchases or investment in these items. If people feel that their incomes are falling due to rising inflation or that their job is uncertain, they would not increase expenditures on discretionary items, in spite of lower EMI.

The investment climate has also been vitiated by the constant attack on businesses after demonetisation. Not that they are paragons of virtue but what they do does matter to the economy. There is an attempt to brand those who deposited money in the banks during demonetisation as black money holders. This is being done to claim success of the failed demonetisation. While some who deposited large sums of money were indeed laundering their black money, but the indiscriminate character of the move to brand everyone has vitiated the environment. Added to this, GST has created uncertainty about input credit, additional paper work, e-way bill, etc. and this has vitiated the investment climate further. So, 'Ease of doing Business' is not visible.

The government itself sensed the brewing crisis. It revived the Economic Advisory Committee to the PM. This is a vote of no confidence in the Ministry of Finance which is primarily responsible for economic policies.

But the key members of the Council are from the Niti Aayog and other think tanks already advising the government. So, what new can be expected from this Council? Its members have not tried to work out an alternative data base; they continue to work on the existing data on which policy has been formulated and which is the cause of the problems.

The mood in the economy is increasingly one of crisis in spite of the booming stock markets. The rate of growth of the economy had dropped continuously for six quarters before there was a slight upturn. It had started falling even before the ill-advised demonetisation was announced. The drop became steeper after demonetisation but data does not reflect that. A reflection of the crisis in the economy is the agitation by farmers, youth, traders and other sections of society. This will not abate because the government does not seem to have a

strategy to tackle the real crisis.

The government and its supporters have been suggesting supply side reforms like labour and land reforms. These are the usual concessions that businesses want and that they extract from society whenever there is an economic crisis. But this would not deliver demand which is low due to the adverse impact of various policies on the unorganised sectors. The crisis in the banking sector due to the large and growing NPAs is nowhere near resolution. That is adding to the difficulties in boosting investment. The package of investment in the banks to boost their capital will help but not resolve the problem since the problem emanates from default by industry and especially the critical infrastructure sectors.

The government has to stop being in denial about the nature of the current crisis in which output, prices, investment and employment are all hit. After demonetisation was announced and the economic situation deteriorated, the government was in denial about the resulting crisis. The economy is facing the consequences of that denial now. With the crisis being deeper than what the government is willing to admit, unless bold steps are taken, the situation can only get worse and that will have political repercussions later on.

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Indian Economy and Food Price Volatility

Dr. Vibhuti Patel

Introduction

Though India adopted a policy of economic liberalisation in 1991, the agrarian sector was liberalised in 2004 when more than 400 agrarian commodities were exposed to global competition. Food price volatility became perennial problem after that.

*“Price fluctuations are a common feature of well-functioning agricultural product markets. But when these become large and unexpected—volatile—they can have a negative impact on the food security of consumers, farmers and entire countries. Since 2007, world markets have seen a series of dramatic swings in commodity prices. Food prices reached their highest levels for 30 years during the summer of 2008, collapsing the following winter, before rapidly rising again in the months that followed. Food prices today remain high, and are expected to remain volatile.”*¹ This acceptance by the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations speaks volumes.

During the period 2014 to 2017, food prices have risen to record highs. The hedge fund speculators indulging in futures trading and commercialisation and corporatisation of food markets are found to be the major culprits for this phenomenon. The free play of market forces is hampered and needs corrective measures. Many poor nations in Africa, Latin America and Asia have experienced food riots as a result of neoliberalism; the political systems have abandoned their responsibility to ensure food sovereignty and food security to their toiling masses through the public distribution system. Corruption and cronyism at micro, meso and macro level does not allow those at the bottom of the pyramid to afford higher food prices. Food and nutrition security for the poor is at stake. Thus macroeconomic policy as well as political decisions serving the vested interests of big players has created food price volatility.

Food Security Concerns

As per the World Bank, 1.2 billion people living below

the poverty line manage their lives with less than \$1.25. Out of these, 33 percent or 40 crore poor are in India. If India is able to address food price volatility, it will have major implications for global food security and fulfilling our promise of achieving the First Sustainable Development Goal of the United Nations, namely, Eradication of Extreme Hunger and Poverty.

As per the 2011 Census of India, more than two-third Indians live in rural areas. Nearly 50% of the work force is employed in agriculture. Majority of them are agricultural workers. Majority of cultivators are small, marginal farmers and poor peasants who own 1–3 acres of land. There are no other opportunities for them to enhance their income. In this context, it is very important for the decision makers in the agricultural sector to contain food inflation.

Concerns for Food Sovereignty

Each time prices of grain, pulses, vegetables and milk shoot up, either food shortage or drought are blamed, while at a grassroot level farmers report bumper crop. The corporate houses buy vegetables and pulses at throwaway prices. International pressure through World Trade Organisation and General Agreement on Trade and Tariff pressurise the poor countries not to give farm subsidies in terms of support price and let the market reign supreme without accepting the fact that there is no perfect competition. Consequently, farmers have to do distress sale of their products because of the monopsony market, wherein corporates are price-makers and farmers are price-takers. Thus, even after improvement in food production, the food price situation has not improved. Occasional tightening of grain exports in case of pulses and sugar and liberalising imports in case of onions and fruits remain just symbolic gestures.

Concentration of food inflation in India in a few commodity groups such as vegetables, fruits, milk, pulses and cereals and eggs–fish–meat is marked by production shocks and the government not playing a facilitator’s

role in the food markets in terms of improvement in storage facilities, rational procurement policy, augmentation of buffer stocks and adjustment of trade policy with production scenario. Sensitivity to farmers needs is very important so that they do not feel demotivated which may result in production shortfalls. Trend analysis of inflation between 2009 and 2013 reveals that increases in demand side pressures mainly for pulses, milk, edible oils and eggs–meat–fish—and increases in the cost of production are the major factors behind food inflation. Thus both demand and supply factors have resulted in food price volatility.

