

# The RADICAL

Vol 3, No 1, October 2022

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## Editorial

In Modi's second term as PM it has become clear to at least some of the regional parties who have earlier allied themselves to the BJP that this was a serious mistake because the BJP/RSS was and is out to swallow them as much as possible by cutting into and taking over their social and voting bases through grassroots muscle, targeted benefits and money power to woo their elected representatives at all levels. Hence the realignment of Nitish Kumar and the JD(U) in Bihar and his talk of forging a united electoral front for the 2024 general elections. But the only common glue available for this is worry about the BJP. As it is, AAP and the TMC seek to grow by eating into the Congress's electoral base while recent comments by Mamata Bannerjee -- attacking the BJP but handing out a measure of praise for the RSS-- suggest that she has her own priorities and ambitions irrespective of other opposition parties. As to the Congress, it is in deep crisis. Like the other bourgeois parties it too cannot, programmatically speaking, significantly distinguish itself from the BJP; they all support an economic policy of compensatory neoliberalism, a foreign policy of nationalist belligerence coupled with a pro-US strategic orientation, and domestically a soft Hindutva. The Congress then is hoping that the Bharat Jodo Yatra -- a substitute for its inability to launch a sustained mass mobilisation on any anti-BJP policy or issue -- will somehow suffice to revive its popularity and electoral prospects.

This issue of our Newsletter therefore looks at the Bihar realignment and of course at Sri Lanka where the remarkable mass upsurge -- the country's greatest in the 21st century -- forced the fall of President Goabaya Rajapaksha

government and his own departure abroad. But laudable as this mass movement was, it had serious deficiencies of leadership and direction. This should now be obvious. A stalwart ally of Rajapaksha, Ranil Wickremesinghe, took over as President. He has brought Rajapaksha back to the country giving him official protection. He has not announced new general elections and instead formed a new Cabinet most of whose members are from the former President's party, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) or "Sri Lanka Peoples Front". Worse, the current government has signed a deal with the IMF for a loan that imposes a brutal austerity budget and policy on an already suffering public and will push the country into a stronger debt trap. We reproduce here an interview with B. Skanthakumar, a representative of a Marxist and anti-Stalinist revolutionary democratic current that points out the weaknesses and limitations of the mass movement -- a necessity if progressive forces in Sri Lanka are now to move ahead.

Another article looks at the nationalist hype by the Modi government, and the leftwing response centred around the call to reassert the constitution. We argue that the entire Constitution cannot be seen as progressive from the point of view of the exploited and oppressed people, and therefore a more nuanced approach is essential. To do that, however, certain long-held dogmas among the bulk of the left need to be recognised as being flawed.

Another article takes up the issue of Ukraine and the different left responses, nationally and globally, to the Russian invasion. Unanticipated by the Putin government, the extraordinary

resistance by the Ukrainian people has now made this a war of attrition. Russia has much more heavy military equipment but much more difficulty in expanding its numbers of fighting personnel although offering substantially higher financial rewards to attract recruits from the poorer sections of society as well as lumpens and even criminals promising them amnesties if they survive. Ukraine has no problem in the numbers willing to fight and risk their lives but comparatively speaking, needs much more heavy and high quality military equipment.

However, Moscow's latest actions, involving the referendum in the Russian held parts of Donetsk and Luhansk, on whether the populace in their majority want to be a part of Russia, while the places are under military control, is annexation disguised as self-determination. Given the unexpected and strong Ukrainian resistance, this is a pull-back, compared to Putin's early confidence of swallowing the whole of Ukraine. But area wise it is a substantial part of the country that he wants to legitimise occupying. It has much of the industry, oil and gas reserves, quite considerable deposits of different valuable minerals as well as the larger proportion of the country's coal deposits. Of course, this referendum and the process of annexation must be deemed illegitimate and unacceptable since it is carried out under military occupation. Crimea is the only part of Ukraine that has a majority ethnic-Russian population. Although Donetsk and Luhansk are majority Russian speaking regions (most everybody in Ukraine understand both Russian, the main market language, and Ukrainian, the language of governance) the majority are ethnic-Ukrainian with a very large portion of ethnic-Russians being opposed to the Russian invasion. We reject the referendum as rigged, and the occupation an imperialist one. Of course, Russia after 'officially' extending its territorial boundaries, will now claim that continued Ukrainian military efforts to retrieve lost territories, is a violation of the integrity and sovereignty of Russia and allows it to use whatever means necessary to defend itself.

This is where the latest veiled nuclear threats by Putin and Sergey Lavrov, his

Foreign Affairs Minister, come in. These hints at possible escalation to the nuclear level is really a political message directed at the West, especially the US. Putin is telling Washington that now that Moscow has absorbed these new territories, the West, especially the US, must stop arming Ukraine and put pressure on it to accept the new political-territorial status quo, i.e., a final settlement that means a Ukraine accepting its own truncation while Russia gets a victory – less than what Putin had hoped but none the less a victory! Ukraine has only conventional military might. Would this deter Russia from using nuclear weapons if this war carries on? Putin knows that any such first use against a nuclearly unarmed Ukraine would alienate most, if not all of Russia's current supporters home and abroad, and simply shock and horrify the world comity of nations.

The most rational evaluation of what Moscow is up to is that it is, in a deeply immoral and obscene way, creating the fearful spectre of what it might do---a kind of bluff if you like---so as to achieve more immediate and lower level politico-territorial gains. The danger, however, is that an escalation dynamic can set in. The West continues to provide arms; Ukraine keeps fighting and even gains further ground over time. It is then that a Russian leadership, which did not initially intend to use nuclear weapons, begins to more and more seriously consider their actual use, albeit at a smaller scale on Ukraine only---a repeat of 1945 in Japan--which will have to be accepted by outside nuclear powers for fear of a wider holocaust breaking out.

Rounding out this Newsletter are four other pieces on why Israel is not an "Ethnic Democracy" -- a term Christopher Jaffrelot unfortunately accepts as valid for Israel while using it to study to India. There is a more general piece on the rise of rightwing authoritarianism followed by a hopefully easy-to-understand 'ready reckoner' on the role of finance and stock markets in capitalism. Finally, there is the reproduction of a review of Tariq Ali's latest book on Churchill and "Churchillism"; and of course as always, a set of links are provided on other important discussions within the global radical left.

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# Realignment in Bihar

**Sonia Khan**

As of now, 75 years after independence, the forces of Hindutva reign largely unchallenged. On the electoral front the BJP rules either singly or in coalition in 17 states and one Union Territory (Puducherry). A delimitation exercise to redraw constituency boundaries has taken place in J&K whose aim is to reduce, relatively speaking, the number of Muslim majority constituencies. This gerrymandering is further aided by the annulment of Article 370 which now allows ordinary residents (mostly Hindus) who earlier could not vote---given the special constitutional status of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K)---to now be able to do so in legislative assembly elections that can take place once statehood for J&K is restored in the future. Moreover, there are over 800,000 armed personnel of all kinds ranging from army troops to paramilitaries to police, most of whom have been posted in J&K for some time and they too will now be able to vote in forthcoming elections.

The one electoral setback that would seem to have taken place and partly countered the BJP's successful division of the Shiv Sena party and re-establishment of National Democratic Alliance (NDA) rule in Maharashtra is Nitish Kumar's shenanigans in Bihar. In this the second largest state in the Hindi heartland, Kumar ditched his senior partner, the BJP, for a realignment of his party Janata Dal (United) with Tejashwi Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) to replace the older BJP-JD (U) combine as the new coalition government in the state. The mainstream left parties in Bihar namely the Communist party of India (Marxist) or CPM, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India-Marxist

Leninist (Liberation) or CPI-ML (Liberation) while supporting the new government have sensibly remained outside the ruling coalition so as not to give up all the opposition space to the BJP and other smaller parties that would be willing to link up with the BJP. This about turn by Kumar is motivated by narrow electoral-political considerations. He feared, rightly so, that as in the case of other regional allies, the BJP was out to eventually break and substantially swallow a big chunk of the JD(U). In contrast to Uttar Pradesh, in Bihar the legacy of Mandal politics and the relative loyalties of the various caste blocs among Other Backward Castes (OBCs) and Economically Backward Castes (EBCs) to the regional parties like the JD(U) and the RJD would appear to be stronger. The upper castes in Bihar it should be noted have gravitated to the BJP.

Two calculations are at play here for Kumar and Yadav. In mid-2024 general elections are due while in 2025 Bihar will have to face the next round of legislative state assembly elections. The leaders of JD(U) and RJD believe that together they can greatly reduce the future seat tally of the BJP in both the national and state level elections. In the 2019 general elections the BJP got 17 Lok Sabha seats in Bihar on a vote share of some 23% itself a fall from the 29% it got in 2014. In both cases the combined vote share of the JD(U) and RJD was around 36% which in the existing 'first past the post' electoral system (at both the Centre and state level) is usually enough to garner a majority or near majority of seats. As for the state assembly elections, the lesson from the last two that took place in 2015 and 2020 respectively, is that here too, the combined vote share of the JD(U) and

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RJD hovered around 36% whereas the BJP vote share went down from 24% to 19%. In short, this new 'unity' is motivated by anti-BJPism and neither the JD(U) nor the RJD have separately or together any distinctively reformist agenda or programme or set of values that are in sharp contrast to what the BJP stands for.

What limited development has happened in a Bihar---a state known for having proportionately speaking, among the highest levels of migration of labour to other states--at times has owed much to financial support from the Central government. This will not be forthcoming between now and the 2024 elections. Nor is it at all clear that the latest developments in Bihar will signal a stronger push towards a pre-poll electoral alliance between the opposition bourgeois parties against the BJP. All these parties, including the Congress Party pursue a soft Hindutva cultural politics. On the economic front, the common commitment remains that of a 'compensatory neoliberalism' while in foreign policy matters it is a common policy of securing and deepening a pro-US strategic alliance in all but name as well as pursuing a belligerent and hubristic nationalism little different from that of the current Central government even if minus the particular anti-Muslim ideological edge that Modi brings to relations with Israel and to the Indian diasporic population in the West.

The BJP will easily remain the single largest and only national party even if it falls short of achieving a majority of Lok Sabha seats on its own in 2024, which may well not be the case. That is to say, given its deep pockets, the BJP can much more easily stitch

together a governing coalition at the Centre in which it remains dominant and where the promise of Central largesse can assuage and keep in line regional parties in non-BJP ruled states. Despite Bihar the BJP has more reason to be optimistic than its opposition. The Congress Party is currently in serious crisis with either the departure of longstanding senior leaders or even their defection (along with some younger leaders) to the BJP. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the Trinamul Congress (TMC) party have ambitions to extend their influence and rule to states other than where they currently reign. But their primary goal is to cut into the Congress vote rather than to directly challenge or undertake the more difficult task of trying to wean away the BJP's voting and social support since they have nothing distinctive to offer other than being opposed to the BJP.

It is much more realistic to recognize that we will in all probability have a BJP-led government at the Centre after the next general elections. The BJP-Sangh will continue on its current path of institutional transformation to establish a Hindu Rashtra that is not just de facto but increasingly de jure. Its longer term hegemony will only be seriously challenged by a newer kind of left in India that categorically rejects Hindutva and an existing capitalist order that guarantees the perpetuation of increasing inequalities of income and wealth amidst mass poverty, continuing ecological devastations and deepening authoritarianism and racism behind the cover of elections whose outcomes are more strongly shaped by a much more controlled media (print, electronic, social) operating amidst a deeply atomised public.

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# ‘The Canary In The Coal Mine’: Sri Lanka’s Crisis Is A Chronicle Foretold

## INTERVIEW

*[Sri Lanka’s acute economic crisis and sovereign debt default, along with its people’s uprising in 2022, has drawn attention across the world. It is described as the ‘canary in the coal mine’, that is, a harbinger of the likely future for other global south countries. Eric Toussaint, spokesperson for the Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt (CADTM) interviewed via email Colombo-based Balasingham Skanthakumar of the Social Scientists’ Association of Sri Lanka and the CADTM’s South Asia network. This appeared in the August 7, 2022 newsletter of CADTM.]*

**Q. What was the cause in Sri Lanka for the people’s uprising in 2022?**

Sri Lanka ran out of foreign exchange in the first quarter of 2022. It exhausted its reserves, already depleted from defending the value of the Lankan Rupee (LKR), having serviced a USD500 million International Sovereign Bond that matured in January. New inflows to renew reserves, confidently assured by the Central Bank Governor on behalf of the Gotabaya Rajapaksa administration, did not materialise.

