

# frontier

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## *Farewell to Arms?*

THE WAR BETWEEN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE IS A MUCH WIDER war. As in the 1930s, apology is made in the name of democracy; the apology of continuing war is made in the name of peace. An old ghost is hovering over Europe. The most violent continent in the world in terms of deaths in warfare for the last one hundred years (not to go any further and include the deaths suffered by Europe during religious wars and deaths inflicted by Europeans on people subjected to colonialism) is for a new war. Eighty years after World War II, so far with some eight million dead, the Russia-Ukraine war on its way may be even more deadly. All previous wars started apparently without a strong reason and were supposed to last a short time. This Russia-Ukraine war is unlikely to end anytime soon. For one thing without Russia, Europe is just half of itself, economically and culturally. By rallying against Russia under the baton of America, Europe is actually jeopardising its own long-term interests. Some right-wing ideologues in the West have started an all-out hate campaign against Russia to the point of absurdity. In an apparent bid to condemn Putin they are asking people to boycott Pushkin.

Meanwhile, a new polarisation of major powers is taking shape against the backdrop of current Ukraine war that has entered the second year. An anti-American and anti- NATO alliance is emerging. China apart, Iran is very much in this group led by Russia, albeit China has not yet fully supported Russia by actively involving itself in Russia's war efforts because of its delicate business relationship with America. The world is heading towards a bipolar grouping again.

Over the past five months, a wave of protests has rocked Iran. Young women calling for an end to the compulsory headscarf have been joined by students, labourers, and professionals demanding individual rights, political reform—and even, increasingly, an end to the Islamic Republic itself. For now, the regime has retained the upper hand, thanks to a harsh crackdown by security forces and a lack of leadership and coordination among the protesters.

But there is no evidence that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is listening. Abroad, it favours aggressive regional policies and increasing collaboration with Russia. Iran has responded to its deepening international isolation by drawing closer to Russia. Khamenei and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have long viewed the Kremlin as a vital ally. Khamenei and

Russian President Vladimir Putin share the same view of the West, and Russia's war in Ukraine has brought into sharper focus Tehran's and Moscow's common grudge against the United States.

Iran's decision to provide Russia with drones predictably deepened Western anger at the Islamic Republic, which in turn pushed Tehran even closer to Moscow. In this vicious cycle, the winner will be hard-liners who have always favoured closer ties between Iran and Russia and decoupling from the West. As Iran drifts further into

Russia's orbit, the power of these hard-liners will grow, improving the odds that they will prevail in Iran's looming succession battle. Ironically drone Iran is supplying to Russia is actually American drone re-engineered and remodelled by Iranians.

The more Putin needs Iran, the more likely he is to flout Western sanctions and provide Tehran with vital military hardware and technology, including advanced fighter jets and air defence systems. High-tech acquisitions from Russia would significantly boost Iran's military capa-

bility, enabling it to better counter Israeli air power in Syria and Iraq, as well as U S military pressure in the Persian Gulf.

At the time of writing crack appeared in NATO family as Turkey refuses to ratify its membership due to a dispute with Sweden. Sweden and neighbouring Finland abandoned their decades of non-alignment and applied to join 30-nation military pact in the wake of Russia-Ukraine war. All NATO members except Turkey and Hungary have ratified their accession, but unanimity is required. □

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## COMMENT

### Reviving OBC Politics

CASTE CONTINUES TO BE A dominant factor in Indian politics. And it will continue to dominate Indian political scenario for years to come unless there is a social revolution radically changing the age-old status quo in the prevailing system, the possibility of which seems remote. As political parties, not excluding the communist and socialist parties, don't talk of any revolution, socialist or otherwise, any more, no dramatic change will happen in the foreseeable future. There is a visible hesitation on the part of the Centre to seek a national data record, especially in regard to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The Modi government's recent disapproval of a demand for a national caste census appears to be based on a fear that any such exercise would inflame caste-based social and political sentiments and harm the Hindutva-nationalist project.

Conventionally, the OBCs belong to the lowest Shudhra Varna-groups associated with the agrarian economy or engaged in artisanal, handicrafts or other manual labour services. They are often referred to as Bahujans. It was in the caste census

of 1931 that the population of the OBCs was last published, where it was enumerated as 52% of the country's population. Since then, no national government has conducted a similar exercise to count the OBCs.

In the early 1970s, leaders of the dominant agrarian castes emerged as the new claimants of political power, disturbing the hegemony of the Congress Party at the national level. The rhetoric of socialism, associated with the values of social justice, was impressive. It mobilised the 'lower castes' and the Dalits, especially in the north Indian states. Initiated by the Jan Sangh in 1951 and later carried on by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), right-wing politics is criticised by the proponents of social justice as being a platform that serves the interests of the 'upper' castes and the bourgeois class and is averse to the growing might of Dalit-Bahujan communities in politics. However, social justice politics soon lost its sheen, allowing the BJP's aggressive politics of communal nationalism to play its divisive role.

Since 2014, the BJP's mobilising strategy, using the cultural markers

of the lower caste groups, has worked effectively. Its vote and seats share, both in the assembly and the general elections, has increased due to the growing support of the lower Dalit-OBC voters, especially in states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh.

However, though the BJP has benefitted from the support of the lower caste groups, little has changed for the OBCs themselves. These sections remain static. They have not seen any particularly impressive empowerment in their economic or social conditions.

With a caste census, the players of social justice politics, especially in Bihar, wish to revive OBC politics. In Bihar, with the alliance between the RJD and the Janata Dal (United), the powerful Yadav, Kurmi and Muslim blocks appear to have consolidated. However, it will not be easy for the alliance to claim similar support from other OBCs, especially the economically backward classes. Even so, it is hoped that by raising the issues of the economic, educational and social backwardness of the OBC communities, a new cycle of social justice politics may churn and push the BJP back, at least in northern India in the coming Parliamentary Elections in 2024. But with-

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out a powerful mass movement nothing will change for the better.

For one thing the casteist parties like RJD, JD (U), Samajwadi Party, BSP etc do hardly bother about caste annihilation. Nor do they launch any social movement seeking abolition of untouchability and obnoxious graded casteism even among 'untouchables'. In a sense they are no less responsible in perpetuating caste prejudices. They are more interested in gaining economic benefits through reservation as guaranteed under the Constitution. In other words they are creating a privileged class of their own. And this class will soon find their acceptability in

the socially elitist club. So long as this process continues the upper caste hierarchy has nothing to lose. What is more the Dalit movement today faces split within split effectively eroding their whatever bargaining power they used to have even a few years ago.

The hard reality is that government job opportunities are dwindling while technologically and educationally weaker sections find it increasingly difficult to compete in the job market. In a shrinking job market in traditional areas too many people are chasing too few jobs, often leading to riots as it happened in case of agniveer recruitment in the army. □□

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**NOTE**

## Aya : Life Wrested from Ruins

*Merve Emre writes:*

**I**T'S A BOY, THEY SAID, WHEN he first emerged from the rubble. The video of his rescue shows a man in a red-and-white kaffiyeh bounding across the ruined stones with a limp, naked creature pressed to the front of his body. Several seconds later, another man runs after him and flings a green blanket into the air. It is too late. The blanket falls short. It hangs and sways, useless, off the edge of a rescue vehicle.