Price Fluctuations in Essential Commodities

Annual trends of price fluctuation in essential commodities show that different commodities had inflationary prices in different years and that no single commodity showed uniformly high inflation. Currently, food inflation is marked by price rise in milk, cereals, vegetables, meat, eggs and fish. Tur dal contributed majorly to food price inflation. Prices of edible oils were stable. Intra-year price volatility in fruits and vegetables and commodities that have greater weightage in the national consumption basket is worrisome. Supply side factors such as quantum of production, wages, support price for cereals need fixing and both supply and demand factors responsible for price fluctuations in pulses need to be addressed. The prices of eggs, meat, fish, milk, and fruits and vegetables appear to be driven mainly by demand-side factors.²

The food price challenge is more about price volatility rather than food price inflation. Rather than long-term structural trends in food prices that we can prepare for and adjust to, it is the rapid and unpredictable changes in food prices that wreak havoc on factors such as labour and product markets, as well as political and social stability. It is important to accept that volatility cuts both ways—prices go up and down. The only reason food prices are going up so much this year is because they came down so fast after reaching 2008 peaks. Both rapid increases and rapid declines in food prices can create problems.

Dynamics of Food Markets

Characteristics of food markets determine food price volatility. Both supply and demand curves of food markets are highly inelastic, and in the short run none of them respond much to price variation. Shelf life of food products are limited and there is seasonality. Hence, small shocks in either supply or demand will result in to large price

changes. Today, we have many shocks: supply shocks in important food producing states due to extreme weather (droughts in Maharashtra and floods in Bihar) and due to the higher cost of inputs (water, electricity, fertilisers, pesticides and transport linked to oil prices). Policy decision to increase bio-fuel content in gasoline has resulted in volatility in food prices.

In this volatile situation, speculators enter futures markets in a big way. Speculators make money out of understanding the market dynamics and providing insurance against volatility. They do not create the volatility themselves, except under extraordinary conditions such as man-made or natural disasters. The volatility inherent in the food marketplace causes speculation, not the other way around.

Remedial Measures

So what is the way out? Unless the link between food prices and oil prices are broken, not much can be achieved. The current global food system worked well in a world of cheap, stable energy prices which allowed food to be grown in concentrated locations and transported over huge distances to meet demands. Volatility in oil prices results in volatility in food prices. As a macro policy, the government needs to promote more localised and more diversified production and consumption, less use of fertiliser and less wastage (20 percent of all food gets spoiled in storage and transport today). To deal with urban and rural hunger, community-managed food banks must be created. Like France, all nation states need to tell restaurants not to destroy unsold food but deposit it in the local food banks. Farmers should be encouraged to sell their products directly to customers without any interference by state governments. At the same time, investment in agriculture production and agricultural infrastructure needs to be enhanced to address increasing demand.

The technology to increase yields is well-known but requires investments; large portion of agricultural land in India is rain-fed and subject to the vagaries of weather. Mechanised power to till the soil is only in green belt areas. India needs a second Green Revolution.

Debt ridden farmers' suicides are a stark reality after liberalisation of Indian agriculture. Governments must make sure that rural farmers get 'fair' prices, while urban masses get affordable food to consume. Not only budgetary allocation for public distribution system must be enhanced, but the distribution channel also must be

improved in terms of quality of food, packaging and storage. Local markets must be protected against volatility in the global price of food. Rich countries are protecting interests of their farmers. America subsidises almond farmers, Japan subsidises rice farmers, France subsidises grape farmers, Europe subsidises dairy farmers, but in the World Economic Forum the same rich countries pressurise the poor countries to withdraw subsidies to farmers in the name of stabilisation policy. India has stood firm against this double standard of the industrialised North against the poor South.

Global versus Local Economic Realities

The current global economic scenario does not give any incentive for any single country to liberalise its agricultural trade so long as the distortions of rich countries—and the volatility in global markets they encourage—remain. Intellectual property in seeds, introduction of bio-technology favouring multinational corporations worsen the situation. And this brings us directly to the failure of Doha Round trade talks even after several years of negotiations. The main bottleneck has been the impasse on agriculture policy. The ongoing failure of the Doha Round shows that the political will to take collective action to reduce food price volatility is lacking; there is no trust that the market will deliver access to food better than a government.

Conclusion

Policy makers and politicians in developing countries care more about volatile food prices than those in developed countries because their citizens are more directly affected by the ups and downs of food prices. Hunger, food and nutrition security of the population and food sovereignty of the nation are at stake. Today, it is the lack of affordability of food for the poor. Studies have shown that the poor are spending more than two-thirds of their income on food. If food prices double, these households literally become faced with the prospect of starvation. The solution: safety nets of social security and social protection for the poor, to cushion the blow of rapid changes in food prices. India passed the Right to Food Act, 2013 that guarantees food and nutrition security to all its citizens.

Good safety nets require effective targeting. Who should be protected? The children, especially the very young, as there is ample evidence that early childhood malnutrition results in long-term deterioration of brain development. Hence, India has universalised Mid Day

Meal Schemes for children as well as pregnant and lactating mothers. The state government of Tamilnadu provides meals to destitute elderly also. As a practical matter, national social protection frameworks to create facilities for food for homeless, unemployed poor, elderly supported by public private partnership under Corporate Social Responsibility need to be created. Building social safety nets in India for sustained food security for all remains a worthy but long-term project.

Major swings in food prices are happening more and more regularly and proving to be highly destabilising for development, poverty reduction and social harmony. The solutions lie in three areas—improving food markets and agricultural production by addressing demand and supply side factors, building political will to integrate food markets in such a way that economic interests of farmers in poor countries are not compromised, and judicious implementation of the National Food Security Act, 2013 (also known as the Right to Food Act), an Act of the Parliament of India which aims to provide subsidised foodgrains to approximately two-thirds of India's 1.2 billion people. Developing social safety nets in India for socio-economically marginalised and resource poor producers, that is, farmers, as well as urban, rural and tribal consumers needs combined and concerned efforts of state and non-state actors.

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What Is to be Done ?