For decades, there has been a chronic balance of payments shortfall, such that import expenditure raced ahead of export revenue, two-to-one. This deficit has been financed by foreign borrowings (initially bilateral and multilateral loans, but increasingly the international money market from 2007 during the Mahinda Rajapaksa presidency). In fact, the so-called foreign reserves were almost entirely foreign loans and not national income. To maintain the LKR at an artificially high value for almost a year, the Central Bank drew down on its dollar holdings. Once the reserves were exhausted, the rupee went into freefall in March 2022. It lost 44% of its value against the US dollar, and around 40% against other convertible currencies between January and May 2022 alone. Presently the US dollar

trades at LKR361, whereas in June 2021 it was LKR200.

Without foreign exchange, highly import-dependent Sri Lanka could not afford to purchase fuel (petrol, diesel, coal, kerosene, LP gas), food, and medicines. The shortages of fuel affected not only transport but also the generation of electricity, making previously rare power cuts a daily and prolonged occurrence from February up to the present. With shortages of food and other essentials in the market, queues of people formed everywhere. The price of everything rose sharply. By July, headline inflation surged over 60% – food having skyrocketed by 90% and non-food items by 46%. One in three persons is food-insecure: without adequate access to food or reducing the number of meals, the portion sizes, quality, and variety. Community kitchens have begun in Colombo with crowd-sourced funding to provide at least one meal a day in low-income areas, along with ad-hoc distribution of cooked food parcels.

Fuel shortages and power cuts also debilitate the productive sectors of the economy spanning farming, fishing, and factories. The livelihoods of daily-wage earners and urban poor households are devastated. The crisis has decimated the incomes of low-paid gig workers who run taxis and deliver

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food. The savings and retirement benefits of the middle and working classes have more than halved following devaluation of the rupee. Those on fixed incomes are losing ground to inflationary price hikes propelled by profiteering, without compensatory wage increase. Tens of thousands of mainly young people through the passport office, their first step to find jobs abroad. Several hundreds have been intercepted at sea, trying to escape in unsafe and overcrowded fishing boats to India or Australia.

Public discontent over the brewing crisis was evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, with farmers, schoolteachers, garment, and plantation workers' protesting in 2021, as did women victims of microfinance loans in 2020. There were set-piece anti-government demonstrations and rallies by opposition political parties but only mobilising the faithful. Meanwhile the government kept downplaying the seriousness of the economic problems. People across classes were disenchanted by a government that was indifferent to their pain and inactive even as they suffered. [1]

The Rajapaksa family that has dominated Sri Lankan politics since 2005 has been the object of both adoration and fear within society, depending on one's ethnicity and political views. For the first time in a generalised way, stories of their abuse of power, attachment to astrologers, and unexplained wealth, became openly ridiculed. The demand for President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to "Go Home!" included the rest of his family too. This slogan was joined by another, "Give us our stolen money back!". Even though cross-class grievances indicate a systemic crisis, the citizens' movement that emerged in 2022 was largely framed by the middle-class belief that the mismanagement of the economy derives from grand corruption among politicians and bureaucrats.

This people's uprising is heterogeneous, without structure or leaders. It defies neat class labels. Its origin from within that inexact category of the "middle class" has shaped its character and consciousness. However, along the way it has become more diverse, receiving support from university students, daily waged workers, the urban poor, pensioners, people with disabilities, trade unionists, the clergy, and the LGBTQI community. Still, the active participation of the working class, farmers', fishers', and plantation workers, is minimal. Even the left-wing representatives of dominated classes who participate in it, have not been able to transcend the general demand within the citizens' movement for short-term economic relief; nor advance an agenda beyond regime-change and liberal democratic and constitutional reform. [2] The left has neither programme nor strategy for the socio-economic transformation of society and working peoples' power.

***Q. What were the stages of the mobilisations of the last months?***

In an organic way, handfuls of middle-class citizens began organising neighbourhood protests in the largest city Colombo and its suburbs. [3] As the crisis gathered pace, so did the numbers and the spread of the movement. There was a qualitative turn on 31 March when youth were violently attacked during a confrontation with security forces guarding Gotabaya Rajapaksa's private residence. Thereafter the protests, including outside of Colombo, grew in leaps and bounds. Some organisers, unconnected to political parties and new to activism, proposed a convergence of the protests on a symbol of presidential power, his office by Galle Face Green, Colombo's seaside park.

This massive demonstration of tens of thousands from across the island that began on 9 April turned into a continuous

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occupation (#OccupyGalleFace), denying Gotabaya Rajapaksa access to the Presidential Secretariat right up to his resignation in July. Elsewhere across Sri Lanka, people became inspired to occupy other public spaces demanding the resignation of the president, his family members, and the government.

However, the largest and most iconic occupation was in Colombo, dubbed by its residents as ‘GotaGoGama’. [4] In the Sinhala language, ‘Gama’ means village. What began as a couple of tents to provide shelter for those who stayed on, organically grew into a commune with a kitchen, library, dance and drama performance spaces, a film hall, vegetable garden, western and ayurvedic medical care, solar-powered energy for mobile telephone charging, along with encampments of the deaf community, Catholics seeking justice for the 2019 Easter Sunday terrorist bombings, campaigners against enforced disappearances and for human rights, and numerous youth organisations including of the leftist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (Peoples Liberation Front) and Frontline Socialist Party.

Another significant stage in the citizens’ movement began on 9 May, when supporters of then Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa attacked the protest sites (#GotaGoGamas) in Colombo and Kandy. There was instant solidarity from the public. The political violence provoked counterattacks by enraged people previously inactive in the protests but in passive agreement with it, directed at government politicians and their properties. This forced Mahinda Rajapaksa’s resignation.

Gotabaya Rajapaksa soon appointed former political rival Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister. Wickremesinghe, along with his United National Party (UNP) that was in government between 2015 and 2019

had been roundly rejected by the electorate, securing only one seat from the total number of votes polled island wide. The President’s move provided some stability within a government in disarray since early April, as Wickremesinghe formed a new Cabinet with the support of the Rajapaksa party, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (Peoples’ Front) and crossovers from the opposition. The perception, encouraged by business interests and liberal civil society, that Wickremesinghe with his pro-private sector, pro-western, cosmopolitan orientation is the best captain in stormy seas – along with anxiety over violence and “extremism” post-9 May – did contribute to fallback in middle-class participation in the protests.

However, the crippling shortages of fuel and the deterioration of economic and social life maintained the anger within the citizens’ movement now known as the Aragalaya (meaning ‘struggle’ in the Sinhala language).

To redouble the demand for ‘Gota’ now joined by ‘Ranil’ to “go home”, 9 July was decided by the groups at #GotaGoGama for a mass protest targeting the president’s office (besieged but not occupied) and his nearby official residence (where he had been bunkered under heavy guard since evacuation from his private residence in March). This turned out to be the single largest mobilisation of the citizens’ movement so far in 2022. Against the odds and overcoming many obstacles in their way, people from popular classes overwhelmed the armed might of the military and police to spectacularly capture the Presidential Secretariat and the President’s House. Spontaneously, others massed outside the Prime Minister’s official residence, unoccupied by Ranil Wickremesinghe but under continuous protest by people camped outside it (#NoDealGama/#RanilGoGama),



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finally taking possession late that night. Finally, after months of protests, Gotabaya Rajapaksa who had taken refuge onboard a naval craft, announced his resignation, before taking flight for the Maldives and later Singapore.

Throughout 9 July, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe resisted the demand from protestors for his resignation, claiming he was needed until the formation of an all-party government. This incensed those who had expected him to depart along with the president with whom he had tied-up politically. Crowds spontaneously formed outside Wickremesinghe's private residence (which he had vacated in advance). They were beaten back by armed police, who also assaulted journalists filming this violence. As word of this attack grew, larger numbers arrived. In a bizarre twist, and under the watch of the security forces, his home was set on fire. Still, the prime minister (by now Acting President) resisted handing in his resignation. This prompted militant demonstrations on 13 July outside his office, which fell to protestors despite tear gas and water cannon assault. In the subsequent week, the state premises that were occupied on July 9 and 13 were voluntarily vacated by protestors.

***Q. Do the different ethnic and religious communities across Sri Lanka participate in the protests in the same way?***

The Aragalaya is largely a movement within the majority Sinhalese nation, and of cities and towns in the Sinhala-speaking south of the island. The minority Tamil nation, particularly in the Tamil-speaking north and east, held back from actively participating in the movement. Small delegations from those areas did visit #GotaGoGama to express their solidarity, while raising their own demands for post-war truth and accountability, against

militarisation of their traditional homeland, and for return of their lands under military occupation. The ethno-religious Muslim minority, at the receiving end of violence and Islamophobia since the end of the war in 2009 and following the Easter Sunday terrorist bombings in 2019, was initially wary but this changed over the fasting month in April. Hill Country Tamils and those of north-eastern origin but domiciled in the south did participate in the protests.

Ethnic minority communities had mixed sentiments towards the movement, as did the Sinhalese but for different reasons. As the former president is a representative of Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism, some perceived the Aragalaya as a belated mea culpa from his heartland, except still unacknowledging of the injustices to minorities in a racist state. Others feared that their overt association with the protests would make them vulnerable to state surveillance and expose them to reprisals. No movement in and of itself, can erase the contradictions and fractures within society, especially when these are side-stepped at best and unseen at worst. Nevertheless, some within the Aragalaya did revisit an uncomfortable past, including historic discrimination against minorities, and the crimes against humanity committed on Tamils in 2009.

Is it correct to say that the causes of the current crisis are the sum of the effects of the neo-liberal capitalist model recommended by the IMF/World Bank and desired by Sri Lankan big capital, converging in the last two years with the dramatic fall in tourist revenues coupled with the increase in the price of fuel and food imports? Please recall for us when the big neoliberal turn was taken, and by what kind of government?

Loyalists of the Rajapaksas within the Parliament and its apparatchiks in state

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institutions, Sinhalese nationalist civil society and pro-regime media, locate this crisis in what is external to the domestic economy and therefore beyond the control of the regime: the Covid-19 pandemic induced disruptions to global and domestic supply chains impacting production and circulation; the collapse of inward tourism over 2020-2021; Russia's war on Ukraine (both countries being prime markets for Ceylon tea and recently countries of origin for tourists); and global price spirals in fuel (petrol, diesel, LP gas) and food (wheat, maize, milk powder, sugar) and fertilisers (urea). This is of course to absolve former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, his advisors, and his family members in government (older sibling Mahinda was Prime Minister up to 09 May 2022 and younger sibling Basil was Finance Minister up to 04 April 2022), from responsibility for this disaster.

Critics of the Rajapaksas drawn from the political opposition, think-tanks and economists, and liberal civil society, attribute the crisis to rash, 'populist' actions following 2019's presidential election, principally reforms to direct tax thresholds and value added tax that halved receipts; the 'organic only' ban on chemical inputs in agriculture that damaged rice and tea harvests and herald a looming famine; money-printing (as endorsed by modern monetary theory) to finance government expenditure that fed inflation; the drastic fall in migrant workers' remittances through official channels (as informal channels offered a more attractive dollar to rupee conversion rate); and refusal to enter into an International Monetary Fund macro-economic programme, accompanied by debt restructuring. This narrative squarely faults the regime, while acquitting the economic model of any part in the tragedy.

Therefore, mainstream, or dominant

explanations for Sri Lanka's troubles blame conjunctural factors. There is a third point of view: the issues above are symptomatic and not causative of the crisis. In other words, the origins of our turmoil are structural. In Sri Lanka, the chickens farmed by neoliberal capitalism came home to roost in 2022. Every manifestation of the current crisis, and every failed response, is an outcome of these hegemonic ideas packaged in policies, processes, and mechanisms. [5]

The 1977 election triumph of the United National Party (UNP), the grand old party of the right in Sri Lanka led by J. R. Jayewardene (uncle of Ranil Wickremesinghe), was a decisive break from the dirigiste policies of the past. The UNP ushered the first wave of pro-market liberalisation reforms allegedly to overcome the failings of the 'closed economy' after 1970, and to imitate Singapore's path to prosperity. This was 10-15 years before the rest of South Asia would follow suit. These reforms it should be noted were not an outcome of an IMF-World Bank loan (which followed), but rather the vision of a new leadership team with new ideas in the UNP in concert with outward-looking sectors of the domestic capitalist class. Of course, the progress of what we now know as the 'Washington Consensus' or 'neoliberalism', did not conform to textbook theory: the political economy of Sri Lanka (as of any other social formation) stood in its way.

