

frontier

Vol. 56 : No. 51

ISSN 0016-2094

June 16-22, 2024

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Published weekly for Germinal Publications Pvt. Ltd. by Sharmistha Dutta from 44, Balaram Dey Street, Kolkata-700006 and Printed by her at Laser Aid, 35A/3, Biplabi Barin Ghosh Sarani, Kolkata-700 067.

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[Typeset by THE D-COMLASER, 60 Sikdar Bagan Street, Kolkata-4, Ph : 98361-58319]

Modi's Disdain for Democracy

INDIA PRESENTS A UNIQUE SCENARIO OF ELECTED AUTO-cracy. Authoritarians everywhere thrive on manufactured reality and Modi is no exception. In its 'Democracy Report 2024' Sweden's V-Dem termed India 'one of the worst autocratisers'. This time some 969 million citizens were eligible to cast their ballot, which is equal to the population of the US, Russia, Japan, Britain, Brazil, France and Belgium. Holding election in India is a Herculean task. Luckily not more than 60 percent voters exercise their rights. Then manipulation in various ways even by forcibly not allowing genuine voters to vote is part of the game called 'free and fair' poll. And yet this is the biggest showcase of democracy they boast of. But whatever remains of constitutional democracy in India is under threat. As Modi with his pre-poll partners returns to power with a slender majority in parliament for the third time it is now a matter of time that they will try to change the constitution to suit the right-wing agenda of Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP] and its ideological controlling authority-Rashtriyaswayam Sevak Sangh [RSS].

For one thing exit-polls that predicted massive victory for Modi immediately boosted the share market initially and industrial barons lost no time to advance their wish list as RPG Group chairman Harsh Goenka listed 10 expectations from Modi. In truth Mr Goenka urged Modi to finish his unfinished agenda of agricultural reforms and labour reforms. But finally Modi's arrogance of winning 400 seats was shattered and early cheers in share market vanished.

The failure of the Opposition alliance to project an alternative agenda other than what Modi preached day in and day out gave the ruling BJP extra-mileage in electoral race. Modi was successful in diverting public attention from basic issues to secondary ones and the Opposition alliance danced to the tune set by the BJP. Congress and its allies are directionless when it is the question of confronting BJP's economic reforms. Talking vaguely about Adani and Ambani makes little sense. Modi's India is no economic miracle. The economy has actually grown more slowly in the decade under Modi than under his predecessor. The latest World Inequality Report finds India's inequality to be worse than under British rule and India now figures below North Korea and Sudan in Global Hunger Index.

With not much to show for his economic resurgence, Modi doubled down on his Hindu nationalist brand but that didn't pay desired dividends in vote market this time.

Regional parties that form the backbone of Congress-led opposition grouping have no national vision. Nor do they bother about national and international issues that affect the nation. Their only political interest is how to extract doles from the Centre.

People in the streets sporadically, rather spontaneously express their grievances against runaway inflation and massive unemployment and yet, the Opposition failed to articulate people's anger into anti-establishment upsurge. Unemployed youths have stopped looking for a job and gone back to farm-work. The situa-

tion is so hopeless that even elite IIT graduates are jobless. When Modi talks about jobs and the economy he speaks in abstract terms about his government's success in generating employment and throws around empty rhetoric about turning India into a 'developed nation' by 2047. All this tall talk sounds ludicrous. What is left in Modi's India is a hollow shell.

Modi's control of the media, vast campaign funds and open demagoguery virtually left him free to ignore voters' real concerns.

Past ten years of Modi's rule

have witnessed increased repression, more repressive laws, further erosion of the independence of independent Institutions, assaults on minorities and the induction of vigilante groups to terrorise the oppressed.

Civil Liberty organisations are worried about Modi's third term because of continuing shrinking of civic space. As opposition is in no position to challenge Modi's bulldozers, civil liberties activists and various organisations representing different sections of society should come together to fight authoritarianism. □

04-06-2024

COMMENT

So Many Parties

BESIDES NEARLY A BILLION voters and more than a million polling stations, Indian general elections are big for another reason: the sheer number of aspirants.

The two large parties—Bharatiya Janata Party and Indian National Congress—that have led most of India's governments so far fielded 769 candidates this time. Then there were more than 30 other parties in the run.

Hidden behind a heated contest between large parties are more than 700 less-known political parties clamouring for attention with diverse ideologies and ambitions, even if their chances of victory are very low.

The number of parties has been steadily rising, but those that managed to win seats have barely grown.

In addition to the 4,440 candidates fielded by different parties, there were 3,920 people contesting as independent candidates; all together, that made 8,360 candidates in the fray, the largest in 28 years. Only 543 of them will be elected.

The rapid growth of Indian political parties from the late 1980s onward could be the result of several factors, such as declining strength

of the Congress Party, fragmentation within the socialist bloc, and assertion of various political identities the country saw around that time.

Spread across thirty-six states and federal territories, Indians hailing from diverse ethnic origins speak hundreds of languages and thousands of dialects.

"Each group wants to be represented via its own leader, based on factors such as region, caste and sub-caste." "A large number of such formations mobilise voters on these issues."

The small regional parties do matter in the larger picture though. At times, they end up being kingmakers when large parties fall short of a majority. Right now BJP partners Chandrababu Naidu and Nitish Kumar are demanding their pound of flesh.

Most Indian governments in the past three decades have been led by a coalition of parties, even when a single party managed to cross the halfway mark.

India follows a first-past-the-post electoral system, in which voters cast a ballot for a single candidate and

the one with the highest number wins. So, in practice, a candidate can win even with a minority of votes.