It's a girl, they said, when the panic and confusion surrounding her rescue had cleared. She was not Turkish, but Syrian. She was not born in Aleppo, as some of the newspapers had initially reported, but in Jindires, a rebel-held town that has been the site of some of the deadliest and most protracted fighting of the Syrian civil war. These corrections were issued with moral outrage, as if the errors were indicative of the larger erasure of the refugee crisis, which they very well may have been; the fact that she was rescued at all, given the lack of

infrastructure and the violence in the area, was itself astonishing. But no one pointed out how senseless it was to fight over the nationality of a baby whose mother, father, and four siblings had died when the five-story apartment building they lived in had collapsed. In the ordinary sense, she belonged nowhere and to no one.

There are too many questions that are difficult to ask and perhaps impossible to answer. Did her mother feel the first contractions before or after everything started to shake? Where were her other children? When, in the long and painful hours of labour and delivery, were the approximately seventy-five seconds that destroyed her home and killed her family? Was she alive when her daughter was born? Can the dead give birth?

At the hospital, they named her Aya, which, in Arabic, means "a sign of God's existence." They placed her in an incubator and people snapped more photographs: Aya sleeping, Aya screaming, Aya awake

and apparently silent, staring into the camera's lens with huge, inky eyes. Another video shows one of the doctors holding the radiograph from an X-ray up to the light for close examination. Aya was found to have deep bruising along her skull and spine—which explained seizures that she had been having. But she was being cared for, perhaps better than she will be cared for ever again. The manager of the hospital, Khalid Attiah, proudly told reporters that his wife had started to breast-feed her alongside their own infant daughter. He said he would not let anyone take her away.

Aya's great-uncle, Salah al-Badran, vowed to give her a home, but since his home had been destroyed, too, all he could offer her for the time being was a space in the tent he was sharing with eleven other members of his family. They would not have enough warmth in the winter, when snowfall causes the tents to collapse, or in the spring, when heavy rains flood the camps. Not enough water or food or baby formula. No adequate schooling and not enough legal work, especially not for women. One sees the overcrowded photographs of children

smiling, flashing a thumbs-up. How to square the images, the proof of life, with the conditions of living?

On social media, thousands of

people had offered to adopt her. People saw two large, black, piercing eyes that gazed at the camera with absolute acceptance. They saw

life wrested from ruins. But it is also the reflection of the ruins and of ruins to come. □□□

[Source: *The New Yorker Daily*]

## THE HAVANA DECLARATION

# The New International Economic Order

*[The Havana Congress on the New International Economic Order (NIEO), organised by the Progressive International, held last month with delegates agreeing on a declaration and a commitment to advance the New International Economic Order through “securing science and technology sovereignty” for the Global South, as Cuba announces a G77 meeting on the issue later in the year. The Congress brought together over 50 delegates—scholars, diplomats, parliamentarians, and policymakers—from 26 countries across all six inhabited continents. This is their final declaration.]*

The Havana Congress,

Recalling the role of the Cuban Revolution in the struggle to unite the Southern nations of the world, and the spirit of the 1966 Havana Tricontinental Conference that convened peoples from Asia, Africa and Latin America to chart a path to collective liberation in the face of severe global crises and sustained imperial subjugation;

Hearing the echoes of that history today, as crises of hunger, disease, and war once again overwhelm the world, compounded by a rapidly changing climate and the droughts, floods, and hurricanes that not only threaten to inflame conflicts between peoples, but also risk the extinction of humanity at large;

Celebrating the legacy of the anti-colonial struggle, and the victories won by combining a programme of sovereign development at home, solidarity for national liberation abroad, and a strong Southern bloc to force concessions to its interests, culminating in the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO);

Acknowledging that the project of decolonisation remains incomplete, disrupted by concerted attacks on the unity of the South in the

form of wars, coups, sanctions, structural adjustment, and the false promise that sovereign development might be won through integration into a hierarchical world system;

Emphasising that the result has been the sustained divergence between North and South, characterised by the same dynamics that defined the international economic order five decades prior: the extraction of natural resources, the enclosure of ‘intellectual property’, the plunder of structural adjustment, and the exclusion of the multilateral system.

Recognising that despite these setbacks, the flame of Southern resistance did not die; that the pursuit of sovereign development has yielded unprecedented achievements—from mass literacy and universal healthcare, to poverty alleviation and medical innovation—that enable a renewed campaign of Southern cooperation today;

Stressing that this potential for Southern unity is perceived as a threat to Northern powers, which seek once again to preserve their position in the hierarchy of the world system through mechanisms of economic exclusion, political coercion, and military aggression.

Seizing the opportunity of the

present historical juncture, when the crisis of the existing world system can either entrench inequalities or embolden the call to reclaim Southern protagonism in the construction of a new world order based on justice, equity and peace;

### **The Havana Congress calls to:**

- **Renew the Non-Aligned Movement:** In the face of increasing geopolitical tensions born from a decisive shift in the global balance of power, the Congress calls to resist the siren song of the new Cold War and to renew the project of non-alignment, grounded in the principles of sovereignty, peace, and cooperation articulated at the 1955 Bandung Conference, 1961 Non-Aligned Conference, 1966 Tricontinental Conference, and beyond.
- **Renovate the NIEO:** To accompany the renewed non-aligned movement, the Congress calls to renovate the vision for a New International Economic Order fit for the 21st century; a vision that must draw inspiration from the original Declaration, but also account for the key issues—from digital technology to environmental breakdown—that define the present conditions for sovereign development; and to enshrine this vision in a new UN Declaration on the occasion of its 50th anniversary.
- **Assert Southern Power:** The Congress recognises that economic liberation will not be granted, but must be seized. As the original call for a New International Economic Order was won through the exercise of collective power in the coordinated production of petroleum, so our vision today

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can only be realised through the collective action of the South and the formation of new and alternative institutions to share critical technology, tackle sovereign debt, drive development finance, face future pandemics together, as well as coordinate positions on international climate action and the protection of national sovereignty over the extraction of natural resources.

- Accompany Cuba in the G77: The Congress recognises the critical opportunity afforded by Cuba's presidency of the Group of 77 plus China to lead the South out of the present crisis and channel the lessons of its Revolution toward concrete pro-

posals and ambitious initiatives to transform the broader international system.