An internal war between the Sri Lankan state and Tamil separatists raged between 1983 and 2009 expanded the reach and social weight of the military. In between, there was an insurrection of Sinhalese youth against the state between 1987 and 1989 led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, stemming from the dual political authoritarianism and economic liberalism of the UNP.

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Nevertheless, there was another neoliberal wave in the early 1990s, begun by the UNP but continued by its historic centre-left antagonist the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). The most recent wave under the Rajapaksa-led SLFP was during the 2007-8 global financial crisis. So, there is continuity in the orientation and trajectory of capitalist development from the late 1970s up to the present, notwithstanding alterations in political regime. [6]

Trade, both import-export and domestic, was liberalised for entry of private capital. The withdrawal of the state undermined its capacity to regulate market prices, store and distribute food stocks. Cartels particularly in the milling and sale of rice and within the import sector grew stronger. Foreign capital was courted through establishment of export processing zones, generous tax holidays, and unrestricted capital flows, as well as repression of wages within export manufacturing in addition to the suppression of trade unions and labour rights. The service sector became the most significant in the economy, creating jobs without security and rights. Corporate taxation and the tax to GDP ratio is among the lowest in Asia. Indirect taxes which hurt the poor, contribute 82% of total tax income, underscoring the resistance of the rich to direct and progressive taxation. Small farmers lost their customary access to state land to agribusiness which benefited from bank loans and export incentives. Combined state allocations on health and education are less than the military budget, and adequate only to meet salaries and other recurrent expenditure. [7]

Export-oriented industrialisation supplanted import-substituting industrialisation, except that the exports are of low value addition ready-made-garments, while the imports are of raw materials, intermediate goods, and

machinery, worsening the imbalance between import expenditure and export income. There was no effort to sustain industrial production for the home market, in cement, ceramics, paper, leather, textiles, fabricated steel, sugar, processing of fuel and lubricant oils, etc. These were not considered to be industries of comparative advantage for Sri Lanka, and anyway imports were cheaper and plentiful, with quicker profit for less effort. This de-industrialised the island economy, destroying local capacity, skills as well as employment, and intensifying dependence on the vagaries of the world market.

Meanwhile, the main agricultural export of tea (and to a lesser extent rubber) continued to be important, except that the terms of trade consistently favour exporters of manufactures over primary commodities. Even major export items such as garments and tea substantially rely on imported inputs. Tourism became more significant as a source of foreign exchange, although never on a mass scale nor surpassing apparel and tea, but again requires large infusions of imports of construction materials, fittings and fixtures, and food and beverages, with added vulnerability to shocks as experienced during Covid-19.

The single largest source of foreign exchange, however, has been remittances from workers in domestic labour in West Asia. The point to underline is that the three top contributors to foreign earnings – labour migration, apparel, and tea – all derive from women’s labour in low-waged jobs.

What is the balance sheet of Sri Lanka’s “open economy” after more than 40 years? [8] It has been to increase dependence on world trade (exports and imports), foreign and private capital, borrowing to finance mega-scale and often commercially unviable, infrastructure projects, as well as

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to bridge the yawning gap between income and expenditure. Sri Lanka's indebtedness has grown exponentially to USD51 billion, relative to a small economy of USD80 billion. The financialization of the economy diverts investment from production, also driving household indebtedness through microcredit institutions. Low-skilled labour migration especially to the Middle East is a mainstay of many poor households. State capacity to regulate prices of essential commodities and services and protect basic consumption, jobs and incomes in society, and access to health and education especially in times of heightened distress such as at present, is degraded. Meanwhile inequalities of income and wealth have exploded grotesquely, as has the informalisation of employment creating greater insecurity for wage-labourers and their households. Class consciousness has eroded in the organised working class; and the decline of the left as an ideological, political, and organisational reference appears inexorable. [9]

***Q. Are there any similarities between Sri Lanka in 2022 and uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia (2011) and Lebanon (2019)?***

After the 31 March protest, the government described the citizens movement as replicating the 'Arab Spring'. This was intended as a slur. The inference was that the protestors by aiming to overthrow the president, were agents of upheaval, instability, and chaos; perhaps even opening the way for intervention and destabilisation by foreign powers, and not to forget the trope of Islamophobia to create a wedge among protestors. However, within the citizens' movement there was no comparison or reference to the people's uprisings beginning in 2010 in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa. There is no evidence even among organisers within

the Aragalaya, of close study of those movements.

What maybe common between Sri Lanka in 2022 and the 'Arab Spring' is that economic crisis, lack of opportunities and daily hardships due to scarcities of essential goods, provoked young people into taking to the streets; grand corruption was identified as reason for the failure of governments to provide a decent standard of living to all; and the remedy was thought to be greater democratisation of the political system and state structure. What is starkly different, unlike Tunisia and Egypt, is the abstentionism in Sri Lanka of the working class in workplaces and through its organisations within the current movement, excepting delegations of trade union leaders to #GotaGoGamas in Colombo and elsewhere, and the thunderclaps of the 28 April hartal ('stay-away') and 06 May general strike. A happier difference from Egypt is the absence to date of a military grab for power in Sri Lanka.

Among right-wing commentators in 2021, there were uncomplimentary references to Lebanon's crisis as holding a mirror in which Sri Lanka's future is foretold. There has been no discussion of the Lebanese '17 October uprising' within the citizens' movement in Sri Lanka. Insularity runs deep on this island, including in its left and trade unions. What may be shared in the uprisings in both countries is the conscious attempt to rise above ethno-religious divides, identifying as one people with common economic issues and a common enemy in the government, and rejecting the executive as well as the legislature. In both places their respective Central Bank governors were seen as shouldering responsibility for the crisis, even if in Sri Lanka the banking system is stable for now. Perhaps another commonality between the two movements is that they succeed in

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bringing down governments, but not yet in making one of their own choosing.

***Q. Is there an awareness of the importance of the debt issue among a significant sector of mobilised people? There were huge mobilisations against the IMF in Argentina also on 9 July 2022. Is there a significant sector that is convinced that there should not be a new agreement with the IMF? What should be done with the debt payments and with the IMF? What are your proposals for emergency measures to face the crisis in Sri Lanka?***

Whereas in Argentina, people take to the streets opposed to the IMF, in Sri Lanka it is more likely that people would demonstrate demanding an IMF intervention. Truly there cannot be another country where an IMF agreement is more desired than Sri Lanka. Of course, this infatuation is based on immediate desperation on the one hand, and innocence of austerity conditions on the other. There is no ongoing IMF programme to be familiar with its pain and destitution of the poor. The most recent (16th since the first agreement in 1965) was in 2016 and not completed, but still being repaid over 2021. In the current crisis, it has been drummed into society that with all doors to fresh loans closed to it, there is no alternative for Sri Lanka than to look to the lender of last resort.

The lie that has been fed is that the silver bullet to kill the crisis is the IMF. It is not explained that the IMF itself is unlikely to lend more than USD3 billion through its Extended Fund Facility, and that too in instalments over 4 years. This sum does not amount to more than the cost of six months of petroleum products. It is also under half of what Sri Lanka was due to pay in debt service in 2022 alone. While it is assumed that IMF funds will support urgent imports, Sri Lanka will be expected by the IMF to

resume servicing its debt, and to prioritise its revenue for this purpose. Above all, an IMF programme does not fix the reasons why Sri Lanka was caught in the debt trap, nor how with its current economic structure and insertion into the global economy it can ever achieve a balance of payments surplus, to avoid new borrowings.

There has been no resistance or alternative to an IMF programme from a stupefied left, ranging from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna to social movement activists. “We should take the money but reject austerity or make conditionalities human rights compliant”, say some optimists. “The IMF has changed from the 1980s, it is more relaxed on public spending and even supports a social safety net for the vulnerable”, insist others. “We are already experiencing austerity, what can the IMF make worse?”, bark a few. “It was a mistake to default on the debt” (which Sri Lanka did in May 2022) declare others. “We need an IMF agreement so that Sri Lanka’s risk rating improves to borrow again from bilateral and multilateral agencies, and the bond market”.

Some private sector trade unions have rightly demanded that the government should be transparent in the negotiation process with the IMF and release the draft staff-level agreement to the public. However, up to now, beyond terse media releases on the process, there is no technical information on the outlines of the proposed programme.

It remains to be seen whether once an IMF agreement is rolled out, there will be a radicalisation of the movement around likely conditionalities such as increased taxes on fuel and food and tariffs on electricity, water and other public services, public sector pay freeze and downsizing, ‘fiscal consolidation’ through reductions in spending on health, education and social services, labour

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market deregulation including on working hours, 'hire and fire', and privatisation of state-owned-enterprises. The right has smartly found its opportunities to advance the neoliberal project in this crisis, taking advantage of fuel shortages and power cuts, to promote privatisation of the state-owned Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) and Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB). Sinhalese nationalists may go into xenophobic opposition against an IMF programme, if only for the purpose of differentiating themselves from President Ranil Wickremesinghe before the electorate. Often in relation to anti-privatisation campaigns involving Indian capital, and the US-backed Millennium Challenge Corporation agreement (MCC), left-wing trade unions and organisations have made opportunistic alliances with Sinhalese nationalists, in the guise of "anti-imperialism".

So far, the question of debt has not been taken up within the citizens' movement. Sri Lanka is already in default. This has interrupted a fringe discussion cutting across right and left, as to whether the government ought to unilaterally suspend debt servicing to prioritise foreign reserves for essential goods especially medicines. Sri Lanka will probably not resume debt repayments until sometime in 2023. The government has hired Lazard and Clifford Chance as its financial and legal advisors respectively to advise on restructuring the external debt. This year, there are murmurs around odious and illegitimate debts in relation to the Rajapaksas. Some solitary voices call for an audit of the debt especially the International Sovereign Bonds (ISBs). However, this has yet to become a demand of political parties or social movements.

A brief overview of the composition of Sri Lanka's foreign debt may be of relevance at this point. The largest chunk of foreign debt

around 47% comprise ISBs which are thought to be held by BlackRock, Allianz, UBS, HSBC, JPMorgan Chase, and Prudential, and to a much lesser extent Sri Lankan commercial banks and other locals (rumoured to include parties close to the Rajapaksas). Bilateral creditors principally Japan, China and India, and others collectively account for 31%. Finally, multilateral creditors, the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank, account for 21%.

The Western and Indian narrative of a 'Chinese debt trap' is mala fide. Nevertheless, two points on Chinese loans should be made. [10] Firstly, its actual proportion is closer to 20% than the Central Bank of Sri Lanka recorded 10%, as the official figure does not include lending to state-owned-enterprises (by the EXIM Bank of China and China Development Bank). Secondly, Chinese loans financed Rajapaksa-era mega-infrastructure and vanity projects which have not been to the benefit of the people, and whose costs were allegedly inflated by hefty 'commissions' to the former first family and connected parties. Therefore, these loans amongst others should be audited to determine whether the debts incurred are odious or illegitimate.

Aside from the ongoing debt default, there should be a moratorium on future servicing pending an audit (inclusive of domestic debt) and reorientation of the economy around the recovery of popular classes from this crisis. In addition to substantial 'haircuts' by private creditors, all illegitimate debts should be cancelled. Household indebtedness has also expanded during the crisis, as loans are taken for consumption needs, and to meet urgent expenses. There should be debt relief for households as well, supplemented by direct assistance for household needs and productive activities, to break the cycle of new loans to repay old loans. [11]

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Some emergency or short-term measures that are urgently needed include the provision of a basket of essential foods to low-income households in urban, estate and rural areas, to protect them from starvation. [12] This should not be based solely on the existing registry, but include those pushed into poverty through the crisis, and internal migrants such as export factory workers and others temporarily resident near their places of employment. In this process the public distribution system that was dismantled by the 'open economy' should be rebuilt under community control. Farmers and fishers should be prioritised in supply of diesel and kerosene to be able to resume production and distribution. School and public transport should be privileged over private vehicles in the rationing and supply of fuel. Employers should take responsibility for transport of workers.