Yogendra Yadav

The Idea of India faces an unprecedented challenge. Preventing irreversible damage to the Republic of India, as we have known it, is the most pressing political task of our times, our *yugadharma*. So far, the response to this challenge has been marked by intellectual lethargy and political paralysis. A better response would require that we appreciate the dangers, acknowledge the depth of the challenge and then prepare a road map that combines short- and mid-term strategies with a long-term vision. This is what the present essay offers.

It argues that the challenge is at once more serious and deep-rooted than we care to admit. We are up against nothing short of a hegemonic regime that enjoys power with legitimacy. Having said that, it suggests that at least some of the sense of doom and gloom that surrounds the defenders of the idea of India is self-created, that we have more resources to take on the present challenge than we imagine, and that this challenge requires us to respond creatively. Paradoxically, this crisis could well be an opportunity.

First, a candid look at the nature and extent of the challenge. There can be an argument about whether we have reached the lowest point of democratic freedoms in the history of post-independent India. But not about the fact that we are passing through the most trying time, so far, for the ideals that the Republic of India stood for.

While the current challenge is unprecedented, it is not the first time that one or the other constitutive element of the idea of India has faced a serious challenge. India's democratic record was tainted by the Emergency and regularly smudged by many milder but chronic failures. Our commitment to diversity has been punctured by episodes of majoritarian excesses like the Sikh massacre of 1984 and Gujarat carnage of 2002 and by failures in regions like Kashmir and Nagaland. There is not much to write home about the idea of development for the last person, an ideal that has been practiced mostly in its breach.

Yet, the present juncture represents an unprecedented challenge to the idea of India in multiple ways. One, all the core ideas—democracy, diversity and development—are under simultaneous and vigorous challenge. Two, this challenge does not arise from a mere failure or violation of the vision; rather it is informed by a vision that stands in opposition to the idea of India. Three, for the first time the onslaught enjoys considerable popular backing; there is a real danger of the republic being undone by the public.

I

The challenge has caused more damage than we are willing to admit. This onslaught has already downscaled constitutional commitment to diversity, halted the deepening of democracy and further distorted the developmental trajectory. The present juncture has not just exposed the long-standing weakness of the institutional edifice of our democracy, it has taken deinstitutionalisation to a new low. The gains from a deepening of democracy in the 1990s have largely been reversed.

Many higher education institutions have been politically captured with little resistance from the top. Anti-corruption agencies have either been packed with yes-men or put in deep freeze. The higher judiciary has been part-infiltrated and part-tamed, though not without some flashes of dissent. The Election Commission too appears weaker than ever in the post-Seshan era. The regime has found ways to circumvent the Rajya Sabha. The national security apparatus as well as intelligence and investigation agencies have been aligned, more than ever before, with the demands of the ruling party. Extra-legal actions by security agencies face less scrutiny than ever before, even as vigilante groups on the street and social media trolls enjoy visible political patronage.

There is a brazen shift to a 'growth-only' paradigm of economic development. Most of the welfare measures introduced in the post-liberalisation era face a quiet but effective rollback. The environmental safeguards built

over the last three decades are being dismantled, one after another. There is a naked disavowal of commitment to diversity; Muslims have de facto been reduced to second-rung citizenship, though without a change in their de jure status.

All these changes have been accompanied by a significant shift in the spectrum of public opinion in favour of a majoritarian consensus, achieved through a mix of image positioning, aggressive ground action and media control. A Modi cult has been carefully built up with the help of communication, media amplification, spin doctoring and social media management. A series of critical events were engineered for assertion of aggressive nationalist rhetoric so as to brand and silence all voices of dissent. Above all, mainstream media has been compromised through a mix of clever spin doctoring, meticulous capture of key media positions, misuse of state patronage alongside brazen use of money power, blackmailing and arm-twisting.

The real challenge is, however, much deeper. If this onslaught continues for a significant duration, we may well be looking at a fundamental disfiguration of the Indian enterprise. The end product may not be 'fascism' in a textbook sense, but likely something different if not worse. It is hard to outline the features of this evolving deformity, but some of the elements can be anticipated. The political system could be 'competitive authoritarianism' where representative democracy and party competition would be limited to episodes of elections, with the playing field severely skewed in favour of one party. In between elections, it would resemble an authoritarian system with a presidential form of governance, severe curtailment of civil liberties, and a higher threshold of tolerance for deviations from constitutionally mandated procedures.

Concentration of power would take many forms: state power into the Union government, governmental power into the ruling party, and the power of the party into the hands of one person. Development would mean a non-nonsense rule of capital, with occasional populist discount but minimum 'hindrance' from ecological considerations. On the diversity front, it would be a non-theocratic majoritarian rule with minor tweaking of some of the secular laws but effective delineation of the hierarchy of religious communities. The existing system of affirmative action may be diluted in a series of small steps. For its survival and popular endorsement, this regime would depend on occasional electoral endorsement, informal regimentation of the media,

crushing of dissent, ongoing crusades against 'internal enemies' and a possible military adventure. To sum up, we may be looking at the mutilation of the idea of India.

II

For all these dangers, this challenge also presents us with an opportunity. The struggle against this onslaught must not be a battle for restoration, of going back to an India that existed prior to 2014, for it would simply not succeed. It must simultaneously be a battle for transformation. A successful response to this challenge would open up space to renegotiate settled equations in multiple spheres. It can force a reconfiguration of the party system, making way for the emergence of alternative political forces and a realignment of voters with parties. It can also provide an opportunity to fortify democratic institutions, push through radical electoral reforms, loosen up economic limits to politics, redefine the paradigm of development, reform our clearly flawed practice of 'secularism', and reimagine the existing frame of social justice. This crisis may facilitate, indeed necessitate, a radical rupture with business as usual of democratic politics.

The current challenge has deeper anchors than is normally conceded. Narendra Modi is no doubt the face of this challenge, yet he is not the challenge. He happens to occupy a unique point of intersection of multiple lines and embodies the opposition to the idea of India. As such, he represents a constellation of forces, not all of which draw energy from the RSS-Jan Sangh-BJP lineage.