- Build a Planetary Bloc: The Congress calls on all peoples and nations of the world to join in this struggle to definitively achieve the New International Economic Order; to build a planetary bloc led by the South and reinforced by the solidarities of the North, whose peoples recognise their obligation to resist the crimes committed in their names; and to bring the spirit of this Havana Congress into the communities that we call home. □□□

[Source: Alternatives International Journal, February, 2023]

গড্ডালিকা প্রবাহ থেকে  
বাংলা ভাষা তথা মাতৃভাষা বাঁচান  
**‘শুধু পূর্বাশা’**  
সাদা জাগানো বাংলা পাক্ষিক পত্রিকা  
ও ‘পূর্বাশা এখন’ মাসিক পত্রিকা  
এখনই সংগ্রহ করুন  
সব স্টলে পাওয়া যাচ্ছে। ‘শুধু পূর্বাশা’ দাম ৫  
টাকা মাত্র ও ‘পূর্বাশা এখন’ ২৫ টাকা মাত্র।  
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## THE ‘CLASS’ QUESTION

# Indian Cinema and Caste

*Harish S Wankhede*

**C**INEMA HAS BEEN A powerful instrument in the hands of the ruling classes that often utilise it to manufacture the national culture. With its deep association with middle-class aspirations, the film industry has unapologetically reproduced and legitimised social elites' religious values and promoted their cultural interest.

For a long time, meaningful representation of life stories belonging to the marginalised communities, especially the Dalits had no takers in the Hindi entertainment industry. Even occasionally when the Dalit body is presented on screen, he/she gets portrayed as the powerless and victimised person, overtly dependent upon the mercies of the social elites for justice and empowerment (remember Bimol Roy's Sujata or Satyajit Ray's Sadgati).

Within the intellectual discourses, there was a comprehensive agreement that caste and class are over-

lapping structures that legitimise the oppression of the poor Dalits by the minority social elites. Its counterparts within the cinema industry, however, remained unaware of this discussion for very long.

The recently released web series ‘Class’ on Netflix, may bridge this gap and open the caste-class register to reveal its engagement with poverty and discrimination.

In the last one decade, the Dalit representation in Hindi cinema has slowly improvised, showcasing that they are more than just struggling or victim bodies. With the huge box office success of films such as Sairat, Kabali, Masaan, Jai Bhim, Article 15, and recently, Kantara, it appears that the cinema-makers have adopted the Dalit-Bahujan narrative as a mainstream mode of storytelling.

The OTT platforms have further elevated the creative and realistic aspect of storytelling and introduced bold and sensitive subjects to its

audience, including impressive Dalit characters. Though caste atrocities and social discrimination often defines the background of these stories (like in Maharani), the new Dalit representation is also about their middle-class aspirations (Serious Man), demonstrating their wishes to live a normal dignified life in the city (Pareeksha).

The Dalit characters are now presented as a robust claimant of dignity and upholder of heroic credentials, ready to survive in the cities on their own terms. Ashim Ahluwalia's web series ‘Class’ is a landmark entry in this discussion.

The film is promoted as a ‘thriller murder mystery’ that eventually reveals the wretched and corrupt underbelly of Delhi's elite junta. In the abundance of dull and banal Hindi content on the OTT today, ‘Class’ rises as a much-needed thriller that uses realistic language and brilliant screenplay to tell a gripping story.

The show opens with a cop investigating the murder of a girl student that periodically reveals the extreme power and privileges of the elites, the atrocious and precarious

lives of the underprivileged sections, especially the Dalits, and the absence of any moral institution (like the school) to address the everyday maladies.

'Class' is an impressive saga that uncovers the corrupt and criminal side of the urban elite class. It is a contemporary tale about psychological traumas that teenagers often suffer because of parental neglect and excessive freedom. Importantly, the show deals with the excruciating complexities when the caste, religion and gender questions (mainly, the Guy issues) are intermixed to examine the social crises and class problems.

The director has achieved a tremendous success in meticulously weaving these segments together to tell an extremely bold and radical story. Especially, his handling of the caste and Dalit question needs special mention, as there are very few instances when it is presented with such nuanced layers.

'Class' courageously introduces three Dalit-Bahujan-Muslim characters as underdog protagonists. Their life histories churn and dominate the narrative and offer vibrant social

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realism, truthfully depicting the darker sides of urban culture.

It is a bold addition to the neo-realism genre (earlier, Paatal Lok can be one such web series) that reflects upon the question of social oppression sincerely and makes the Dalit characters its leading protagonist.

One major subplot of the web series revolves around the two Dalit brothers Neeraj (Gurfateh Pirzada) and Dheeraj Kumar Valmiki (Piyush Khati). Dheeraj, the younger one, managed to get admission in the most elite school of Delhi and wanted to become an IAS officer. He faces humiliating verbal abuses, violence, and discrimination in school and only in the company of his female love interest, Suhani (Anjali Sivaraman), he finds little solace in that alien space.

One witnesses that below the glitter of elite educational institution, there exists a dangerous world of drug abuse, cringe sexual appetite, corrupt and compromised establishment.

On the other hand, viewers also see his elder brother Neeraj as an angry young man who struggles to get justice for the poor habitants of his locality. He is portrayed as a vagabond, a negative hero that finds no harm in adopting illegal means to achieve his objective.

Though he is heroic and courageous, he falls a victim to the powerful system that overtly serves the interests of the elites. It is showed that the contemporary Dalit lives are messed up with vivid aspirations and there are perpetual obstacles that halt their progress.

Films that often claims to be closer to the darker urban realities, seldom decided not to speak about the parallel tragedies and traumas that engulf the Dalits in the city. For example, in Madhur Bhandarkar's recently released film 'Lockdown', one sees struggles of various social and professional identities as the

part of the narrative; however, he decided not to reflect on the caste question, as if the urban society is divorced of it.

Many other films around the city also bring the social and class question in their narrative (like Page 3, Life in a Metro, Shor in the City, Ugly, etc.). However, the required intersectionality between caste and class was often missing.

Hindi cinema overtly highlights the class characteristics while denouncing the possibility that the protagonist can also emerge from socially deprived backgrounds. Ahluwalia's 'Class' reflects over the problems of city by centring the 'caste' question and thus, brings an impressive shift in the narrative style.

The 'Class' has raised the bar of non-fiction drama with its brave portrayal of urban tragedies, showcasing immoralities of rich elites and the vulnerable locations of the socially marginalised groups.

Though it also utilises certain popular stereotypes and prejudices while depicting marginalised communities, it can be legitimised as it serves the longer objective of the narrative. More such stories are required to elevate the stature of Hindi cinema not only as the space for popular entertainment but also to make it a responsible art form, sincerely connected with social maladies and can contribute in bringing substantive social change. □□□

[Dr Harish S Wankhede teaches at Centre for Political Studies, JNU, New Delhi. He writes on identity politics, Dalit questions, Hindi cinema and the new media. This is an opinion piece and the views expressed above are the author's own.]

[Courtesy: The Quint]

For **Frontier Contact**

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## BILLIONS OF DOLLARS AT STAKE

## GM Mustard and Akuna Rodrigues

*Colin Todhunter*

**I**N A FAIR WORLD, AKUNA Rodrigues would be heralded as an incredible individual for her ongoing struggle to protect the socio-economic and environmental integrity of India. So says respected environmentalist, author and campaigner Leo Saldanha.

He adds:

“Since 2005, she has tirelessly pursued a public interest litigation before the Supreme Court of India, in which she has made a case why India should not yield to pressures from mega agri-transnational corporations and certain sections of the Indian agricultural sector who are keen on promoting genetically modified organisms in farming.”