The tax burden on the poor must be removed, with value-added-taxes increased on consumption by the rich. An employment guarantee scheme to assure a minimum number of days of waged work must be rolled out in urban, rural and estate communities. The super-profits made by banks, finance companies, and other sectors, during the pandemic must be subject to higher taxes. The military budget must be halved, with those allocations channelled into health (including nutritional supplements for mothers and infants) and education (including fresh milk and mid-day meal for students). There should be a moratorium on the loans of micro and small enterprises and reductions in the interest rate for bank credit, to enable them to survive while sustaining production and employment. Community-owned and managed credit and distribution mechanisms including cooperatives should be assisted to prioritise the needs of working people and especially women.

***Q. With the appointment of the new president and the use of repression against the demonstrators, clearly the regime is not making serious concessions, what can happen?***

While the ouster of the former president Gotabaya Rajapaksa and the expulsion of his family from government is a victory for the citizens' movement, the election of Ranil Wickremesinghe as the president, is a serious setback. [13] This has for the moment stabilised the political order that safeguards the Rajapaksa family, its political party, and the status quo, against which citizens have been protesting. This 'selection' of the new president has the blessings of big business, the middle class and liberal opinion. This new situation has substantially demobilised the citizens' movement and is systematically demonising it now. The Aragalaya's demand was for an interim all-party government led by a caretaker president and prime minister to institute reforms diluting the executive powers of the presidency and providing economic relief and stability pending an early general election. Radicals within it also demanded a People's Council, as an extension of participatory democracy, to represent the interests of citizens as a counterpart to the parliament. However, the Aragalaya has been checkmated by the scheming of the new president backed by the rotten majority in parliament. The aim of those in government is to string out the term of this parliament until 2024, protecting the parliamentarians of the Rajapaksa regime from criminal investigations, and possible loss of their electorates.

Within hours of Wickremesinghe's oath-taking as president on 21st July, he unleashed the military on the 'GotaGoGama' agitation site in Colombo, assaulting protestors and destroying some tents and spaces. Since then, the repression has intensified and

is unrelenting, while emergency law is in force. Around 100 people including those most visible as influencers or spokespersons during the movement have been abducted or arrested by the police for various offences relating to their entry into or occupation of public buildings or just participation in peaceful protests. Journalists and media organisations that provided sympathetic coverage of the protests are being harassed. Trade unionists who amplified the demands of the Aragalaya are being arrested at this time. The police are trying to remove the remaining protestors at Galle Face Green, thinking this will deflate the movement.

There is a concerted campaign on social and mainstream media to smear the protestors as variously ‘fascists’ or ‘anarchists’, funded by Western governments and NGOs and even the Tamil diaspora to effect regime change. There were solidarity protests across the North and East (Jaffna, Mannar and Batticaloa) on 29 July of civil society organisations, women’s groups, Christian clergy, human rights defenders, and others from the Tamil and Muslim communities, calling for the release of all those detained and an end to the repression. There have been solidarity actions in Sri Lankan communities overseas. These must continue and have the support of the left and labour movement organisations in those countries too.

This struggle is unfinished and is presently experiencing a serious setback. But it is undoubtedly the most uplifting and hopeful social struggle in Sri Lanka of the 21st century. All those everywhere inspired by the people’s uprising of 2022 must now rise in its defence. Aragalayata Jayawewa/Poraattathukku Vetri/Victory to the Struggle!

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## Seventy-Five Years of Independence: The Hindutva forces, the Left Campaigns, and Revolutionary Perspectives

**Kunal Chattopadhyay**

When the BJP government, under the stewardship of Narendra Modi, proclaims “Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav”, the irony is so thick it almost condenses in front of our eyes. But these forces cannot conceal their real views for long. Their challenge to liberal nationalism, mounted from a rightwing position that included the Indian Council of Historical Research, (a once independent body now turned into a lapdog of the Hindutva forces) issuing a poster for the celebrations that excluded Jawaharlal Nehru’s image. Predictably, the poster included the image of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. Under the present dispensation, the history of his obsequious letters, seeking mercy, and his getting a pension from the British government after his release, has been airbrushed.

Beyond the dispute over images, which involves also Narendra Modi’s perpetual hatred of the image of Nehru and his desire to project himself as the greatest prime Minister India ever had, there were other issues. The government in a bid to stir a frenzy of nationalism launched a “harghartiranga” campaign. Citizens were urged to unfurl the national flag atop their homes, and display it in their social media profiles. This call for a public display of patriotism through such measures had multiple aims.

In the first place, this is a bid to make people forget that the RSS, the parent of the BJP, had been deeply hostile to the idea of a secular India. The Hindu Mahasabha, the organization long headed by Savarkar, as well as the RSS, did not take part in the freedom struggle. They collaborated with the colonial administration at critical junctures, like during the Civil Disobedience and the Quit India

movements. It is not surprising that a previous BJP-led government, that of Vajpayee, had stopped the ICHR from publishing two of the volumes of documents and related materials, edited by historians Sumit Sarkar and Partha Sarathi Gupta, as part of the “Towards Freedom” project. These volumes dealt with the period of the Quit India movement and its aftermath, and showed the actual role of the Hindu fundamentalists under colonial rule, as abject collaborators and opponents of a secular, democratic freedom struggle.

The Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS had a conception of India that excluded Muslims, Christians, and from a slightly later period, the communists, as equal citizens of India. And they rejected the tricolour. Now, one can say that there might be different reasons for that. Did the communists not reject it too? But the reasoning of the Hindutva forces was clear. When in 1929 the Congress finally adopted the Purna Swaraj resolution, it was decided that on 30 January 1930, the tricolour would be raised as the national flag. And the first person in the Congress who had raised the demand for full independence was Hasrat Mohani, a communist, who put this demand forward as far back as 1921. The founder and supreme head of the RSS at that time, K. B. Hedgewar, called on RSS units to hoist and worship the saffron flag (bhagwadhwaj) instead, in line with his desire for an exclusively Hindu India.

So why now? Because by linking the flag to the BJP government, the BJP and its parent the RSS, are seeking to appropriate the inheritance of the freedom struggle. Moreover, by making flying the flag a mandatory symbol of patriotism, critical voices are sought to be silenced. The immediate impact was in

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Kashmir, with reports of Kashmiris being forced to buy the flags.

At the same time, the government never passes up the least opportunity to ensure further profits for one of the two principal capitalists it is hand in glove with. The amendment of the Flag Code to allow the use of machine-made and polyester flags was primarily aimed at bringing some more loot into the coffers of Mukesh Ambani. Before the amendment, only hand-woven and hand-spun flags made of cotton, silk, wool or Khadi were allowed. India's largest manufacturer of polyester is Mukesh Ambani. (A famous and almost suppressed book, which had tracked the rise of his father Dhirubhai Ambani through government patronage, had been titled Polyester Prince). To ensure his profit, a part of the "Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav" project called for the government buying flags to ensure that people put them up. This is one more way in which public funds are being channeled for the private profit of Mr. Ambani at the behest of Narendra Modi, Amit Shah et al. There is also an ideological element here. The focus on khadi had stressed, albeit in a limited form, economic self-reliance in opposition to imperialist exploitation. Lovers of British imperialism would of course not like to keep that link going.

The most ironic use of the "Azadi ka Amrit Mahtsav" of course came after the British queen, Elizabeth II, died. When Elizabeth II became the ruling Queen, she was touring Kenya, then a British colony. This was exactly the time when the British were crushing the Mau Mau nationalist rebels through tortures and concentration camps, namely British gulags that few in the West will mention. She was also a queen who, as Tariq Ali writes, was well known for entertaining ruthless dictators in her palace. They include both the Portuguese dictator Marcelo Caetano, a year before he was finally deposed by a

revolution, as well as Nicolae Ceausescu of Romania. The late queen was involved in the 1975 removal of the democratically elected Labour Party government of Gough Whitlam in Australia. And of course, she never even gave a symbolic apology for the Bengal Famine in which millions died, nor stopped wearing the looted crown jewels. Yet, when she died, the Government of India, a country that had been under British colonial rule from 1757, declared a one-day state mourning. And the notice was issued on a letterhead with the header proclaiming "Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav".

### **How to respond to the BJP?**

What is certain is that the BJP government has been steadily taking all the liberal-democratic elements out, turning India into a deeply authoritarian country. The left parties are all raising their voices against this. But what is important are the strategy and tactics they chalk out. The CPI(M) website carried an article on 4 August 2022, which stated at the outset:

"While the Narendra Modi led BJP government at the Centre is marking the 75th Anniversary of India's Independence with usual sarkari programmes, the sad reality is that the country's Constitution is under an unprecedented attack from the Sangh Parivar, of which BJP is a core part. This is not really surprising because the RSS and the Hindu fundamentalist stream had never accepted the Constitution fully, because its strategic objective is to establish a Hindu Rashtra in India, which would naturally conflict with a Constitution that has Secularism, Democracy and Federalism as three of its essential pillars."

Another article, this time in Peoples Democracy, the English language organ of the CPI(M), stressed that the working class vision of an independent India was socialist, as

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among other things is stated in the preamble of the Constitution and the paper ends with the following two paragraphs:

“It is an irony that the Modi government is observing 75 years of independence the so called ‘Azadi ka AmritMahotsav’ by implementing policies that totally negate the aspirations of the people who sacrificed their lives in the independence struggle. This government has diluted all the principles enshrined in the Constitution – right to adequate means of livelihood for all citizens, living wage for decent standard of life, control of material resources for the common good, prevention of concentration of wealth.

It is imperative for the working class of our country, which has fought against British colonialism to again rise in united struggles with much more intensity not only against the neoliberal attacks, but also against the RSS led communal divisive machinations. The struggle it has launched against neoliberalism since its inception has to be intensified and linked with the struggle against communal divisive machinations. That is the only way to ensure that the aspirations and dreams of our forefathers who sacrificed their lives in the struggle for independence are realised. That is the commitment we have to make on the occasion of the 75 years of our independence.”

This is similar to the stance of the CPI(ML) Liberation, notwithstanding much expressed differences (in places like West Bengal, sometimes deep hostility) between the two parties. The CPI(ML) Liberation website has a “We the People of India, Freedom 75” campaign whose tone is set by an important reference to the reality that there were several streams in the freedom movement. It declares:

“It is ironical that today when the country

is moving towards its 75th year of independence, it is the communal ideology which is in the seat of power and wants to use its power to change the face of the freedom movement. All accepted standards of writing history are being flouted openly and facts are being twisted. In this situation, the true celebration of 75 years of independence would be to re-establish the dreams and values of the independence movement”.

Thus, there is a general line of agreement within the left about the need to defend the values of the freedom movement, of the Constitution. During the first half of August this year, the CPI(M) had a country-wide campaign calling for the defence of democracy and the Constitution. Party General Secretary Sitaram Yechur talked about this at the Telangana State Conference of the Party in late July. On 24 August 2022, he spoke at a symposium organised by his party in Agartala. There, he reiterated

“We are observing these in defence of the Constitution and constitutional order, democracy, secularism and the character of our republic. In Tripura, specifically, this is all the more true that there has been a complete fascist attack on democracy, people’s democratic rights and assurances guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. We shall restore (these).”

The CPI(ML) Liberation has likewise not merely put up articles on their website but has repeatedly carried out campaigns. In November 2021, the party launched a Jan Abhiyan campaign in Bihar, one of the provinces where it is particularly strong, to counter what it called a false campaign by Hindutva forces to discredit country’s glorious freedom movement and independence. It is a part of the CPI(ML)’s initiative to reach out to people across Bihar to inform them of the “real history” and to create awareness

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against attempts to distort the history of the independence struggle.

What we need to understand first is that such campaigns are important. Sectarianism on the left is widespread, and every organisation often spends a lot of time finding faults with the others without acknowledging that they are all part of a broad left, all of whom the fascists want to wipe out. Regardless of who calls whom revisionist, neo-revisionist, ultra-left, Stalinist, or any other term, and regardless of how accurate the characterisations are, what must be clear, is that for the fascists, not just today but ever since fascism came on the scene globally---destroying all working class organisations has been a central goal. So while there will obviously be differences and criticisms, there is also a need to form alliances within the left, and to understand that movements, even if they have limitations, are more valuable than 'ideological perfection' that does not call for action.