While there was nothing inevitable about his ascent to power in 2014, Modi is not an accident or aberration. We are not just dealing with someone who happens to have won an election and captured state power. His popularity has faced its first crisis in the fourth year of his government. The BJP's victory and Modi's rise to power has been accompanied by a realignment in the social basis of politics and a shift in the spectrum of public opinion. Thus, the challenge to the idea of India comes from a force that is at once widespread, well entrenched and popular. The Modi regime should be characterised as a hegemonic power since it combines state power with street power, electoral dominance with ideological legitimacy.

The Modi regime wields far greater legal and extra-legal coercive power than enjoyed by any ruling party in post-independence India. It uses every possible constitutional-legal power sans the constraints imposed

by democratic conventions: dismissal of unfriendly state governments, use of CBI and other investigative agencies and, of course, the use of armed forces. This is supplemented by the use of state apparatus for extra-legal coercive measures: harassment and persecution of political and ideological adversaries, protection to vigilante groups and the misuse of anti-terror laws. The most pernicious aspect of the BJP's use of coercive state apparatus is the silent, everyday form of surveillance, intimidation and infiltration.

This coercion draws its legitimacy from the BJP's growing electoral dominance. The BJP may not match the Congress in its heyday of one-party dominance, but it does resemble the Congress during its one-party salience period in the 1980s. Despite reversals in Delhi and Bihar, the story of the BJP since its spectacular performance in the Lok Sabha election of 2014 is one of expansion and growth. It has spread to virtually every nook and cranny of India, including the hill states of the North East, and is a force to reckon with even in the coastal belt from Kerala to Bengal, though it is as yet in no position to win elections. The organisational machine, the election machine and the propaganda machine put together make the BJP the most formidable political force to emerge in recent times.

III

It would be a mistake, however, to think that Modi's power rests only on political dominance and a coercive state apparatus. The Modi regime enjoys a hegemonic position because it has also successfully secured moral, cultural and ideological legitimacy. The BJP's and Modi's continuing popularity in opinion polls draws upon something deeper than an approval of its governmental performance. The packaging and positioning of the PM's image as 'hardworking', 'tough', 'selfless' and 'driven by larger national goals' has more takers than many would care to admit.

The BJP has successfully shifted the entire spectrum of public opinion towards its ideology. It has more or less captured key symbols of nationalism, Hinduism and our cultural heritage. The demons invented by the BJP troll brigade – 'anti-national', 'westernised', 'secular', 'enemies within' – have come to acquire a life of their own. To be sure, Modi's legitimacy is categorically different from the deeper ethical appeal of a Gandhi or a Nehru, or even the legitimacy of the Congress in the post-independence era. In a sense, a typical BJP

supporter is saying, 'We may not be ethical as per the highest standards; but what the hell, why do we need to be saints?' A latent societal meanness has found a legitimate political outlet.

It needs to be underlined that the BJP's hegemony is far from total—no hegemony ever is. Its coercive power is frustrated by the endemic inefficiencies and the notoriously modest capacity of the Indian state. Its electoral dominance peters out at the geographical and the social peripheries. The BJP is not a serious contender in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, West Bengal and smaller states like Tripura, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland and, of course, the Kashmir Valley.

This hegemony is predicated on the exclusion of the Muslims and mostly Christians as well. The inclusion of Dalits is still tentative, the peasantry's association is still tenuous as is its hold over the youth. For all its seeming ideological dominance, it is yet to find acceptance among the intellectual elite, both in English and Indian languages. None of this takes away from the fact of BJP's hegemony. But it does point to spaces available for counter-hegemonic action.

Modi's rise to hegemony has deeper historic causes which we cannot detail here. While certainly not the only possible outcome, long-term failure of political action and imagination combined with structural deficits in our capitalist modernity clearly contributed to it. First, our democratic institutions have always been weak, subject to routine indifference and occasional capture. At the best of times we have shown little respect for the rule of law and institutional autonomy. This was partially made up by a deepening of our democratic practices, especially in the wake of 'the second democratic upsurge'. But the gains of the deepening of democracy were not consolidated. The earlier system was unsettled without being replaced by a new one, thus opening the space for a sudden capture.

Second, the failure of economic growth to deliver well-being to a vast majority of our population created a political constituency that could be easily mobilised by populist promises. Rising inequality and growing media density in a society gradually coming out of absolute poverty in the post-liberalisation era has created a class whose aspirations are completely out of sync with reality. This underclass is an easy prey for miracle masters as well as hate mongers.

This was reinforced, third, by the cultural logic of modernity in a post-colonial society. The imitative character of India's modernity created a shallow public sphere marked by envy and anxiety. The modern Indian citizen, pushed into urban experience, craved for a sense of belonging and self-respect. The failure of the so far dominant liberal-secular ideology to fulfil this need gave rise to a huge vacuum.

Fourth, the weakening of the existing instruments of political action contributed to the vacuum which Modi occupied. Over the last few decades, political movements have declined and are forced to exist in an agitational mode, useful for sectoral gains but not worthy of general trust. This period has also witnessed a hollowing out of political parties as they essentially turn into election machines, indispensable yet illegitimate.

Finally, the sudden death of modern Indian political thought in post-independent India resulted in a drying up of intellectual resources in politics and disjunction of political ideology from popular imagination. The task of making sense of reality was left to university based academics and high-end media with little feel for or touch with ground realities. The challenge of shaping public opinion was thus completely neglected, leaving the field open to low-brow media, ever amenable to propaganda, hate speech and myth-making.

IV

Cogent thinking about what is to be done must begin with clarity on what is not to be done. So far, this clarity has eluded Modi critics. It is a sign of our times that those who seek to uproot the republic are proactive, innovative and energetic, but the defence of the republic is reactive or kneejerk, if not lethargic or paralysed. Opposition to the Modi regime is marked by an inability to fathom the extent of the challenge it poses, unwillingness to recognise its deep roots and failure to think beyond quick-fixes. No wonder, anger at history has replaced serious criticism, fear mongering is the only response to hate mongering, fright has prevented any farsighted action.

So far, the Modi regime has evoked a series of predictable responses from its opponents: a passive wait for the bubble to burst; simple-minded anti-Modiism, attempts to take on the regime on its own turf, and trying to build a grand anti-BJP coalition. None of these strategies is likely to succeed.