India’s apex regulatory body, the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee, recently sanctioned genetically modified (GM) mustard for cultivation. This would be India’s first GM food crop, despite a public interest litigation (PIL) before the Supreme Court to prevent cultivation as well as the widespread rejection of GM mustard by farmers’ organisations.

Aruna Rodrigues, the lead petitioner of the PIL, has exposed in her various submissions to court that claims about yield increases through GM mustard to be completely baseless. She indicates how data has been rigged and manipulated and protocols have been severely compromised, and that the government and its regulators are parroting the false claims of the crop developers.

Thanks to the PIL, the Supreme Court put a stay on the commercial release of GM Mustard on 3 November 2022.

Independent experts who have

looked at the biosafety data submitted by the crop developer at Delhi University have clearly pointed out that GM mustard has not been tested rigorously and adequately.

India is a centre for diversity for mustard and several high-level official committees have recommended against transgenic technologies in crops for which the country is the centre of origin or centre of diversity.

Various high-level reports have also advised against introducing GM food crops to India per se. These reports conclude that GM crops are unsuitable for India and that biosafety and regulatory procedures are wholly inadequate.

Rodrigues also played a leading role in preventing commercial cultivation of GM brinjal more than a decade ago. Her tireless efforts have been a thorn in the side of global agritech corporations and seriously compromised regulatory officials who have for the best part of two decades been trying to get GM food crops cultivated in India.

There is much at stake.

India has a lot to lose, not least its food and seed sovereignty and contamination of its crops as well as the risks genetically modified organisms (GMOs) pose to human health.

The industry has much to gain.

Global biotech corporations like Bayer and Corteva are seeking to increase their control over the future of food and farming by extensively patenting plants and developing a new generation of GMOs.

They seek to claim all plants with those genetic traits as their ‘invention’. Such patents on plants would restrict farmers’ access to seeds and impede breeders from develop-

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IFSC Code: PUNB0008020

Branch Code : 0008020

Swift Code: UTBIINBBOBC

ing new plants as both would have to ask for consent and pay fees to the biotech companies.

According to an October 2022 report, the global GM crop and seed market is projected to reach \$46 billion by 2027. That is up from an estimated US\$30.6 billion in 2020. The US market is estimated at \$8.4 billion, while China is forecast to reach a projected market size of US\$10 billion by the year 2027.

Key global players include AgReliant Genetics LLC, BASF SE, Bayer Crop Science, Canterra Seeds Holdings, DLF Seeds & Science and Corteva (Dow/DuPont).

If India succumbs to pressure, that figure of \$46 billion by 2027 could be much larger. With 1.4 billion people, India represents a massive financially lucrative cash cow.

For instance, Goldstein Research pushes pro-GM industry talking points and laments about resistance to GM food seeds as it is hindering the growth of India's GM seed market. Even so, it forecasts that the Indian GM seed market is set to reach US\$13.1 billion by 2025 (cotton is the only legally sanctioned GM crop in India at this time).

GM mustard is regarded as a pioneering food crop in India—it would open the floodgates for many other GM food crops that are in the pipeline under a veil of secrecy, including

wheat, rice, brinjal and chickpea.

But—it seems—genuine science stands in the way. GM mustard is unwanted, unneeded and fails to stand up to scientific rigour.

Maybe that is why, in December 2020, the Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR) prevented serving and former public officials from expressing any opinion or writing any article on the approval to release GM mustard. This is a 'gag order' and an attempt to close down debate on the matter and to keep the public in the dark on the issue.

Trade and agriculture policy specialist Devinder Sharma says that silencing scientific voices indicates there is more to hide than reveal. He says that every claim that the ICAR makes about GM mustard can be challenged. And it has been—in court. Sharma adds that the US is placing tremendous pressure on India to embrace GM crops.

Leo Saldanha, who is mentioned at the start of this article, is forthright on the Change.org website in condemning a recent attack on Rodrigues.

Due to Rodrigues, Saldanha says the Supreme Court has time and again questioned the enthusiasm with which the Indian government and several public institutions have collaborated, questionably and controversially, in promoting GM foods and crops.

Just before Christmas, however, Aruna Rodrigues was unexpectedly forcibly evicted from her ancestral home by the Indian army. The Defence Estate Office is the custodian of all military properties of India and is required to secure such properties by following the due process of law.

Saldanha notes that Rodrigues' home has been with her family from 1892—legally secured via proper sale deeds. But about 27 years ago, the Defence Estate Office made a claim on the house. This claim was challenged, and the matter has been in court since then. Consequently, any action against the occupant should be only through due process of law.

On 20 December 2022, a court ruled that Aruna Rodrigues has occupation rights to the house. Yet the Defence Estate Officer moved into the house with army personnel—without any court directive—and physically removed her and threw the contents of the house onto the street. Within hours, a court ruled in Rodrigues favour. By then, however, the damage had been done.

As Saldanha says, one can only wonder whether any of this is connected to Rodrigues' case before the Supreme Court. Given the billions of dollars at stake for the global agritech companies, it would indeed be wise to wonder. □□□

[Source:countercurrents.org]

## BOOKS IN BRIEF

### Understanding Indian Crisis

*I Satya Sundaram*

**P**SUNDARAYYA WAS A distinguished and unique leader of the communist movement in India. As an intellectual, he could speak on any issue relating to Indian Polity, Economy and Society. The volume under review contains 19 Papers, dealing with issues like capitalist develop-

ment, communalism, neo-liberalism, foreign capital, women and public policy, the agrarian crisis, class and caste and science and technology.

The relative roles of the State and the Market change over a period of time. This is not surprising. What is surprising is that India has not been able to select an appropriate system

to revamp the economy. At one time, Market was glorified, later the State received top priority, and now the focus is on neo-liberalism. For one thing in the Indian context, Market has serious limitations.

The two staid blemishes of modern economic development in developing countries are: absence of any manpower planning to fully utilise the abundantly available labour force, and utilising the available funds in such a way that inequalities rise sharply. The result: India is not able



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to solve its basic problems --poverty, unemployment and inequality. In India, around 90 percent of the labour force is in the informal sector.

It has been rightly observed by Prabhat Patnaik: "Democracy must mean sovereignty of the people, their right to choose between alternative agendas". (p, 17). Political parties in India forget their poll promises once they come to power. Even Panchayats are enfeebled. The democracy has been deliberately debilitated.

Women's role has been marginalised in most spheres. The unpaid work of rural women is rising. Poor rural women have to spend more time to collect minor forest resources like firewood because of Joint Forest Management (p, 151). There is child labour in domestic work, in both paid and unpaid forms (p, 160).

The tragedy is that most state governments are not able to maintain even the Public Distribution System (PDS) properly. The Direct Cash Transfers would do more harm than good (p, 172).

[The various papers included in the volume [India Today: Looking Back, Looking Forward (Sundaraya Birth Centenary Seminar Papers), Prajasakti Book House, Hyderabad-500020, Compiled by C samba Reddy & R Arun Kumar, Pp 286, Price: Rs 300} throw useful light on the socio-economic issues facing India.]