### **Fighting for the Constitution?**

It is acknowledged that the CPI, the CPI(M) and the CPI(ML) Liberation take up the bulk of left political space when we are talking about the left that occupies the parliamentary, the trade union and the legal social movement terrains. even as there is a wider space taken up by other left parties, progressive forces and pre-party formations. Sowe also need to probe the nature of the campaigns they are running and how far these can steer popular movements. In the first place, the caveat introduced in the previous sentence indicates, there are large mass movements which are not under the political sway of the left. One needs to think of the large Dalit, Adivasi or OBC movements, of huge issue based movements like the anti-NRC, anti-CAA movement of 2019, or the farmers' movement of 2020-21, and of large parts of the women's movement and the LGBTIQ+ movement. They all had or have left cadres inside them, but none of

them are under left hegemony. And one hopes that by now the left, or most shades of the left, have understood that putting labels like petty bourgeois, imperialist dominated, etc., don't go far in ensuring dialogues and alliances with these forces. Besides, such characterisations are often plainly false.

We may return to some of these forces a little later. But the key question we face at this juncture is whether, the main task of the left is to call for a defence of the Constitution. In part, this stems from the stagiest conception of revolution upheld by much of the Indian left. According to this view, as long as some form of bourgeois democratic revolution remains incomplete, the left has to fight first for the completion of that national democratic/peoples' democratic/new democratic revolution. Our argument is that there is no separation in today's world--- where the rule of capital is dominant---between the unfinished tasks of a bourgeois revolution and a proletarian revolution. If the proletariat is to play the leading role, a conflict is immediately built in. The party/ies of the proletariat cannot both promise the proletariat that they will implement the minimum programme and commit to the bourgeoisie that they will not go beyond the minimum programme. A full-fledged implementation of even an eight hour day and the grant of social security to all the jobless would mean, first of all, a drastic revision of the recently passed Labour Code; secondly, a massive restructuring of the tax regime to ensure that big capital pays the taxes through which the funds will be mobilised. Neither will be achieved in a peaceful manner.

India's big capital has tasted blood, and over the last three decades and more, its turn to neoliberalism has deepened. To assume that mass mobilisations and electoral victories of the left will scare them so badly that they will throw in the towel is totally absurd. And if it is indeed something more, like a working

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class led revolution, then big capital will take various steps, starting from organising the flight of capital outside India, to mass lockouts and closures, to more overt political action like funding right wing armed plots. Should this happen, a government with proletarian hegemony, supported by organisations of workers, peasants, and all the oppressed, cannot but take action against the bourgeoisie and make inroads into the sway of capital. That is why there cannot be a separate period called the (national/peoples'/new) democratic revolution.

We will be told, that we are confusing between the defensive era of struggle against fascism and the need for an offensive that is far away. Our argument is, that such a separation is itself questionable. Why should the working class fight fascism? Only to defend the Constitution? How democratic is the Constitution? Does it actually stand in clear opposition to the fascists?

In recent times, much has been written about Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and his role in the making of the Constitution. Not only those who have been long term Ambedkarite activists, but much of the left in a bid to make gestures of friendship directed at Dalits whose special oppression they have in the past ignored, have ended up accepting the myth that Dr. Ambedkar drafted the entire Constitution. Had that been so, we would actually have to say things far more critical about him. In fact, we need to see him, and others, as the progressive forces in the Constituent Assembly, but simultaneously to recognise that there were plenty of less progressive, even reactionary forces in the same Constituent Assembly, and acknowledge that the Constitution is a very mixed document.

There were significant weaknesses built into the Constitution from inception. These were the built-in Hindu, dominant-caste and patriarchal biases. For this reason, in the

struggle against the Sangh, we hold the slogan “Defend the Constitution” to be inadequate. Not only is the Constitution willing to tolerate heavy class inequality, but also no steps have been taken to abolish caste. The token actions like formal declaration that untouchability is prohibited mean little unless mass action can prevent violence on Dalits. Reservation has also become increasingly tokenistic, with permanent government or public sector jobs accounting for hardly three to four per cent of all jobs in the country.

As Achin Vanaik remarks in his book *Nationalist Dangers, Secular Failings: A Compass for an Indian Left*,

“One cannot take refuge behind the argument that the Constitution—meant explicitly to shape all spheres of society—is blameless for the chasm between its good intentions and eventual societal outcomes”.

With thirty per cent of the people in absolute poverty and another forty percent precariously placed above it (the 2020 Covid crisis has pushed a good part of them into the absolute poverty), inequalities of wealth and power have widened like never before in independent India. In this situation, how much concern, past or present, is there in the Constitution for issues of social justice, or for generating stronger movement in that direction? What kind of democracy has the Constitution sought to promote? How much responsibility, if any, does it bear for sanctioning the undeniable authoritarian drift of the polity over time?

We therefore submit that the task cannot be one of just defending the Constitution as such. It is this Constitution that has provided for special laws that nullify general democratic principles. Every repressive law used by the Modi government, every repressive institution, has been created by the mainstream liberal bourgeois forces during the Congress regime, using this Constitution.

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As a result, any progressive struggle, however defensive, has to distinguish itself from a simple call to defend the Constitution.

Our stance must be a more qualified and nuanced one and the slogan required is: “Defend and deepen the progressive values and principles of the Constitution”. This recognises the deficiencies in parts of the Constitution, but should still be a fitting rallying cry even for those liberals and social democrats whose admiration of the document is fuller than ours. And, should the Sangh ever succeed in amending the Constitution to further its anti-democratic aspirations, this slogan will retain its validity in the long term.

A socialist perspective must also link the individual and the collective interests more closely. It also needs to recognise more strongly that justice has to be trans-historical. In the face of increasing attacks on Dalit/Adivasi rights, especially the attacks on the meagre reservations (meagre, since over 92% jobs are in the unorganised sector, and of the rest, half are in the private sector), we have to recognise that we are not merely individuals. We are located in class positions through birth, through linkages, that stretch back over time. Some groups such as oppressed castes have been so historically oppressed as to deserve special social, economic, political and educational support. Minority rights are not enough—opportunities and resources must come into the reckoning. But the way the Constitution, and especially its more recent interpretations deal with this, are very often inadequate, and in need of a stronger socialist response.

Finally, when discussing the Constitution we need to look closely at the contradictions inherent in liberal democracy. Liberalism arose out of a desire to stop late feudal absolutism from impinging too strongly on individual rights, particularly of the propertied. Yet when the propertied fought absolutism, and had

to enlist the support of the poorer sorts, the latter had only to demand democracy for the propertied to return a stiff gaze. At the Putney Debates, the moment the Levellers demanded democracy, the Cromwellians responded by saying that the propertied and the propertyless could not have the same rights.

The twentieth century saw the linking of liberalism and democracy, but always with an eye to limiting democracy. Democracy in the Greek original sense meant power of the ordinary people. As reinterpreted by liberal democracy, democracy has been reduced to voting periodically, under conditions that make it difficult for any, but the candidates of the rich, to campaign seriously let alone win. Actual control by the people over the parliamentarians is absent. And there are huge sections of the state, over whom people have no control even in theory – for example, the bureaucracy, the judicial process, etc. And the electoral system is the worst of all with the First Past the Post System enabling a party with a minority of votes to win a majority of seats. The argument for it is simply that it gives a degree of stability which proportional representation does not. The question, of course, is who benefits by such stability. Proportional representation would give support to the federal character that a multilingual, multi-ethnic India needs. Also, it would reduce any tendency to Hindutva aggressiveness.

When the demos (people) actually exercise *kratos* (power), the political system would have to be more closely connected with the production and distribution of resources. Such a democracy would seek to transcend the limitations of capitalism’s separation of the economic and the political which has permitted important forms of political equality to emerge even as very significant levels of socio-economic inequalities of power and status remain or even deepen. Implicitly,

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alongside the critique of capitalist liberal democracy, this carries a critique of the mainstream of twentieth century socialism/communism, where state ownership under a bureaucratic regime was held up as socialism.

A key feature of the Indian Constitution has been its toleration of class and caste inequalities. Both are contained in the protection given to the right to private property. Historically it is the more powerful castes that had more property. Land reforms made it possible for a layer of intermediate castes to rise. But the most oppressed and exploited remained where they are. What pro-poor land reform measures took place was unevenly spread, limited and half-hearted. An Amendment in 1978 removed this right from Article 19 and made it a legal right only.

One recent (and sometimes not so recent) trend within the working out of the Constitution that we can see is the role of some Supreme Court judges in legitimisation of Hindutva projects. The Court never demanded the removal of the Ram Lala idol illegally placed in the Babri Masjid in 1949. Even more damaging was the 1995 ruling that Hindutva was a way of life.

We would therefore argue that the struggle by the left must be one that goes beyond any call for restoration of the Constitution to a real socialist vision. Any attempt to pit liberal democracy as a full-fledged alternative to fascism fails because liberalism has two faces – the anti-feudalism of a distant past, and the economic liberalism that foregrounds defence of capitalism even at the cost of civil rights, to say nothing of substantive political and social equality.

## **Nationalism and the Freedom Movement**

There is another dimension to the campaigns of the left that we need to discuss briefly. Both the CPI(M) and the CPI(ML) mention correctly that there were several streams in the freedom struggle. Nationalism as an ideology, enshrined in the Constitution, however, seeks to drive them all into one corner. One needs to think of the fact of the many Adivasi resistance struggles, long before liberal bourgeois opposition developed. One needs to remember that the working class played a role quite distinct from the bourgeois liberals, and that Gandhi kept himself away from the AITUC. One needs to remember that the Congress and the Muslim League were united in opposing the massive Tebhaga movement of sharecroppers in Bengal in 1946-47; the revolt of the ratings of the Royal Indian Navy, in Bombay and elsewhere. But if all these, and other streams of the oppressed and exploited are treated as less mature forms, with bourgeois nationalism as the highest form, the other streams and their contributions are ultimately marginalised, and the alternatives to bourgeois hegemony silenced. This means for example, that the fact that the people of Manipur and Kashmir had clearly shown a sustained and distinct national identity is simply ignored. Once that is done, the BJP's handling of Kashmir can at most be criticized for so-called excesses, but the core grievance cannot be touched. Or, by collapsing national identity with the elite, the repeated struggles of the exploited masses with their own demands, agenda, are swept away.

The left has to find a language for the present, yet one that will focus on independence from bourgeois nationalist hegemony, not just the Sangh version, but any version.

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## Ukraine: Divisions Among The Left

**Achin Vanaik**

It was never expected that the response to the war on Ukraine of the Left internationally, would be so divided. Broadly there have been four positions held by those who consider themselves to be anti-capitalist socialists of one kind or the other. The arguments, rationalisations and justifications provided by the first three of these groups do, in some degree or the other, overlap.

The first group (which is certainly the smallest of the four categories) includes those who fully support the Russian invasion as well as those who while not going gung-ho in supporting the invasion will neither call it an invasion nor condemn it in even the mildest of language. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation fully supports the action which it describes only as a “special military operation”. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM calls the war “unfortunate” and insists that US/NATO expansionism is the real cause forcing Russia to behave as it did. The older and smaller Communist Party of India (CPI) says much the same without using the word “unfortunate” even, and makes a meaningless general call for peace in the region. That is to say, neither of these parties make even a cursory criticism of the Russian action and put not just primary but sole blame on the US/NATO. Whatever the leaders and ideologues of these two parties in India may think privately, in public they do not even declare that Russia (and China) are now capitalist countries let alone that they are imperialist. In fact, a principal ideologue of the CPM, Vijay Prashad who has written a number of good books on the

Middle East and on the Indian diaspora in the US, says that the only imperialist country in the world is the US. So France and the UK, despite their behaviour in Africa, the Middle East or elsewhere are no longer to be seen as imperialist powers despite their past. While lower order powers making military-political incursions abroad whether they be Saudi Arabia, India, Pakistan, Turkey, Israel, etc. are also absolved of any charge of being weaker imperialist countries or even sub-imperialisms. It is not just that the US is the biggest imperialist power with the ugliest historical record which it is; but that it is uniquely imperialist!. However, this claim cannot be used to deny the ugly and unjustified behaviour of either China or Russia or even the former USSR. Loyalty to the CPM/CPI, however, has generally triumphed to the point of its acolytes and leaders repeatedly defending the indefensible whether it is the Soviet invasions of Hungary in 1956 or of Czechoslovakia in 1968 or post-Soviet Russia in Chechnya and Ukraine.