The actions, or rather inactions, of the Congress party symbolise the first approach, i.e. wait for an unravelling of the Modi regime by its own blunders, for the Modi bubble to burst thanks to the sheer magnitude of its original lie. Now, it is true that Narendra Modi made irresponsible and impossible promises—*achche din*, Rs 15 lakh in each account—giving rise to unreal expectations. Even as the public is sharp enough to perceive the gap between promise and delivery, it is also quick to scale down its expectations to 'realistic' levels and overlook some rhetorical excesses of a power seeker.

By now the Modi regime has accumulated a big heap of blunders, arguably bigger than its counterparts in the recent past. Even as its mismanagement of the economy is staggering—with incontrovertible evidence of all-round economic failure such as falling growth rates despite a favourable climate, job shrinkage, aggravation of agrarian crisis, decline in manufacturing and fall in exports made worse by the demonetisation disaster and GST mismanagement—the government's failures in other domains are only waiting to be exposed, be they of its highly publicised missions or of its foreign policy initiatives to yield results when needed or indeed the counter-productive nature of its internal security measures.

Yet, a blunder is a blunder only when seen to be such and there are layers of mediation between reality and popular perception. The Modi government's 'brilliant' management of perceptions to turn the demonetisation disaster into at least short-term political dividends is a textbook illustration of this eternal truth of politics. Besides, usually, governance blunders have political consequences only when there is an assurance that an alternative would be better. There are occasions when the people could not care less for an alternative, when they just want to 'throw the rascals out' as they believe than no one can be worse than the incumbent. But it would be fanciful to think that the Modi regime's popularity has already hit that point.

When the opposition graduates from not doing anything to doing something, more often than not it takes the form of simple-minded 'anti-Modiism'. A typical opposition tactic in competitive politics, it involves countering the ruling party in anything and everything that it does in the hope that some of the criticism will stick. The luxury of playing opposition obviates the need for coherence and consistency in these oppositional manoeuvres. So, the opposition can criticise the prime minister for spending time abroad; if he did not, he would be accused of

relinquishing his international responsibility.

Deeper maladies that have afflicted the country across all regimes—railway accidents, malnutrition, farmers suicides—are now attributed to the Modi regime as if they are happening for the first time. The Congress party that drafted and pushed for a GST (Goods and Services Tax) not too different from what this government has implemented, can happily blame the BJP for its consequences. Unfortunately, such short-sighted criticism soon loses legitimacy as the public begins to see it for what it is—opposition for the sake of opposition. These tactics may work once the regime has lost public confidence, but cannot be deployed to undermine the legitimacy of an otherwise popular government. In fact, they could end up eroding the legitimacy of the opposition.

V

A more proactive and consistent form of anti-Modi politics has tried to take on the BJP on its own turf. Over the last three years, ideological and political opposition to the Modi regime has focused on its jingoist nationalist rhetoric, its anti-minority stance and its promotion of obscurantism. Hence, the campaigns against cow vigilante-led lynching, *award wapasi* to protest against the murder of rationalists, opposition to the move for a uniform civil code, questioning of the ‘surgical strikes’, a critique of brutality by security forces in Kashmir Valley and elsewhere, mobilisation against the murder of Gauri Lankesh and rejection of anti-Romeo squads, and so on. There is no doubt that each of these acts of opposition is in itself worth undertaking and necessary. Yet, taken together, an obsessive focus on these issues plays into the hands of the Sangh Parivar. The Modi regime might even welcome criticism on these counts, as it would bring desired publicity for the regime. An indictment of the Modi regime for its anti-minority orientation sends a positive signal to the majority community that the regime stands with them.

The opposition to a uniform civil code usually ends up as evidence of politics of ‘minority appeasement’. Any questioning of the regime for its jingoist nationalism ends up reconfirming its nationalist credentials. It is not that the regime cannot or should not be confronted on its cultural agenda. The present essay goes on to suggest several long-term measures to this end. Yet, we must admit that as of now the opposition does not possess cultural weapons to match the BJP in this battle. A premature battle on this ground can be counterproductive.

Finally, much of the oppositional politics falls back on forging a grand coalition of anti-BJP parties. As we inch towards 2019, this anti-BJPism (to replace anti-Congressism) seems to be the default strategy, or perhaps a response of helplessness that the opposition is drifting towards. The logic is self-evident. On the face of it, there is an arithmetic advantage to a pre-election coalition in a first-past-the-post system. Aggregation of non-BJP votes can help the opposition edge past the BJP, even if it retains its peak vote share of the 2014 parliamentary elections. This can be decisive in states like Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka where the non-BJP parties enjoy a distinct and complementary vote base, provided it is transferable. Besides actual aggregation, opposition unity can also help create a perception of winnability and the possibility of an alternative to the BJP at the national level.

VI

But these possible advantages of opposition unity may not translate as well in a real life scenario. For one, the benefits from an aggregation of votes are overstated. First, opposition unity is irrelevant in a large number of states. These states either witness a direct BJP-Congress contest, with virtually no other party for the Congress to align with, or do not have the BJP as one of the top two parties. Second, the mechanical advantages of aggregation of votes may be overstated in many cases where votes of non-BJP parties are either non-complimentary (Congress and JDS in Karnataka) or non-transferable (CPM and Congress in WB and Kerala, also SP and BSP in UP?). Third, the benefits of opposition unity may be uncertain when possible allies—parties like TRS, TDP, DMK, JKNC, BJD and BSP—could as easily shift their loyalty to the BJP in a post-poll scenario.

Moreover, the calculus of arithmetic advantage of opposition unity fails to add up some serious minuses. One, unity of major parties (e.g. RJD and JDU in Bihar, regional party and Congress in Odisha, Telangana and Andhra) tends to create a void, as many voters of either party feel ‘orphaned’. This space vacated by the opposition could result in a consolidation of votes in favour of the BJP. Two, the perception of everyone ‘ganging up’ against Modi can create sympathy for him. He could well improvise upon the famous retort used to deadly effect by Indira Gandhi vis-à-vis the Grand Alliance against her in 1971: ‘Woh kehte hain Indira hatao, main kehti hoon garibi hatao.’ The bottom line on a grand anti-BJP alliance is simply this: a carefully crafted unity of major oppositional forces may yield some dividends for

opposing the Modi regime in 2019, but a ragtag coalition of all non-BJP parties cannot be an alternative to Modi; an electoral alliance cannot substitute for a coherent vision, a credible leadership and a clear road map.