### **Facets of Food Science**

It is said, right food nourishes, wrong

food poisons. We have to take the right food in right amount and at the right time. We have been neglecting healthy food habits. Few are aware of the need for balanced food. Hence, incidence of malnutrition continues to be high. A good source of protein is often a combination of various foods (p, 38).

Water too plays an important role in ensuring healthy life. Yet, drinking water standards are not up to the mark. There is severe shortage of potable water. This leads to waterborne diseases, acute and chronic illness (p, 44). Around 97 per cent of water available on the Earth is salt water. Hence, importance is given to desalination. Most water, even from deep wells or springs, requires some type of treatment before use... . The extent of treatment depends on the source of water (p, 61).

Carbohydrates are a common source of energy. But, human beings are able to obtain most of their energy requirement from protein and fats. However, in the case of dietary fibre-indigestible carbohydrates which are not a source of energy--inadequate intake can lead to significant increase in mortality (p, 76). Of course, nutrient based dietary recommendations differ between countries and institutions (p, 133).

Food irradiation is the process of exposing food stuffs to a source of energy capable of stripping electrons

**As Timir Basu is still seriously ill, he is not in a position to communicate with contributors and subscribers. Please bear with us. —Fr.**

from individual atoms in the targeted material (ionising). The radiation can be emitted by a radioactive substance or generated electrically. This treatment is used to preserve food, reduce the risk of food borne illness, prevent the spread of invasive pests, delay or eliminate sprouting or ripening, increase juice yield and improve rehydration (p, 134).

The street foods include fast food, snack food, burger, panipuri, pizza, ice-cream samosa, cup noodles and soup. According to a FAO Study (2007), 2.5 trillion people eat street food every day. These obnoxious foods are becoming more and more popular. They also increase weight.

Fasting too is important. It beats stress. Short-term fasting can correct energy imbalances, sleep disorders, depression, mood swings, nervousness and just about every other ailment or disorder.

The book Essential of Food Science by Laxmi Singh [published by Aprajita Publication, Allahabad, Pp 224, Price: Rs 675] throws useful light on how people have to manage their natural resources and food to lead a healthy life. □□□

### **SPLIT WITHIN SPLIT?**

## **Re-organising the Bahujan Movement**

[Sunil Kashyap, a staff writer at The Caravan, spoke with Dr Indu Chowdhary, an assistant professor in Banaras Hindu University's English Department, founder of Bahujan Shakti Mission, regarding Bahujan Movement. **Excerpts:**]

**Sunil Kashyap:** What is the Bahujan Shakti Mission? What kind of work is it doing?

**Indu Choudhary:** The name is self-explanatory. Kanshi Ram taught us the word 'Bahujan.' Scheduled

Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and minorities are about eighty five percent of the population, if they come together and realise their power, they will be unstoppable, like a giant elephant.

This is what Kanshi Ram tried to do. Taking inspiration from that, we have named the organisation Bahujan Shakti Mission. This is a mission to make the common man aware of their power again, to remind them of the ideologies of great men, the power of their vote, and to make the youth economically, educationally and socially prosperous. This was needed because after the lockdown and demonetisation, a

large section of us have become even poorer. Demonetisation and lockdown have had an adverse impact on the education of the children in our classes.

In the political scene, some people are relentlessly capturing power. Where are our votes going? People vote in favour of different political parties but all votes seem to be shifting towards one party. What sort of a situation is this? How to study this? In the villages, voters are still equipped with the thoughts of Kanshi Ram but the society which Kanshi Ram created is drifting apart, slowly. That's probably why it's not getting converted into votes. The empowerment within castes, created by Kanshi Ram, is coming to an end. The castes within castes, once unified, used to produce their own leaders but now these leaders have merely become the leaders of their own caste. They could not become leaders of the entire Bahujan Samaj because caste ideology is still flourishing. In such times, we have to unite society. We will not be able to work in the whole of India but we will definitely work in some areas and give it better direction.

**Kashyap:** How do you see the Bahujan movement after BR Ambedkar?

**Choudhary:** I have not seen both, Babasaheb [Ambedkar] and Kanshi Ram. But Kanshi Ram brought Babasaheb and his ideas to life. He said that one could judge society by the progress of women in it. Today, it is said that in the olden times women had a lot of respect. What kind of respect was it? Talking about the Bahujan movement, in a way, women had an important role in it. If a woman comes out, then the whole family joins her. Kanshi Ram placed his entire leadership on the shoulders of a woman [Mayawati, popularly referred to as Behenji, has been the president of the Bahujan Samaj Party since 2003].

Slowly, patriarchy is trying to

dominate, not only in Uttar Pradesh but also in other states. The most important role in this mission is that of women. Then there is the youth. We don't want aggressive youth, nor do we want agitated youth. Those who are studying should focus on their studies and others should continue with work as usual. Being overly agitated and constantly hitting the road will not do everything. The movement should be united like the one which took place on 2nd April [2018, when several Dalit organisations called for a Bharat Bandh, to protest a Supreme Court ruling that diluted the provisions of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989. The ruling was reversed in October 2019]. Even without any organisational association, it showed an organised form of Bahujan Samaj. Our mission needs movements like this.

**Kashyap:** What are some of the challenges faced by the Bahujan movement today?

**Choudhary:** Today, organisation is the biggest challenge in front of the Bahujan movement. Our society is already divided by caste. Everyone is making himself the national president and is not ready to sit with others. Some youth organisations that exist are only getting entangled with the police and the administration on every small thing, twirling empty moustaches. Youth should be well-equipped with the Bahujan ideology. They should be educated, and have strength to stand in front of anyone and talk; talk according to the law.

Another problematic thing is, as many Bahujan Samaj organisations were formed, they created a separate women's wing. You are not able to get yourself out of the double hierarchy system, which means that patriarchy will stay within the organisation as well. What do we want to prove by creating a separate wing of women in our organisations?

What is the need? Why don't you give them the main responsibility in your organisation?

**Kashyap:** There is a Bharatiya Janata Party government at the centre and in Uttar Pradesh. How does this impact the Bahujan Samaj?

**Choudhary:** It doesn't matter whose government it is, if your ideology is strong. If your ideology is strong, then you will always be strong. Today, Bahujans are getting weak because their ideology has weakened. They have mixed it up. This is the era of pseudo-Ambedkarism and it is dangerous. The ideology which is contradictory to Kanshi Ram's is called Manuwadi ideology. You cannot take both along. Kanshi Ram talked about how the caste order and social distinctions should be eradicated. What is that distinction based on? It is based on the Varna system. Babasaheb tried to end this superstition and hypocrisy; he failed. Then he made 22 vows, before adopting Buddhism. It was simple, if you want to align with this ideology, then you have to break away from that ideology.

The generation that was the first to adopt [Ambedkarite] Buddhism gradually died out. It is the third generation now. And this generation is watching everything through media and television, and somehow, that [Manuwadi] ideology starts spreading. I'll give you a small example, the festival of Rakshabandhan. According to Babasaheb, we should be free from the belief of every thread. But by tying some kind of thread, you are following both types of ideologies. I have seen on Facebook, that many people celebrate Holi. But if you know your history then you will never congratulate anybody on that festival. If you have read your history then you will easily connect it.