### **Second Group: Two Variants**

The second group do condemn the Russian invasion in milder or stronger forms. But they generally avoid reference to Ukraine’s ‘right to self-determination’ since if one were to endorse this clearly and unequivocally or even half-heartedly, then what follows as a matter of logic is endorsing the right to resist of the Ukraine people, whatever be the nature of their current government, to fight as they see fit to regain their freedom and sovereignty. However, the central preoccupation of this group of leftists is to focus on the iniquities of the US



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and NATO. The latter's expansionist drive is not seen as the sole reason for the invasion but it is seen as the main reason. This is the dominant prism used for understanding the why of the invasion and what the response of the Left and progressives should be to this development. Depending on whether one sees Russia as itself an imperialist country or not, there will be variation in the degree of culpability to be attached to Russia. a) Those reluctant to identify Russia as an imperialist power (even if of much lesser weight than the US) can then talk of its 'misadventures' or its 'imperial' behaviour but above all emphasize its 'reactive' character mistaken though this is or might be. They will highlight the iniquities of the Ukrainian government, its rightwing and even its supposedly far-right or Nazi character which can then serve as a kind of excuse for Russia's assault. b) Then there are those who say very clearly that Russia (and China) are imperialist powers though weaker than the US. Hence there is an inter-imperialist dimension to the Ukraine issue and a corresponding geopolitics that must be unravelled. That there is a geopolitical dimension that has to be addressed is obvious since the impact and implications of the Russian invasion are not confined to Ukraine and yes, these inter-imperialist rivalries have also been playing out within Ukraine's own internal politics.

The crucial question is how much weight to give to this inter-imperialist dimension as a causal or explanatory factor behind Russia's decision to invade. Those subscribing to approach a) given above will give much more weight to the geo-political dimension (they are reluctant to call Russia imperialist) and will in their arguments provide at least implicit rationalisations, even justifications, that will greatly soften their explicit words

of formal condemnation. Supplementary arguments will be used to buttress their case. There will be talk of Kiev's repression in the Donbas region where pro-Russia separatist forces are presumably wanting to exercise their choice of political self-determination. This argument then becomes a cover of sorts for Russian intervention in the past (the 2014 takeover of Crimea) and the 'understandable' desire of Moscow today to 'counter' this drive against the more culturally Russified eastern part of the Ukraine. Focussing more attention in one's arguments on the 'Nazi' character of the government and the ruling classes for example, becomes a way of diverting attention away from the fact that it is the huge mass of ordinary working people in Ukraine who are angry, who are suffering deaths, injuries and devastations from the military assault and who are fighting back in whatever way they can. To pretend or even imply that the broad masses are dupes of their authoritarian rulers is shameful. One can certainly criticise the far-right forces and ruling government in Ukraine but there are liberals, socialists, Marxists, feminists who are very much part of the forces resisting the Russian forces. This is rarely if ever mentioned; nor is it pointed out that Ukraine's quite flawed democratic polity is less flawed than that of Putin's Russia. Instead, most efforts are made to promote the view that since the 2014 Maidan protests (supposedly engineered by Washington) the Kiev regime is basically a puppet or near-puppet regime of the US led West.

Those subscribing to approach b) will usually say a lot more about Ukraine's sovereignty being violated. They will make more noises about the suffering of the Ukrainian people and that they are resisting. They will generally be more

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critical of both the domestic and external behaviour of Putin and the Russian ruling classes---after all, Russia is an ambitious imperialist power. Its recent record from 1990 onwards can be brought in to defend the argument that they too are an imperialist power though not one able to match the US. So Russia's military-political interventions into Afghanistan, Georgia, Moldova, Abkhazia, Tajikistan, Nagorno-Karabakh, Kazakhstan, Chechnya, Armenia and Azerbaijan and its own establishment of a pact of countries over which it can exercise some degree of control and influence, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) are much more likely to be pointed out. But since this lot of leftists also claim that the primary factor in causing this war is inter-imperialist rivalries, this section of the Left will also greatly underplay the more fundamental reason for why the Russian government carried out this invasion. Ironically, this is not something that Putin and the key decision-makers and supporters around him have ever been shy of publicly voicing---that the very formation of a post-Soviet Ukraine as an independent country is unacceptable and that, in part or preferably whole, it should cease to exist and be part of a Greater Russia and subordinate to the dictates from Moscow. That Putin declared as much to the Russian people just before invading is either ignored or only very briefly mentioned in the most cursory way. No, it is US/NATO expansionism that is the main culprit alongside the geopolitical ambitions of Russia beyond the specific concern with Ukraine that must be understood to make proper sense of what has happened.

In both the cases of a) and b) it is essentially assumed that Putin is so naive that he would not recognise that his attack on Ukraine (the country had not

even reached the stage of getting a NATO Membership Plan), far from weakening this western expansionism, would solidify and spur it forward towards greater hostility and efforts to militarily encroach nearer Russia's borders. It should occasion no surprise that Finland and Sweden have now decided to become members of NATO thus providing newer border outposts against Russia. It is also revealing that Putin has dismissed these developments as of little worry or consequence indicating that for him, capturing as much as he can of Ukraine and dismembering it is a much greater priority than concern about US/NATO expansionism. Both a) and b) use the language of this being a 'proxy war' between Russia and the US-led West. What an extraordinary claim! The term 'proxy war' is used in cases where within some country there is an internal conflict between two major forces, something like a civil war situation where two major external forces or blocs are militarily-politically respectively supporting opposing sides. The 'external' aspect is then to be seen as the major arena of contestation rather than the internal conflict itself. The geopolitical dimension is given a higher political status and concern than the national dimension. Is it any wonder then that upholders of this approach go on and on about the global impact of the war in Ukraine, of how global food supplies are being affected and how a new Cold War is emerging and how this new and growing tension is making things globally worse and dangerous. All true of course. But this then should lead to a more severe and forthright condemnation of the culprit Russia which has caused it and should reinforce support from the international Left for Ukrainian resistance. Moreover, to call this basically a 'proxy war' is absurd. It is an actual war

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launched by one side, Russia against another capitalist country which is not itself an imperialist country or a weaker imperialist power or even a sub-imperialist one. The use of the term 'proxy war' disguises what is the central characteristic---that for Ukraine this is a war of national liberation against a foreign power out to crush and subordinate it and that Ukraine therefore deserves the support of the international left which must always be both unconditional in defending its right to self-determination and yet always prepared to be critical and even opposed to the ways its government and other forces may go about conducting this struggle.

As for the possible advocacy and exercise of the right to self-determination in Donbas and Crimea, this cannot ever be justifiably done under the military jackboot of a foreign occupier. The military takeover of Crimea in 2014 followed by a referendum under occupation was a deliberate and ruthless violation of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum whereby Russia, in return for retrieving Ukraine's nuclear arsenal (then the third largest in the world) promised never to violate its territorial integrity---a betrayal that gets little or no mention among the geopolitical preoccupations of the Left rationalisers of Russian behaviour.

### **Third Group**

This third group is for peace and an end to militarism. It notes the suffering of the Ukrainian people and condemns Russia for what it has done. But for various reasons--the danger of further military escalation, the nefarious designs of the US for wanting to 'bleed' Russia over time by continuing the war---it wants a settlement as quickly as possible. This group is therefore against US/NATO supplying of arms to Ukraine--a posture also held by the first and second

group of leftists discussed above. Another common position held by these three groups is that economic sanctions against Russia should be opposed because these will hurt ordinary working people economically. That they are in fact endorsing and supporting an undeclared regime of sanctions against the Ukrainian people (their desired embargo on arms) whereby on a mass scale the suffering endured by Ukrainians---millions displaced as refugees, physical deaths and injuries, destruction of homes and devastation of everyday life is far beyond what can happen in Russia through sanctions---does not even seem to register on the minds of these leftists. How is this settlement to be achieved? Why, through diplomacy presumably! And how is that going to happen? Is a ceasefire and settlement to be somehow imposed on the belligerents or at least made more possible through pressures applied from outside powers? Since Russia is much the more powerful side in this war isn't it logical that it would be easier to achieve a settlement by pressuring the weaker side, the Ukrainians? In brief, what follows from this logic is that for the peace advocates, in the name of a practical and realistic assessment of the balance of forces on the ground, the least consideration should be given to what the Ukrainians themselves think or want.

Ukrainians want justice; they want a retreat of Russia, they want reparations. Their only hope of being able to move some way at least towards these goals depends on changing the course of this war in a direction whereby the costs to Russia, material and political, become progressively higher. Weapons support, whatever be the motivations of the suppliers which are not the same as those of the Ukrainian people fighting, is vital. Certainly, those motivations can be fiercely criticised by

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left voices but solidarity with the people of Ukraine is primary. They have to decide whether and when to stop fighting. We on the outside can disagree with tactics, strategies and policies and warn about this or that. But we must respect their freedom of agency to decide as they see fit because they are the people oppressed! On this issue the position of Chomsky and other peace votaries like him is not to be upheld or supported.

#### **Fourth Group**

This fourth group aligns itself with what the anti-Stalinist Marxists and Socialists and Socialist Feminists and progressive Anarchists of Ukraine themselves say. Listen to us, they say. We are as much against the US and NATO as you in the West and elsewhere are. But this war is not about Russian security concerns but primarily about its imperialist ambitions. We are fighting this war; we need political, moral, material support and yes a continual supply of weapons to enable us to effectively resist this military onslaught. The more determinedly the international left supports us the stronger can the Ukrainian left become internally, for we are much more aware than you outsiders of our own class and internal divisions and its dangers even as we are broadly united as we must be, in opposing the Russian military and its government. We, like leftists internationally, also want a dismantling of NATO which has now become more difficult to attain. But what about the dismantling of all imperialist blocs like the CSTO about which you say little or nothing?

Any end to this war, whether temporary or prolonged or permanent will be shaped by the course this war will take. And that trajectory will itself depend on the strength and durability of the will

of the Ukrainian people to keep resisting this great injustice done to them. The calculations of the US and other Western powers, that currently say they support Ukraine, are always subject to change and to the proclivity of their elites/governments to making unprincipled deals with others including Russia if they think this will best suit their 'national interests'. The international revolutionary and democratic left should be the most principled supporters in the fight against injustices everywhere.

Even as we criticise those sections of the Western left who are not prepared to give unconditional yet critical support to Ukraine and go on and on about the Russian invasion as basically a reaction to the US and its allies, we can be grateful that at least they are strongly critical of and opposed to their own governments for their imperialist behaviour or collusion in imperialist pacts like NATO. In India, however, too many liberals as well as many of those who see themselves as on the left refuse to similarly attack the stand of the Indian government but actually applauded its so-called neutrality on the war in Ukraine. This is an India which is, in all but name, a strategic ally of the US and whose own imperialist ambitions to become a dominant regional (perhaps global) power require it to maintain a strong military relationship with Russia and Israel and with the US as well. India has the second largest army in the world. It has the third largest military budget and is the fourth largest purchaser of arms. Its healthcare expenditure as a proportion of GDP is the fourth lowest in the world and it has the largest absolute number of malnourished and undernourished people in the world. India itself is a lower order imperialist power with ambitions to become an ever more powerful imperialist one. Why

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should leftists support such an orientation let alone cover it up with false references to India having a foreign policy of ‘strategic autonomy’ or ‘neutrality’?

In a world divided into separate nation-states the left everywhere must always also take a stand against the pernicious, immoral and unprincipled positions adopted by its own national governments. This, much of the Indian organised left has failed to do. The position of the Radical Socialist (RS) group is clear. That the Communist Party of India Marxist Leninist-Liberation (CPIML-Liberation) has also taken a forthright stand condemning the Russian invasion and supporting the Ukrainian resistance is to its credit. The Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-Maoist) does condemn Russia and declare its support for Ukrainian sovereignty and resistance. However, its public statement is a very long and rambling

text which spends most of its time making generalities about ‘proletarians of the world unite’ and of ‘turning the imperialist war into a civil war and revolution’. The statement has more to do with propagandising the general perspectives of the Party than with analysing or focusing on the specificities of the Russia-Ukraine issue. One of the more interesting sidelights revealed in the text is that the CPI-Maoist calls China a “social imperialist” country. This means it sees China as still not a capitalist country but one which turned towards social imperialism presumably after the leadership of Mao ended. That the two biggest parties of the mainstream Indian left---the CPM and CPI--have neither condemned Russia nor the stand of the Indian government nor offered solidarity to the Ukrainian people, is but another symptom of why we need to build a newer revolutionary and democratic left in India.