VII

What, then, is to be done? In one word: think. Those of us who are serious about taking on this challenge to the foundations of the republic urgently need to move from kneejerk reactions to a plan of action that incorporates smart tactics which draw upon a coherent anti-hegemonic strategy that reflects an alternative vision. While much of the action aimed at countering the Modi regime will understandably focus on the Lok Sabha election of 2019, it is critical to reserve some mind space for the deeper challenge beyond Modi, beyond electoral politics and beyond 2019.

If the understanding of the challenge proposed here has any merit, it is here to stay with us in one form or another, irrespective of the outcome of the 2019 polls. Therefore, we need a more coherent and calibrated response. The plan of action must link various fields and sites of action. The tactics need to weave the familiar moves with new and surprising manoeuvres. The strategy must harmonise the immediate with mid-term and long-term. The vision that guides it must recast the foundational vision of the republic for our times.

Let us begin with a short-term perspective on what can be done to preserve some available spaces and open up possibilities of resistance within the current regime. There is some space available for a battle of institutional autonomy. As mentioned earlier, the judiciary, media and universities constitute three sites where complete control still eludes this regime. While the Modi regime has succeeded in curbing judicial independence more than any other regime since Indira Gandhi in the 1970s, the presence of judges with conscience and spine and the residual strength of procedures and precedents in an otherwise liberal constitutional system, sustain the possibility of resistance.

While the owners of private media are more compromised than ever before, an average journalist feels suffocated and a majority of the opinion makers are still not aligned with the regime. These are silent allies in the battle for truth. Notwithstanding the regime's massive investment in dominating social media, the very nature of this media resists control and provides avenues for alternative articulations. While most university

administrators have caved in all too easily, the faculty remains circumspect, if quiet for now. The real resistance has come from the students, both in the form of organised groups and as a community.

All these three are critical sites, especially for their impact on many other sectors and sections of the population. Thus a well thought out action here could have a multiplier effect. This may not take the form of organised protests; techniques of silent solidarity are more likely to be effective here. Equally, action for institutional autonomy cannot afford to be silent on the rather shoddy record of the earlier regimes, including the Congress and the left, on this score.

Picking another low hanging fruit would entail mobilisation of spontaneous outrage against political and cultural excesses of the Modi regime, especially among youth and marginal social groups. These include protests against lynching and other restrictions in the name of cow protection; building on the youth unease with attempts to impose 'love jihad' or vigilante activities of anti-Romeo squads; Dalit upsurge against atrocities and caste based discrimination; and local unrest against killing of rationalists and dissenters like Gauri Lankesh. As mentioned above, all this has to be done with caution, or else it could backfire. Even as these local and sectional protests cannot be the fulcrum of counter-hegemonic action, as they may not enjoy widespread support, yet, a careful stitching together of such protests could bring to the fore our home-grown liberalism and prove critical to defending the republic.

A relentless and credible expose of corruption at all levels could also be a critical element in countering the hegemony of the Modi regime. The Lokpal movement created a legitimacy crisis for the previous regime and paved the way for BJP's rise to power. However, more than three years into its term, this government has little to show by way of an anti-corruption record. On the contrary, it has diluted anti-corruption laws and institutions: amendment to the Prevention of Corruption Act, non-implementation of Whistleblower Act, appointment of compromised officers to the Central Vigilance Commission and non-appointment of a Lokpal are cases in point.

At the ground level, there has been little difference in the experience of everyday corruption, or in the persecution of incorrupt officers. Gradually, various corruption scandals of this government are beginning to

breach the media's wall of silence. To be sure, we should not expect a repeat of the Lokpal movement type of anti-corruption agitation, yet a consistent and credible campaign can take off the residual moral sheen of the Modi regime.

The thrust of counter-hegemonic action, however, needs to be on pro-active mobilisation of two key constituencies: farmers affected by agrarian distress and the unemployed youth. There are good reasons why, unlike communalism and nationalism, these two issues have put the regime on the backfoot. One, agrarian distress and unemployment are not short-term difficulties arising out of a faulty policy or poor execution; both flow out of the nature of economic policies pursued in the post-independence period. In both cases the condition has got much worse under the current regime.

Two, both these issues are very hard to address in the short run; it is virtually impossible for the Modi regime to improve the outcomes on either of these fronts in the next year and a half. Three, unlike many other issues, agrarian distress and unemployment have a clearly identified social group—farmers and youth respectively—that can be mobilised for action. Both these groups are large enough to make a difference. Their mobilisation is among the best antidotes to possible polarisation along communal lines. Finally, the regime's commitment is suspect on both these counts. The BJP was always seen to be a party of urban traders, even though it has now acquired a fair share of the farmers' vote. The youth has always been attracted more to the left than to the right. All this makes it easier and more rewarding to build counter-hegemonic mobilisation on these two issues.

VIII

If there is one class whose 'objective' interests almost entirely match the political project of counter-hegemony, it is the farmers. Structural contradictions of the economy make it impossible to incorporate and retain farmers within the fold of the new hegemony. It so happens that at this juncture, the farmers' movement is poised at a historic turn. This coming together of the 'objective' and the 'subjective' situation means that in the short to medium run, the ongoing farmers' movement across the country offers the greatest possibility for mass mobilisation against the Modi regime.

The agrarian crisis—a combination of economic, ecological and existential crisis—has been around for a

long time. But an overlap of climate, market and policy induced disasters in the last three years has pushed the agrarian crisis to a flashpoint. The response of the central and state governments is no match to what the farmers need; the governments have continued with business as usual governance, platitudes for policy and indifference where political will is needed. That is why the spontaneous eruption of farmers' protests across the country since June this year and the formation of an umbrella coalition to fuse these could prove to be a turning point in the history of farmers' movements. After a very long time the stage has been set for an all-India farmers' movement.