**Kashyap:** Today, popular culture is created through social media and many other mediums. How do you see this?

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**Choudhary:** The Ambedkarite movement has also spread rapidly due to popular culture in the last seven to eight years. And nowadays, people standing with Babasaheb are found in every movement. Whether they believe in him or not, our movement has also become a part of popular culture. But our preachers, who were prepared by Kanshi Ram, because they did not get importance or they have become old or for some other reason, have stopped setting up cadre camps. Backward caste people are unaware of their history. Jotiba Phule, Shahu Ji Maharaj, Periyar, they all belonged to a backward society.

The first reform movements that started were led by backward society, but we have not been able to make that popular. Kanshi Ram tried, he would organise cultural fairs. What happens when you see the photos of your great men, when you see swings with their names? Slowly, they seep into the lives of our children. Now, we have placed politics on a higher pedestal and movements have been left far behind. Ambedkar's ideas were in the first two generations and did not seep through to the third. Now, this third generation is influenced by what is 'trending.' Ambedkar's ideology in the house and another ideology in the society.

**Kashyap:** The Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh (RSS) is also working with the Bahujans. What kind of challenge does this pose for the Bahujan movement?

**Choudhary:** Everyone has the freedom to work, we cannot stop them. We need to find what lacks within ourselves. Now that Kanshi Ram is gone, many people with his ideology are also gone. The second generation was divided into multiple organisations. Now, the third generation does not have an ideology. They are faced with a challenge. Is someone right because they are more visible? This is the challenge for us.

**Kashyap:** BJP leaders often eat

food at the homes of people from the Dalit community, during elections, and call it social harmony. The party says that they made a Dalit man, and then an Adivasi woman, as the president. What do you think about this?

**Choudhary:** We welcome the fact that they made the people of our classes the president. But calling them a Dalit or Adivasi president is unconstitutional. The post of president is beyond every caste and above every religion, caste and society. You insulted the Constitution first. Secondly, you insulted your presidency. We will see when they make a prime minister from these classes.

The word harmony itself seems unconstitutional to me. Equality is equality, justice is justice and there is a fraternity. What does harmony mean? I look at it this way, they want to maintain that system, they want you to stay in it, and you are getting some rights while they enjoy the power. This is the meaning of their harmony. If they eat by coming to our homes, why don't they invite us to their homes? They will have a mass dinner, make khichdi and invite you for dinner. The second thing is, if you are trying to show that you are coming to our house to eat, you are trying to humiliate us. The reason that they come and eat food in our houses is that they want to force us to come to them for votes.

**Kashyap:** Kanshi Ram had formed a political party, the BSP and a social organisation, the All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation, or BAMCEF. Are they no longer living up to their ideals? What do think of Mayawati's politics?

**Choudhary:** Kanshi Ram was a man of scientific thinking. He focused on all aspects of organisation—made BAMCEF for the people who had jobs and money, and formed BSP as a political party. The people of the village wanted to fight but people with money and jobs said, "We cannot

come forward and agitate and our job is in danger." His Bahujan Sangathan ran a newspaper, to equip people with the ideology, to allow ideas to reach our people.

Kanshi Ram's work is visible on the ground. But today, its propaganda has become absolutely zero. No person is going out and campaigning; only organisations are being promoted a lot. We have seen how, politically, we have been cleared out. Kanshi Ram used to say that politics should never stop, and the pace of social change should never stop. And that pace is slowly dropping. When people focus on the ideology and not on the person, then we will be strong politically also. The biggest task in this era is to re-establish the ideology.

Behenji is an icon. The crowd at her rallies is enough to prove that her craze is still there. Her craze will continue in the times to come. We also thought that the top-down approach will suffice and we will not have to work on the ground. But the movement is becoming weak because of this.

**Kashyap:** How do you see the politics of Uttar Pradesh in terms of Bahujan consciousness?

**Choudhary:** In Uttar Pradesh, after Kanshi Ram's death, many parties are still working on his ideology. Kanshi Ram brought a complete earthquake in politics. We have to bring that earthquake back. And the future of Bahujan politics can never end because this ideology will never die. If one Kanshi Ram goes, another will be born; if not now, later. We have to keep this seed alive in our youth. We have to make our ideology a part of pop culture.

**Kashyap:** Will you join politics in the future?

**Choudhary:** So far, I have not thought of it. You have to do politics with ideology and we can never compromise with ideology. If I have to do politics in future, it will be purely ideology politics. □□□

[Courtesy: Caravan magazine]

## COMMUNAL TINDERBOX

## The Conversion Controversy

*Ranjan Solomon*

CHRISTIANS ARE UNDER frequent threat by the Chief Minister in Goa. Without any real evidence to corroborate false qualms, he has vowed to act with an unyielding hand to put down forced conversions that were taking place in remote corners. Pastor Dominic has been one of his targets and the government had even imposed Section 144 around his residence. Religion cannot be conducted under political surveillance.

Minority Christians fail to grasp the upheaval not only in Goa but in the country as a whole. Such religious persecution contradicts the secular vision prescribed in the constitution. There is a plain message to all right wing rulers: "Faith is a matter of conviction and nobody requires permission to join another faith group as long as it was not under duress. Many Hindus attest to the fact that they join Pastoral ministries in Goa to find solace and, often, healing from dreadful illnesses. They do not generally convert to Christianity and Pastors do not make that a pre-requisite.

Extremist leaders from the Hindu majority feign fear of the minorities as if the country is at imminent risk of being taken over by Muslims and Christians. This is an incongruous notion. Since the Sanvordem riots, Goa's reputation for peaceful co-existence has been alternated by scruffily constructed hate laboratories. It was once the question of beef. Then, there were several Gram Sabhas which voted to forbid permission for Muslims from residing in their areas or set up businesses in the area. (Muslims are skilled business persons and the loss will be Goa's). After that came the desecration of crosses whose

perpetrators still roam free while an innocent elderly man was blamed for the mayhem and later declared innocent. If persistent communal bullying persists, Goa will be seen as space where ease of business is thorny and could lead to declining investments, flight of/skilled labour, and a sully of Goa's image as an inclusive space.

Mohan Bhagwat avers that "Hindu society has been at war for over 1,000 years against foreign aggressions, foreign influences and foreign conspiracies and now finally Hindu society has awakened. But why the counter-aggression, especially when the Hindu community is pulsating with values and vigour. In general, Hindu society is not fragile and is hugely vibrant in numbers and spiritual dimensions. Hindus should be confident, imbibing tolerance and inclusion. The recent drift into belligerence by fringe elements is out of sync with the teachings from the seers and saints of Hindu traditions. Counter-aggression has no purpose. Their worry should remain the harsh fact of internal caste and ethnic conflicts.