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## Israel Is Not An “Ethnic Democracy”

M. Navid

Among the people who have used the term “ethnic democracy” (or “ethnocracy”) to describe India is Christopher Jaffrelot who admits that he has borrowed this term from the Israeli sociologist Sammy Smootha. How accurate or useful a characterisation this might be of India can be a matter of serious scholarly dispute. Some, for example, would prefer the term “electoral autocracy” or “authoritarian democracy” or “illiberal democracy”. However, Smootha’s purpose in theorising the validity of this notion of “ethnic democracy” was to establish a generic concept and label which would then include Israel. as somewhat flawed polity but nevertheless a democracy! Whether intended or not---most likely intended---this could then mask Israel’s actual character of being a “settler-colonial apartheid state”.

It is necessary to expose this cover-up of Israel which is the only country in the world that is not a state, first and foremost, of its own citizens but of Jews worldwide wherever they are born or live. Israel’s non-Jewish citizens do not have the same rights axiomatically granted to Jews anywhere should they wish to settle in Israel. That is to say, it is a settler-colonial state which furthermore fulfils the definition of apartheid as laid down in the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) which came into force in 2002. Here an apartheid state is one where “inhumane acts of a character similar to those referred to in paragraph 1 [See its list of crimes against humanity --- [https://legal.un.org/icc/statute/99\\_corr/cstatute.htm](https://legal.un.org/icc/statute/99_corr/cstatute.htm)] committed in the context of an institutionalised regime of systematic oppression and domination of one racial group over any other social group or

groups and committed with the intention of maintaining that regime.”

Smootha identifies 8 key features of an ethnic democracy.

- 1) The dominant ethnic nationalism determines that there is only one ethnic nation that has an exclusive right to the country.
- 2) The state separates membership in the single core nation from citizenship.
- 3) The state is owned and ruled by the core ethnic nation.
- 4) The state mobilises the core ethnic nation.
- 5) The state grants non-core groups incomplete individual and collective rights.
- 6) The state allows non-core groups to conduct parliamentary and extra-parliamentary struggle for change.
- 7) The state perceives the non-core groups as a threat.
- 8) The state imposes some control on non-core groups.

Notice how the manner and language in which these key features of Israel are adumbrated become a way of reconciling, legitimising and soft-soaping the reality of differential rights and power of one ethnicity over another but still claiming to be a democracy. In the case of Zionist Israel these features do not describe a temporary or transitional situation or process but constitute an institutionalised discrimination from its very birth and is meant to be permanent and unchangeable. India may be becoming something of an ethnic democracy, i.e., undergoing a process

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of rapid democratic degeneration. But the legal principle of equal citizenship rights irrespective of religious affiliation exists and where those rights include basic civic freedoms for all.

It is when we come to Smooha's 10 basic conditions laid down for achieving stability for an ethnic democracy that the deceits of Israel and its apologists become clearer.

1) *The core ethnic nation constitutes a solid majority* and 2) *The non-core population constitutes a significant minority.*

Given that Israel controls the occupied territories plus the Golan Heights and is steadily expanding into the West Bank/Golan heights and has no intention of ever going in for a two-state solution refusing to give a map to the UN delineating its borders leaving it free to extend its territorial claims, the actual majority is of Palestinians.

3) *The core ethnic nation has a commitment to democracy.*

This a joke. The commitment is to a Zionist Israel and hence to maintaining a settler-colonial apartheid system. Israel is a garrison state with a garrison mentality that wants to sustain the 'myth of perpetual victimhood' when it has a conventional armed force that is stronger than all the armed forces of the Arab world put together. Israel also has nuclear weapons and is backed by the most powerful military power in the world, the US but goes on and on about its insecurity.

4) *The core ethnic nation is an indigenous group.* and 5) *The non-core groups are immigrants.*

This is a lie and a deliberate historical falsehood. Except for a tiny section, the Jews are the immigrants and the Palestinians the indigenous group. That so many of them were expelled from their homes by deliberate ethnic cleansing does not alter their status

as the indigenous group just as is the case with the native populations in the Americas even as they have been reduced to the status of a minority in the territory under overall central government control. In the case of the Palestinians they actually constitute a majority in the area under the overall military-political control of the central Israeli government. Please note that when it comes to the 'core ethnic nation' this is in the singular. The 'non-core' population is not to be termed a 'nation' and is to be presented as 'groups' in the plural to hide that this is a conflict between two basic communities.

6) *The non-core group is divided into more than one ethnic group.*

This claim wants to change reality by the 'magic wand of re-description'. The group/ethnicity that suffered ethnic cleansing and continues to suffer from apartheid discrimination are Palestinians and not because some happen to be Muslims and others Christians and others atheists. The idea here is to pretend that the 'non-core groups' are Muslims and Christians as contrasted to the 'ethnic core' which is defined in religious terms.

7) *The core ethnic group has a sizeable, supportive diaspora.*

This very much applies to Palestinians as well but is a reality not mentioned since in general the claims of Israelis and Palestinians are not to be equated.

8) *The homelands of the non-core groups are involved.*

Note here the use of the euphemism 'involved'. this is to cover up the fact that Palestinian lands (and homes) have been stolen.

9) *There is international involvement.*

Yes this is true and an utterly unremarkable observation.

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10) *Transition from and undemocratic ethnic state has taken place.*

Two implicit claims are being made here. If this is, in part, a reference to the situation before Israel was established in 1948 it is wrong because the state then was undemocratic because it was under the mandated rule of Britain, not of some ethnic group ruling. If the claim is that the emergence of the Israeli state in 1948 and its continuity constitutes some kind of a democratic transition then this is absurd since from its beginning it is a settler-colonial apartheid state and has consolidated this character over time. So much so that more people and organisations concerned about human rights are now referring to it as institutionalising a system of apartheid.

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You don't have to be a Palestinian to recognize the justice of the Palestinian cause. Indeed, in the world arena there is perhaps no other issue existing of such an obvious and prolonged injustice where the clarity of identification of who is the victim and who the victimiser is so sharp and straightforward. Yet most governments including that of India are so morally debased that in one way or the other they support Israel paying at most lip service and funds to the Palestinians.

Radical Socialist calls for the complete severance of all diplomatic-political-military and economic relations between India and Israel and not just for

the severance of military relations which is the position of the mainstream Indian left. We also fully support the existing Boycott, Divestments and Sanctions (BDS) civil society campaign against Israel as a whole and not just in regard to its illegal settlement activities in the Occupied Territories. We support a just and democratic one-state solution (incorporating Gaza and the West Bank) to the Israel-Palestinian issue with full and equal democratic rights for all, i.e. the complete end of apartheid and of the Zionist character of the state. The Golan Heights must be restored to Syria. The Right of Return for all Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and in the diaspora to their homes and lands, to be fully accepted in principle while there can be negotiated settlements for those Palestinians who would prefer material compensation in lieu. There could not be a new beginning post-apartheid in South Africa without the White regime's accept that apartheid was a profound injustice. Similarly, it is the political-symbolic aspect of the Right of Return that is central here. There can be no new beginning for the establishment of a genuinely democratic society and country having equal citizenship rights for all without the acceptance that the very formation of Israeli as an outpost of Western imperialism constituted a profound and unacceptable injustice against the Palestinian people who among other things were made to pay the price for Europe's guilty conscience about the holocaust.



Achin Vanaik

Capitalism's break with pre-modernity meant that the rate, depth, scope and continuity of change have been so profound that older certainties of custom and tradition were replaced by the uncertainties of knowledge and reason enormously increasing the complexity of lived realities while multiple and necessarily shifting identities emerge. Newer and more powerful forms of social disorientation emerge needing to be dissolved, above all by the promise of ever greater human flourishing.

From late 1970s onwards neoliberal capitalism emerged and spread. There was also the rise of the politics of cultural exclusivism everywhere -- of ethnicity, religion, nation e.g., racist and anti-immigrant xenophobia in the West, irredentist nationalisms in the former 'second world', religious extremism not only in the developing world. Behind this rise were the shattering of the developmental promise for all; betrayal of democratic aspirations with either its continuing absence or its substantive erosion even where there was its expansion procedurally; ideological disarray – what belief system to help cope and provide hope? Growing alienation and the need for psychic stabilization is being met by clinging to identities 'unchangeable' because ascribed by birth.

## Stabilizing Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a direction, not a 'state of affairs' hence its variable manifestations. But its institutionalization and reproduction can only be ensured through establishing a rightwing politics with associated ideologies. While neoliberalism's economic dynamic is transnational, the stabilizing forms of rightwing politics and ideologies must be nationally specific. Because the nation-state system remains functionally crucial for capitalism economically/financially but above all politically and militarily, the co-existence of a globalizing capitalism and a nation-

states system will continue. Authoritarian nationalism is thus the contemporary form of rightwing extremist politics, testimony to the exceptional power of nationalism as an imagined community because the principle of 'popular sovereignty' unlike in the pre-modern past, is given a new mass character. Even a modern dictatorial state is no longer the patrimony of the dictator or his family but belongs to the 'people' constituted as a separate nation. The people are never the exercisers of power but are now seen, and see themselves, as the legitimisers of those who rule!

Neoliberalism is secured in advanced liberal democracies like US/UK when the main less rightwing party -- Democrats/Labour is transformed so that the difference between the 'centre-right' and 'centre-left' mainstream counts for much less. This mainstream decries left and right populisms but is influenced by the far-right on specific issues and policies thus shifting the political fulcrum further rightwards. In many developing countries of Latin America and in India, an original bourgeois Centrist populist party after WWII, pursued import-substituting industrialization (ISI) and its internal right and left factions had a controlling centre. With the end of ISI, these Centrist parties either transmogrified into a much smaller right wing force or disappeared, creating a political space for possible rise of rightwing or leftwing populism.

## Populism Today

Rightwing populism internally scapegoats an already vulnerable minority less capable of resistance. This populism opposes some effects of neoliberalism not the overall structure. Barring a grave socio-political crisis, it is not the preferred option of the ruling classes. Despite its anti-elite rhetoric its discourse weighs more strongly on cultural and law-and-order themes regarding

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the 'weakening of the nation'. Rightwing populism may not be based on grassroots organizations distinguishing it from popular power i.e., genuine participatory democracy.

The emergence of a more Personalized Populism is in keeping with the more general trend of all politics in liberal-democracies. This trend relates to: a) Declining relevance and appeal of party programmes of main contenders due to neoliberal policy convergence. b) Growing mediatization of all politics whereby TV and internet platforms become the main inter-face between political persuaders and a more atomized public, thereby re-shaping the nature of messaging and mobilization. Personalized image projection can count for more than the quality of argument. Social media interactions generate mass mobilizations for punctual events/demos but are no substitute for the shaping power of long-standing cadre-based formations operating face-to-face over many years (decades) in civil society.

### **Fighting the Tide and Indian Distinctiveness**

Despite erosion, democratic structures of West/Japan are much stronger than those in India with its paradox of macro-level durability and meso-/micro-levels of everyday violence and poor governance. But a key difference is that a) India has a far-right force, the BJP in governmental power which is the electoral wing of a much wider cohort of organizations called the Sangh Parivar having unmatched implantation in civil society as compared to any far right force globally. b) India has a corporate capitalist class much more suborned to whatever government is in power than in US/Europe/Japan.

Even as our problems are increasingly global and require global resolutions, a stepping stone to successfully fighting neoliberal globalization is promoting more progressive forms of nationalism. Progressive change globally depends disproportionately on what happens in key states, namely US, Germany, UK, France, Japan, BRICS, emerging powers like Turkey,

Indonesia, Mexico, Egypt. Today's rightwing populisms have culturally essentialist notions of nationalism. Though better, even civic nationalisms (France/US) do not escape this trend. To successfully defeat this tide requires fighting on all levels – cultural-ideological, social, economic, ecological, political. For mass counter-mobilizations, social democratic demands are vital. If achieved, these help shift the relationship of social forces positively. But more importantly, since such a programme is not fully achievable, this can help raise mass consciousness towards seeking transcendence of capitalism itself. Even if the extreme right is kept at bay, 'mainstream politics' under capitalism will still be less democratic and more rightwing than it should be.