The realisation of this possibility depends upon successful fusion of two streams of agrarian struggle that we have inherited from the 20th century: 'farmers' movements' for inter-sectoral parity between agriculture and non-agriculture domains on the one hand, and 'peasant struggles' for intra-sector justice for small farmers, share-croppers and farm labour. The growing and starkly visible rural-urban disparities, increasing pauperisation of all sections of peasantry, including the erstwhile well-off sections, and the increasing overlap between farm labour and sharecropper farmer has created objective conditions for this political unity of the 'big' and 'small' farmers with sharecroppers and farm labour. The point now is to turn this possibility into a reality.

This requires a historic project of uniting farmers' movements across different regions, varying cropping patterns, different classes and both genders, various ideological shades and conflicting charters of demands. Specifically, it would mean bringing 'green' as well as 'red' flags together, getting the farmer green to speak to the ecological green, bringing Dalit and Adivasi struggles within the fold of farmers movement and foregrounding women farmers cutting across all divisions.

All this is not just in the realm of a theoretical possibility: this fusion has already begun. The All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC) has already brought both shades of green with red, along with Dalit, Adivasi and women farmer organisations under one umbrella. Farmer's movements all over the country, even those outside the fold of AIKSCC, have adopted the twin agenda of remunerative prices and freedom from debt.

Forging this unity will also be an ideological challenge: the traditional farmers' movement needs to acknowledge

that marginal farmers and women farmers are the typical Indian farmers; and the left wing peasant movements need to set aside the tendency to view class distinctions within the peasantry as the principal contradiction. There is a real danger of the farmers' movement degenerating into typical trade union style 'economism'. Thus, the political challenge before it is to become an all-encompassing movement for regeneration of rural India. Such a movement can be the vanguard of counter-hegemonic politics to defend the republic.

IX

Unemployed youth are at once more powerful and more difficult agents of counter-hegemony at this point in history. The youth movement is more powerful by virtue of the sheer energy, speed and visibility that it can bring to counter-hegemonic politics. Yet, it is also currently much weaker and more fragmented than the farmers' movement. Consequently, it is difficult to find issues and sites that can bring together the various sections of the youth.

The 'objective' conditions appear ripe as in the case of farmers: an extended period of jobless growth, possible shrinkage of job opportunities, contractualisation of organised sector employment, widening gulf between work conditions of organised and unorganised sector workers, an educational system that fails to provide skills or knowledge and growing disparities in educational opportunities.

The 'subjective' conditions are also, on balance, favourable. The crisis is seen and felt by the affected group: take any opinion poll and unemployment tops the chart of problems that the youth would like the government to address. There is enough evidence of a latent youth unrest that occasionally comes out in campus protests across the country. Clearly, a significant section of the youth is uncomfortable with the cultural politics of this regime.

The real challenge at this moment is to marshal this latent energy into counter-hegemonic politics. Campus politics is in a deep freeze: since elected student unions are an exception in the institutes of higher education, politics has long been an episodic aberration. While there are thousands of student organisations across the country, there has been a marked decline in vigorous and ideologically oriented all-India students' organisations.

There are very few independent organisations of the

youth other than students that could launch a nationwide movement for employment. A new generation of youth leadership is emerging from among women, Dalits, Muslims and other marginalised communities. But there is no large platform for this leadership. The creation of a nationwide youth movement on the two issues of equal access to quality education and dignified employment to all is thus a historic possibility and a historic challenge.

X

In the last instance, the success of counter-hegemonic politics depends not so much on the short and medium term action plans and strategies mentioned above, but rather on its capacity to offer an alternative vision. We need a long-term strategy of counter-hegemonic ideology. The heart of the challenge lies in the creation of a new vision of India that can capture the popular imagination. This requires careful deliberation, as the defenders of the republic need fresh moral, cultural and intellectual resources. Today it would be imprudent to foreground counter-hegemonic politics on issues of nationalism, secularism and culture since any contestation on conventional terms would end up strengthening the Modi regime. But an inability to take on these issues for long would be fatal to counter-hegemonic politics.

Fortunately, we need not begin in thin air. Many of the resources needed for the counter-hegemonic project are available. Modern Indian political thought is an extraordinary repository of moral, intellectual and cultural resources that can help us collectively negotiate our present. This tradition can help us access the wisdom of our cultural traditions and also the heritage of modern European thought. But we can draw upon this tradition only if we give up the insistence on any of the 20th century ideological labels or icons as the starting point. We must recognise that many of the ideological battles of the 20th century—violence vs non-violence, state vs market, class vs caste—are pointless today. Instead of carrying on the deadwood, we need to learn from all the major streams of modern Indian political thought.

Specifically, we need to bring together two strands in 20th century Indian political thought: on the one hand the modern egalitarian strand represented by the socialists, communists, Ambedkarites and feminists, and the indigenous strand represented by Gandhians, sarvodayaites and environmentalists on the other.

What we need is a new ideological integration of both these strands under a capacious concept like 'Swaraj'.

This alternative ideological vision must not be tied to any one thinker or text. Instead, the Constitution must become the key symbol for a counter-hegemonic ideology. Such an ideology would enable us to renegotiate some of the key issues that have been deployed by the Modi regime to achieve hegemonic status. This would also result in rethinking some of the key social and economic policies, such as redesigning policies of social justice beyond caste as the only criteria and reservations as the only mechanism, or rethink egalitarian economic policies to move away from an obsession with the state and allow intelligent use of market with sensitivity to ecological concerns. But let us focus on some of the key issues that need urgent and radical reorientation.

Recovering the lost ground of nationalism has to be a key agenda of counter-hegemonic politics. Nationalism continues to be the currency of politics in a post-colonial society as ours; allowing the Sangh Parivar to appropriate the nationalist plank is at the heart of the political setback for the idea of India. Thus, an unapologetic embrace of the legacy of the freedom struggle and proactive propagation of Indian nationalism as a distinct, non-chauvinist, strand of anti-colonial movement must be placed at the heart of the counter-hegemonic project. Instead of handing over the cultural legacy of nationalism to jingoism, we need to recover the idea of a nation centred around the people and their unity internally, and with other post-colonial societies externally.