Goa is obtusely gripping patterns of communalism from elsewhere in the country. Anti-Muslim and Anti-Christian sentiments around the country are being animated by right wing fringe elements and aped in Goa. Muslims and Christians around the country are being told that they do not derive from the 'Indic' traditions, and hence are not true Indians. The government should aggregate the manifold services run by various Christian traditions to understand the impact the church has made to social development. Conversions are an irrelevant aspect for mainstream churches. Muslims not only serve their

community according to their religious dictates; they contribute to the economy of the State in greater proportions than their numerical strength represents.

The rebuilding of temples purportedly brought down by Portuguese rulers is assuming communal dimensions. Reparations must be paid for by the coloniser who destroyed heritage spaces. Portugal is an economically outdone country, but they must do their part. Is this a political move or genuinely reclamation of heritage? If so, why not restore Christian heritage sights? It does not quite add up.

Political rhetoric and ambiguous interpretations of the Freedom of Religion Acts are responsible for the high rate of Christian persecution in India. The UK-US-based group Open Doors ranks India high in a World Watch List of 50 countries where it is dangerous to live as a Christian. India traditionally parades itself as a secular state, one where all religions are recognised and can peacefully co-exist. Facts-on-the-ground contradict this claim. In 2017, the Pew Research Centre analysis of 198 countries ranked India as fourth worst in the world for religious intolerance.

The recently established Goa Christian Federation (GCF), comprising Clergy and Lay Christian leaders has united to serve oppressed people of all faiths. For now, the efforts will be in Chhattisgarh where Adivasi Christians faced attacks from right wing forces that drove them out of their homes, villages, and fields. The attackers insist that Adivasis embrace Hinduism or face being banished from their homes forever. They have socially boycotted the Christian Adivasis, organised assaults, and traumatised them.

GCF demands that right wing elements that attacked the Adivasis must be subject to legal action. What happened was a systematic cam-

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paign of dispossession and denial of identity and choice. Police are also complicit and until all perpetrators are reigned in, the culture of impunity will worsen conditions for the Christian Adivasis. Chhattisgarh swiftly needs adequate relief camps to which people had fled under duress by extremists. Chhattisgarh authorities must restore the rule of law and allow Adivasis Christians to live by their faith convictions and reclaim their dignity and Constitutional right to

practise whatever religion they choose to adopt.

Right wing fundamentalists have dismantled homes and prayer houses of the Christian Adivasis and the elementary task of the government is to ensure that they are rebuilt by the State. Victims of violence should be adequately compensated for the psychological pain and agony they suffer, apart from loss of property, agricultural assets, cattle and livelihoods. Pastors arrested under dubious sec-

tions of the law must be set free.

Indian secularism is at grave risk. A spate of anti-conversion bills and Chhattisgarh are being pushed like a malignant phenomenon with no clarity of intent, except to divide-and-rule. Secular-minded Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Christians and animists must push-back in masses, reclaim common humanity, and celebrate India's magnificent and multi-religious/cultural values. □□□

[source:countercurrents.org]

## UKRAINE WAR

### Why Do So Many Russians Support Putin?

*Joshua Yaffa*

**I**N THE MONTH SINCE RUSSIA invaded Ukraine, public-opinion polls have shown a range of support among Russians for what Vladimir Putin and the country's state media call a special military operation. In one survey, sixty-five per cent of respondents approved of Russia's actions in Ukraine; in another, the figure was seventy-one. But one thing seems clear: the war, at least as sold and narrated to the Russian people, appears to be decently popular. Even independent polls show approval well above fifty per cent. But what does public support mean in a society with no functioning political opposition, a decimated free press, and a repressive regime in power?

"I don't think we can say that, on the whole, people in Russia love this war—that they like the idea of going off in search of conquest," Alexey Bessudnov, a professor of sociology at the University of Exeter, told me. "But I think it would be equally false to say it's all the Kremlin, that they are simply inventing these figures, that they don't reflect reality." People are supporting something, Bessudnov said, but "we should remember what people have in mind when they say they support what is happening in Ukraine." He pointed out that the

state-owned Russian Public Opinion Research Centre used phrasing in its survey—"Do you support the decision made for Russia to conduct a special military operation in Ukraine?"—that mimicked Putin's own. "First, this decision has already been taken, which is a kind of hint right there," Bessudnov said. "And, second, it's a 'special operation,' not an invasion or war."

In the early days of the invasion, state television told viewers that the purpose of the "special military operation" was to protect Russian speakers in the Donbas, with little mention of the mass bombardment of Kharkiv, the barbaric siege of Mariupol, or the battles outside Kyiv. This messaging appeared convincing, at least to a point. According to the Athena Project, a collective of sociologists and I.T. specialists who have been conducting their own polling in recent weeks, thirty-eight per cent of respondents who view news on television identified the main purpose of the intervention as safeguarding the populations of the Russian-backed quasi-republics in Donetsk and Luhansk. Twenty-one per cent of TV viewers didn't know the goal of the operation.

The Kremlin presumably knows that a full-fledged war with Ukraine

would be a difficult concept to sell to most Russians. Even if the idea has imperial roots, the widely resonant concept of Ukraine as a "brother nation" means that few enjoy seeing its population actively suffer—hence, the government's insistence on the "special operation" language and the portrayal of the campaign as a fight not against the Ukrainian people but, rather, distant NATO forces and the spectral, undefined threat of "Nazism." Putin has repeatedly said that the Ukrainian units fighting back against Russian forces are not regular troops but neo-Nazi battalions. Russian state television blares from morning until night with talk of a quasi-holy struggle against Fascism. "Do you support a battle against Nazism?" Bessudnov asked. "I do, and I bet you do, too. Only you and I don't think the Russian invasion of Ukraine has anything to do with a battle with Nazism—but plenty of people inside Russia do."

On some level, the data likely reflect an impulse, whether born of fear or passivity, to repeat approved messages rather than articulate your own. "Surveys don't show what people think, but what they are ready to say, how they are prepared to carry themselves in public," Denis Volkov, the director of the Levada Centre, the country's premier independent polling and research organisation, said. Even before the war, Russia was not the kind of place where you willy-nilly

shared your political beliefs with strangers, let alone with those who called out of the blue. That tendency, forged in the Soviet period, only intensified in recent weeks, with new laws that criminalised “discrediting” the Russian military, spreading “fake news,” and making any mention in the press that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was war.

The state’s intended message has not been lost on the public: speak of the special operation in pre-approved key words, or don’t talk about it at all. Tatiana Mikhailova, a professor and economist in Moscow, relayed how a pollster from a state-run agency had reached her by phone and said that, if she participated, her number would be recorded for “quality control.” As she put it, “any normal person would hang up.” Earlier this month, Maxim Katz, an opposition-minded politician in Moscow, and a team of researchers commissioned a poll on public attitudes toward the war; Katz reported that, out of the thirty-one thousand people who were called, twenty-nine thousand and four hundred ended the conversation as soon as they heard the topic.

In mid-March, Aleksei Minaiilo, a former social entrepreneur and current opposition politician, oversaw another telephone survey with the aim of trying to capture the effects of fear and propaganda on survey data. He told me that, when researchers added the option “I don’t want to answer this question,” twelve per cent of those surveyed opted for this answer—a number that he presumed, given the atmosphere, was made up nearly entirely of those who opposed the war. And that figure came from among those who agreed to participate at all; Minaiilo suspected that the polls were not capturing a majority of the real antiwar sentiment, whatever its size.