Defeating the Indian far-right requires a long term perspective. Although the mainstream left has made serious concessions to neoliberal economic policies when in state power (Nandigram and Singur), all other bourgeois parties are not only strongly committed to neoliberalism but are willing to play the politics of 'soft Hindu communalism'. So very specific tactical alliances is all that the genuine Left can pursue. Defeating the BJP in forthcoming general elections in 2024 would give a small breathing space but the forging of an opposition party alliance which does not even have a social democratic perspective or programme, is not something this Left should be involved in. It has a longer term fight to build a cadre base widely and deeply implanted to counter the Sangh's enduring power in civil society. The struggle to decisively defeat Hindu communalism/nationalism means fighting against much more than communalism. Here the weak spots are on the issues of jobs, health and welfare for all; while lower caste mobilization against upper caste discrimination and the inescapably Brahminical foundation of Hindutva ideology, remains crucial. Progress in defeating the Sangh can at some later point simultaneously place the socialist project on the agenda.

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# The Role Of Stock Markets In A Capitalist Economy

Sonia Khan

Ever greater financialisation is one of the most distinctive characteristics of the neoliberal turn in the nature of the capitalist economy. Globalisation means that the rich everywhere can now make more money by playing the financial markets which have arisen in all kinds of ways, encompassing all kinds of areas, creating all kinds of markets in which speculation to increase personal wealth can take place. Here we will look at Stock Exchanges to explain for the general reader how they work and what they contribute or do not contribute to the functioning of a capitalist economy within any country and more globally. Wall Street remains the most important Stock Exchange in the world and the US remains the one country where the world's rich, concerned about the safety of financial assets would most want to park some of their wealth. China and its Stock Exchange is not a serious challenge to this reality and indeed its government parks a great deal of its own foreign exchange reserves in Wall Street. The insights listed here are derived from one of the best books written for the lay person on this theme, namely *Wall Street: How It Works and for Whom* by Doug Henwood, Verso, 1998. While it is specifically focused on the US much of it remains relevant to other capitalist countries having a substantial stock exchange and a sizeable section of big businesses owned by capitalists.

1) Main sources of corporate capital spending comes from a) retained profits/earnings and depreciation allowances; b) debt capital (bank credit), c) equity capital (stock markets).

2) Stock markets are not mainly about raising capital for investment but about

making money/profits through changes in the ownership of stocks, bonds and other financial instruments. Financial markets concentrate wealth.

3) Rather than taxing the rich, governments borrow from them and pay interest to them.

4) While share trading is important more and more activity is in bonds and forex.

5) Ownership of shares is a claim on future profits from productive, i.e., real assets that shares are supposed to be connected to. But the connection is indirect and weak, so regardless of how well or bad the company in the economy is doing, stock prices can go up.

6) Company liabilities must first be met for bondholders and bank creditors i.e., direct debt holders; then for those holding preferred shares; then common stockholders.

7) In bank-centred economies e.g., Germany and Japan, stock markets are smaller in size and importance relative to their national economies. Banks not only provide most corporate finance, they own much of stock as well. US and UK are stock market centred economies. India is in-between. In Japan it is very difficult for foreign companies to take over ownership of major firms unless invited to do so.

8) At the heart of financial systems are (i) a Central Bank, (ii) large and liquid market in government debt. Interest rates on public debts act as benchmarks for the rest of the credit system. The market in US government bonds is the biggest financial market in the world.

9) Most trading is in instruments for money making and not trading in monetary claims on underlying real assets.

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10) 70% or more of all wealth comes from appreciation of existing wealth as compared to the much smaller amount that comes from savings. Some 70%, if not more, of personal wealth acquisition comes from inheritance.

11) Stocks are by their nature, more connected to the real economy of production, production profits, productive assets. But the behaviour of stock prices in relation to the real economy is pattern-less. Players in stock exchanges are not that concerned about the real economy but are looking for short-term gains. Most activity is not in the primary share market but in the secondary market for shares.

12) For Keynes financial markets were not 'positive' allocators of capital but are conservative and de-stabilizing mechanisms mainly directed at promoting 'rentier' wealth. It is real investment that drives the capitalist economy forward. But this real asset creation is hostage to financial markets. Financial investment and real investment are two distinct activities carried out by distinct sets of people with distinct motives, not paying

much attention to each other. But they are often--increasingly so--in the same firm.

13) It is changes in ownership of real assets through stock markets that really affects/connects with the real economy.

14) Short-term speculation in share prices is the main activity in the stock market. It is not what investors think about the real economy that is important, but what investors think other investors think. A 'bull market' makes everybody happy because no matter at what price you buy, you are confident of selling at a higher price in the short-term. So it is not the longer-term fundamentals of the economy that is important for most stock market activity but the short-term expectations/anticipations of investors about themselves that is important. As Keynes said it is not about betting in a beauty contest on who you think are the most beautiful candidates to fill the top three but betting on what the judges are thinking. [Use of this analogy should not be taken as approval of practices like beauty contests by Radical Socialist which is definitely not the case].



**Winston Churchill: His Times, His Crimes** by **Tariq Ali**, Verso, London, 2022

[*Achin Vanaik* reviews a new book examining the realities behind the cult of Churchill. This review first appeared on August 29, 2022 on the UK-based Red Pepper magazine website]

In the vast literature on Churchill, Tariq Ali's latest book is path-breaking in two respects. First, who else has provided such an unrelenting, and convincing, indictment of Churchill as journalist, war-lover, MP, minister and finally Prime Minister! Ali is clear: Churchill was a white racist, a warrior for Britain's traditional ruling classes and above all a hardcore British imperialist, seeking expansion in its heyday then, during its decline, steering it into a 'partnership' (read: subordination) with the US as the rising hegemon.

Second, as the subtitle of the book makes clear, the aim is not just to undermine Churchill's unjustified cult status by showing his numerous 'crimes' but to situate these in the 'times' he lived. Ali therefore provides a profound, complex, geographically far-ranging historical account of the rise and decline of European and British imperialism; the birth, progress and limitations of the organised working class in Britain; the lead-ups to WWI & II and their consequences; and finally the post-1945 era of decolonization and the Cold War.

Even for the potential reader who is not particularly interested in Churchill, this book contains rich and worthwhile fare. Here, however, I will focus on Churchill, the man and his politics.

**Deep-seated racism**

Ali repeatedly cites Churchill's deep-seated racism confirmed through direct quotes – something his more critical admirers mostly avoid. We can take just a few illuminating examples from South Asia

and Africa, to buttress the case of Churchill's profound indifference to the sufferings of the 'lesser peoples'.

As PM, he ignored the man-made famine in Bengal (1942-44) caused by the massive 'scorched earth' policy of requisitioning food products for the war effort – at least 2 million Indians died. A similar body count resulted from the partition of the subcontinent when serious steps to ensure a much more controlled process of transition were not taken, such was the British haste to wash its hands of any responsibility for the consequences of its imperial policy.

In Churchill's otherwise voluminous writings, there is complete silence on the massacre of half the population by King Leopold in the Belgian Congo in which 8-10 million people died. Detention camps for tens of thousands with routine torture for Kenyan freedom fighters in the mid-twentieth century has only been more recently publicised.

**A real balance-sheet**

In drawing up a truthful balance-sheet of policies that carried Churchill's distinctive stamp, the negative side is overwhelming. It includes the disastrous Gallipoli military campaign against Ottoman Turkey in 1915; sending the Black and Tans paramilitaries to Ireland in 1920 which only accelerated the momentum towards the Republic's independence; and domestically, his frequent resort to violently putting down working-class struggles which earned him an enduring class hatred. His decision in 1925, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, to return to the Gold Standard was savaged by Keynes

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as monumental stupidity. Given this, it is difficult to see what the positive entries can be that underpin his cult status.

Support for Churchill is founded on his supposedly prescient warning against rising fascism and the claim that as PM during WWII he embodied the spirit of British heroism and in some measure was the guide to its survival. Ali successfully dents this widespread belief and image. If empire was Churchill's greatest love, Communism was his greatest hate. He saw fascism as the sometimes necessary if violent counter to Bolshevik evil.

Hence, he saw 1930s Japanese expansionism in Asia as a counter to the USSR. So confident was he of British power that Japan's takeover of Singapore (1942) was a profound shock. Before this event – signalling as it did the sunset of Empire – it is more than likely that India's Congress leaders would, in return for political concessions, have given their support to the war effort. But the arch-imperialist Churchill would have never considered such an option.

As for being a resolutely principled anti-fascist, Churchill especially admired Mussolini, and initially Hitler too, with a more enduring fascination for Franco. He opposed Munich not because he was against any deal with Hitler but because the terms he would have wanted – offering Germany its lost colonies and assuaging its land lust via expansion eastwards only against Stalin – were never acceptable to Berlin. Munich was therefore not on.

Yet how prepared was Britain under his premiership? His “finest hour”, the evacuation of Dunkirk, was, as most serious historians would now admit, a matter of luck, with Hitler (considering a possible

treaty assuring Britain of its overseas colonies) calling a unilateral halt to the Wehrmacht when it could have marched on and completely destroyed the British army. In popular folklore, the Battle of Britain ‘decisively’ prevented possible occupation, but Ali has omitted any reference to this claim and its validity. His only reference to airpower is that the shameful civilian bombings by both sides failed to demoralise either Germans or British.

### **Nostalgia as national ideology**

In his introduction, Ali rightly points out that a periodic resurrection of “Churchillism” as a hoped for nationally binding ideology is much more important than Churchill himself. Interestingly, an artificially constructed ‘Nostalgia Paradigm’ of sorts exists in both Britain and Modi's India, but provides different forms of elite and popular reassurance.

India sees itself as a rising global power but is frustrated that the military-political capacities of Pakistan and China (separately and together) prevent it from being acknowledged even as regionally pre-eminent. Domestically, the ideology of Hindu Nationalism cannot get succour from the more recent past of a colonialism it never opposed. Therefore, it must pretend to being the legatee of an ancient but supposedly continuous Hindu ‘cultural civilization’.

By contrast, those who rule the island Empire-State of the last few centuries still cannot come to terms with its status as a declining power externally, while domestically, premonitions of possible future break-ups (Scotland and Irish unification) weigh strong. Both nostalgias need puncturing. Tariq Ali deserves gratitude for his powerful intervention.

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## Conversations on the Left

● **Jean Dreze** discusses **Teltumbde's** book "*The Republic of Caste*" and his courageous commitment to working class unity and the limitations of an approach to caste reservations that necessary though it is as a transition measure it has real problems when it comes to class-based mobilisation to actually eradicate and annihilate the caste system itself.

<https://scroll.in/article/1028256/republic-of-caste-anand-teltumbdes-thoughts-strive-to-liberate-us-even-as-he-is-in-jail>

● Here is a link to a text by **A.G. Noorani** about *Savarkar's mercy petition*. This is important and should be read in conjunction with the book by **Dhirendra Jha** on *Gandhi's Assassin: The Making of Nathuram Godse and His Idea of India*, Penguin Random House, 2021 which clearly shows that even in his period as a so-called revolutionary Savarkar was always careful to keep in the background and not be directly involved in armed action against the British, i.e., physically he was something of a coward. Jha is not alone in claiming that Savarkar was a conspirator in the group around Nathuram Godse, the assassin of Gandhi.

<https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/article30204154.ece>

● Here is a Marxist approach by **Eric Toussaint** - his *five theses - on the question of debt and how it has been used by ruling classes, foreign and domestic, to impoverish populations from the 19th century onwards; and what can be done about it today*.

<http://cadtm.org/Five-theses-developed-in-the-book-The-Debt-System>

● Here are some *geo-political reflections on the US and Eurasia* in contemporary times by **Pierre Rousset** who has written widely on China.

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article63351>

● *Interview* with a **Ukrainian feminist** in response to western feminists calling for an end to the war.

<http://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article63443>

● An informative article on the *current state of the unionized Indian working class---its numerical growth and its political weakness*

<https://labourreview.org/growing-union-strength-declining-political-power-understanding-the-paradox-of-general-strikes-in-india/>



The role of a newspaper, however, is not limited solely to the dissemination of ideas, to political education, and to the enlistment of political allies. A newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator, it is also a collective organiser.

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