Instead of simply decrying jingoism and critiquing shallow symbols of nationalism, we need to develop deeper, positive yardsticks of measuring nationalism: willingness to unite Indians across caste, region and religion, sharing the pains and problems of all Indians, assertion of national sovereignty in the face of neo-colonial domination and protection of genuine national security interests without bullying our neighbours. We also need a new concept for this form of nationalism – perhaps *desh prem* instead of *rashtra bhakti*.

This must be accompanied by a concerted attempt to reclaim the cultural heritage of traditions suited for our times. We must acknowledge that the westernised English speaking elite—including liberal, left and progressive sections—has done a disservice to the idea of India. We must give up the ignorance and suspicion of traditions that mark most modern secular Indians, invest

deeply in multiple cultural and religious traditions, and be willing to engage in an open-ended conversation with traditions (not just an instrumental and selective appropriation of some elements that fit the modern imagination) and view these as building blocs of our own modernity. This must be accompanied by a shift in our cultural vocabulary and policy. A counter-hegemonic project would involve an advocacy of Indian languages including both non-scheduled languages and classical ones like Sanskrit, Tamil and Persian, as well as support for an ‘Indianisation’ of educational curricula that draw upon our context, our needs and intellectual traditions.

A vigorous counter to the hegemony of majoritarian politics would require a recalibration of the politics of ‘secularism’ so as to distance it from pro-minorityism and establish connections with the multiple religious traditions of India. We need nothing short of an open disavowal of a deracinated and culturally empty secularism. Secular politics must publicly distance itself from the exclusive demands of the Muslim leadership and focus instead on their insecurity, disadvantage and discrimination in jobs, housing and education that they suffer. Our secularism must draw upon syncretic traditions or traditions of religious coexistence and assiduously avoid the rhetoric that goes out of its way to offend sensibilities of followers of any religion, including the Hindus.

Finally, counter-hegemonic politics needs a new political instrument. Clearly, none of the established political parties are fit for this purpose. But the need is not merely to create a new party or a new alliance. What we need is a new kind of political formation that subsumes a party, which is a party but not just a party. Such a political formation will have to simultaneously perform several functions that are assigned to different organisations today. Contesting elections will of course be one of those functions, but not the only one. This will have to be accompanied by organising agitations and struggles, carrying out constructive work for realising an alternative vision, intervening in politics of knowledge by way of creating new concepts, theories and policies while also creating space for a meaningful relationship with the inner self of the political actor.

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The Ego of Doing Good

Prem P. Verma

When we question the purpose of life, the reason for our birth, the goal of why we were put in this world, we start wondering that it must be not merely to earn a living and look after our family but one for a greater purpose. We come to the conclusion that there must be a greater role for us than just day-to-day living and that it has to include making the world a better place for all. We need to look around and challenge injustice meted out to the vulnerable and the neglected, we must help the weak and the disabled to find their rightful place in the society, we must constantly endeavour to convert our earth to a better place for future generations. As they say, "Did you leave the earth a better place than what you found?" We must rise beyond self and work for the betterment of others round us and thus spare a thought for those less fortunate.

In this process of introspection a number of people choose a non-traditional path to tread, sometimes at great loss to their own self, but of great satisfaction in their lives. They willfully choose to serve others rather than themselves and stand apart from others in braving the risks and dangers that lie ahead. Their lives are filled with a missionary zeal in the pursuit of their altruistic goals and they may sometimes win adulation from the general public at large. This praise works like a tonic in propelling them further and faster on the non-traditional path they have chosen and the ego of doing good takes its birth.

These sincere do-gooders start thinking of others as inferior beings who are merely content to fill their bellies and pursue materialistic pleasures. The altruistic soul on the other hand assumes a superiority complex and feels closer to the Almighty in carrying out His desires. The pursuit of doing good fills us with the thought that somehow we are the chosen one and the others have sold their souls to the devil inasmuch as they are obsessed with the comforts of materialism. This ego generated

from doing good then becomes dangerous since our pursuit of the goal of helping others is coloured by our own imagined elevation to a higher plateau of existence. This results in our soon forcing our thoughts and action on others and trying forcibly to convert them to our own supposedly superior path of life.

This is so contrary to the teachings of Gita and the Buddhist philosophy which enjoins us to be humble and to treat all actions of ours as God's will of which we are merely instruments that carry them out. Who are we to assume a superior role when we do something good for the public welfare? The very purpose of fighting injustice and inequality is defeated if we assume ourselves to be more equal than others simply because we are living for others whereas the rest of the world is content with their own self.

This ego of doing good slowly eats into our soul and makes us look at all others as people not worthy of living. In the process of genuinely fighting against inequality we ourselves are creating inequality by derisively looking at others pursuing a materialistic philosophy as being sub-human. Sooner or later, we start searching for the untrodden path because it will make us unique in the eyes of others. We long to get recognized and if that does not happen, frustration is bound to set in.

On the other hand, if we pursue the altruistic path with the thought that God is merely using us as an instrument and we are fortunate to have been chosen so, then the credit is Almighty's and we are not in any way superior to others. To pursue a benevolent path is a neutral act and does not endow us with an aura of superiority as we falsely believe. The true joy is in the act of giving without any return and this philosophy only can prevent us from believing that we are somehow more worthy to live in this world. The ego of doing good has to be replaced by the humility of neutral thought. As the

famous Indian saying goes, "Neki kar aur dariya me daal" (do good and throw it in the river).

The ego of doing good is more dangerous than the ego that comes from becoming powerful or wealthy or materialistically successful. We must be aware of this

danger and insulate ourselves with the cloak of humility to selflessly pursue the path of common good. To bring happiness to the maximum number, as Bertrand Russell proclaimed as his goal, is a noble idea but nobler still is to carry out this mission with all humility, unheeded and unnoticed without any ego of superiority.

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Western Railway Employees Union

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