Even those who did agree to answer the questions in Minaiilo’s survey displayed a heightened level of fear and discomfort. One man in his

fifties said, “It is now prohibited by law to answer what you think about this topic. So I will refrain.” Another man said, “I will, of course, tell you this is a ‘special military operation.’ Any other opinion risks criminal punishment.” A woman living in a rural town said she was worried that the police would come and take her away the next day.

The research left Minaiilo with little faith in polling about public opinion toward the war. The only real takeaway, he said, is that it’s impossible to say anything with much certainty about what Russians actually think about it. “Talking about whether the survey data is off by ten or even twenty per cent totally misses the point,” he told me. “What I think we’ve learned is that the numbers about support for the war are one hundred per cent unreliable—they tell us nothing.”

Polling on the war, then, is perhaps a better indicator of a person’s willingness to post antiwar content or to attend a protest rather than of what one might think privately or discuss at home. Given that public dissent, or lack thereof, matters for Putin’s ability to continue to wage war, not to mention his hold on power, this information, too, is important—it’s just a different question than whether Russians actually welcome the invasion. “The support picked up in polls is not deep or passionate, there is little emotional involvement, and certainly no euphoria,” Volkov, from the Levada Centre, said. “It’s more like tolerance.”

Yet Volkov added that this tolerance, however passive, is likely to remain quite stable, even strong. “People aren’t responding to the war so much, but, rather, looking to confirm an us-versus-them world view that was locked in place a long time ago,” he told me. “Russia is on the side of good and the West is against it.” During a focus-group discussion that the Levada Centre conducted earlier this month, a woman said

that she supported the “special operation,” but acknowledged that if she got her information from, say, the BBC, she might think otherwise. “If I watched different channels, I would probably have a different opinion, but I don’t watch them,” she said. It’s not that she doesn’t know alternative information is out there, but that she doesn’t want it, lest her vision of the world come under threat. “It’s not about having to reconsider this one event but everything you thought and understood over the last ten or fifteen years,” Volkov told me.

In today’s Russia, there is also an overwhelming sense of distrust or disbelief in the very possibility of civic consciousness: that is, a near-total disengagement and alienation from matters of politics or public concern, of which war is the most extreme manifestation. “People are habituated not to stick their noses into politics, not only because it’s dangerous or unwise but because it’s silly—only a fool would think to do such a thing,” Greg Yudin, a sociologist and philosopher, told me. “People are trying to protect their own world, this personal space they built with a lot of hardship and difficulty, and now they want to defend it—and they’ve been told many times that any form of collective action could be the thing that makes it all come crashing down.” In a climate of wartime censorship and repression, the mere expression of an unsanctioned or a critical thought begins to feel like a protest action; that is, the very thing for a sane, self-interested person to avoid.

This has led to the most dangerous situation of all, Yudin fears. “The vast majority of Russians feel no sense of political responsibility whatsoever,” he said. “That means the state can do absolutely anything and people won’t think it has anything to do with them.” □□□

*[Written in March 2022 when the war was just one-month old]  
[Source: The NEW YORKER]*

## LETTERS

**"India: The Modi Question"**

The BBC on February 14 said that it is fully cooperating with the Income Tax department after survey operations were conducted at the media corporation's Delhi and Mumbai offices as it hoped to get the situation resolved "as soon as possible".

The operation, part of a tax evasion investigation, comes weeks after the broadcaster released a two-part documentary on the 2002 Gujarat riots named "India: The Modi Question".

The synchronised surprise action began at 11 am with I-T officials reaching the BBC offices in Delhi and Mumbai. BBC staffers were asked to keep their phones at a particular spot inside the premises, officials said.

The department is looking at documents related to the business operations of the London headquartered public broadcaster and its Indian arm, they said.

Following the survey by the IT department, the BJP hit out at the BBC, accusing it of "running agenda under the garb of journalism" and taking an anti-India stance.

"Any agency or company operating out of India will have to abide by the laws and regulations of the country. If you are following the law, then you should not be scared. Let the agencies do their job," BJP spokesperson Gaurav Bhatia told a press conference.

"It won't be wrong to say that BBC has become the most corrupt and ridiculous organisation in the world. And the worst things are BBC's propaganda and the Congress' agenda match with each other", he said.

The investigation is linked to international taxation issues of BBC subsidiary companies, sources indicated.

As news spread, onlookers and media crews were seen outside the

BBC office at central Delhi's Kasturba Gandhi Marg. In Mumbai, the office is in Santa Cruz.

As part of a survey, the Income Tax Department only covers the business premises of a company and does not raid residences and other locations of its promoters or directors.

The department is looking at documents related to the business operations of the company and those related to its Indian arm, they said.

**News9****Refusing Award**

Dalit writer and poet Sukirtharani has refused to accept the Devi Awards citing that the main sponsor of the award ceremony is the Adani Group and accepting any awards sponsored by them is against her ideology. Sukirtharani, who is known for her literary works on Dalit women's rights, noted in her Facebook post that she renounced the Devi awards on Saturday, 4 February.

"The New Indian Express group

presents the 'Devi Awards' to 12 women personalities who are selected from across the nation for their contribution in their respective fields of work. The award is to be presented to me for my contributions to Dalit literature. I thank the New Indian Express", she wrote in the post.

"I learned that the main sponsor of the event is Adani only yesterday. I don't feel happy to receive an award from an organisation or at an event that is financially supported by the Adani Group, for the politics I speak about and the ideologies I believe in. So, I refuse to accept the Devi Awards," she further wrote. Sukirtharani also sent an official mail declining the award and mentioned that she will never deviate from her political clarity and choices.

Sukirtharani, a teacher from Lalapet of Ranipet district, has written six books namely Kaipattri Yen Kanavu Kel, Iravu Mirugam, Kaamatthipoo, Theendapadaatha Muttham, Avalai Mozhipayarthal, and Ippadikku Yeval.

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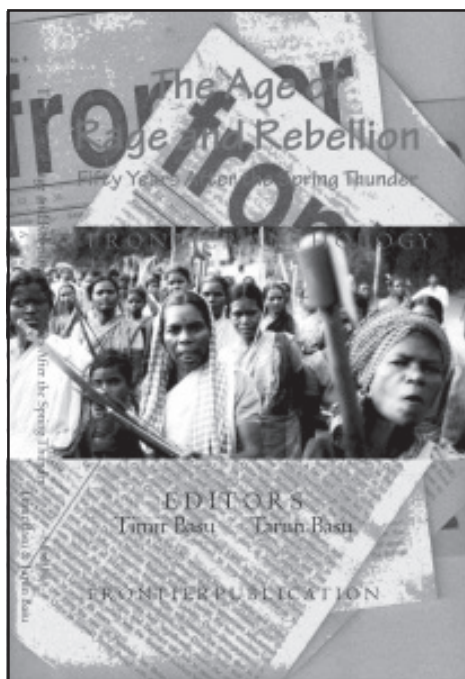
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