Founding political parties serves purposes beyond electoral gains, such as legal exemption from income tax, which could be another reason for their proliferation. Moreover, parties are "practically and effectively able to convert black money into white." "People can buy cars and houses for themselves in the name of the party."

There are other intangible benefits, such as expecting favourable treatment by government officers based on the perception that politicians are influential individuals.

Parties also put up shadow candidates for various reasons. More than a thousand candidates have withdrawn their nominations for this year's election, though the reasons are not known.

Despite the increasing number of parties contesting Indian elections, the bunch of parties winning seats has not expanded. Of more than 1,500 parties that have contested the past 15 Lok Sabha elections, a majority contested only once. Only 34 parties contested more than half of these elections. □□□

06-06-2024

[Contributed by
Vijdan Mohammad Kawoosa]

NOTE

NATO is at War against Russia

Farooque Chowdhury writes:

THE IMPERIALIST WAR ALLIANCE NATO is already engaged in a war against Russia. The war front's name is Ukraine.

Soldiers and specialists from a number of NATO-countries are taking part in the Ukraine War. They play different roles in supporting the Kiev regime. Generals from a number of NATO-countries are involved in planning of the war the Kiev rulers have been employed to wage. Satellites and other surveillance mechanisms from a number of NATO-countries constantly feed the Ukraine forces. A number of NATO-countries' territories are being used as training and weapons storage grounds for the Kiev military. Psy-ops by the NATO against Russia are open and incessant. The imperialist military alliance's arms supplies to the Ukraine forces and financing the Kiev regime in its day-to-day governance activities, and sanctions against Russia are an operation in continuum. There's no point to disagree that the NATO is at war against Russia.

A part of the war is clandestine while a part is in public view. Elements of the war lead a section to tag it as a Hybrid War although there's no reason have such a mark, as all wars have similar elements and phases depending on capacity of warring parties. Moscow has reason to identify it as a Hybrid War, as terming it as a war will carry legal and other including diplomatic implications and obligations at home and abroad.

In the war front, the Ukraine military has lost strategic initiative. It's being pushed back by the Russian fighters. There're talks of possible collapse of the Ukraine defence

line, whatever is there. Imperialist media that were waging propaganda war, part of NATO psy-op, now a day intermittently present facts that are bitter for NATO and Kiev supporters and that the Russians reported weeks and months back.

Even, one or two NATO or EU political or military leaders opine: No possibility of recovering the territory the Kiev regime has lost, and no possibility of defeating Russia; sanctions against Russia are turning a boomerang; war is not the ultimate approach to subdue Moscow, opposite to which many NATO and EU leaders adamantly told two years back; negotiations with Moscow should be resumed.

But, hawkish tones propagate regularly. Military measures including hitting inside certain areas of Russia have formally been taken, which are identified as a new phase of the war. For long, the Kiev regime was hitting Russia's interior with NATO supplied weapons. But, now, it's a formal nod from the Kiev masters. Biden now allows Ukraine to strike targets deep inside Russia with long-range weapons supplied by the Pentagon.

Now, in view of the Kiev masters' formal approval to hit inside Russia, the hovering question: Shall NATO escalate its war against Russia further? Much serious questions are there: Where shall the escalation reach? Shall that be a fatal devastation in Europe already seating on a heap of failures in global competition? How capitals in Europe are going to align with emerging global capitals' map of competition?

One day, leader from a European country, obviously a NATO

member, calls for sending soldiers to Ukraine to fight out the Russians. The other day, another leader from another European country expresses caution—no sending of soldiers; and the leader makes an about turn the next day. In the war, the smaller, Estonia, Latvia and similar brand, sound more hawkish.

It reflects a tug of war between factions within the NATO camp—one faction taking stock of the war that appears a net loss while the other trying to continue with profiteering from the war. The issue of adjustments within the imperialist global order is yet undecided. Already, new elements that have emerged within the order are putting stress on the order led by the imperialist power that still considers itself as the sole power of the planet. But, under its feet, sands are shifting.

This situation is dangerous for the entire planet, as yet uncertain is the answer to the question: Shall a part of global capital need a nuclear boom to keep its dominance intact or make adjustment in the global order or will its parts be able to have a soft landing? Already the imperialist camp has begun resorting to brinkmanship, as it's stepping into a planetary danger zone.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy accused China of helping Russia to disrupt an upcoming Swiss-organised peace conference on the war in Ukraine. Ironically, Russia was not invited at the peace meet. □□

02-06-2024

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“MARXISM WITHOUT GUARANTEES”

Rethinking Marxism

Arup Kumar Sen

THE BOOK [RETHINKING Marxism: India from a Class Perspective by Anjan Chakrabarti and Anup Dhar, AAKAR Books, 2023, Price: INR 1495; aakarbooks@gmail.com] under review is a collection of articles/contributions to books/journals, published by the two authors, either individually or with other co-authors, in the 21st century. In the preface, the authors have highlighted the trajectory of their journey: “This book seeks to forge a relationship between India, Marx and Marxism; so as to rethink our relationship with all three.” It is noted in this context: “Class analysis, that was part of a vibrant space and debate of Marxian scholarship till the 1980s in India, seems to have receded to the background, paradoxically when its significance and impact, particularly with the expansion of capitalism, has only deepened and expanded even into the distant recesses of economy and society.”

In the first chapter of the book, the authors focused on “G A Cohen’s rigorous presentation of historical materialism (HM)” and argued: “Two

crucial intersecting and reinforcing steps compose HM—one, a theory of society and secondly, a theory of history.” The chapter concluded with a pluralistic reading of Marxism: “Marxism is neither a singular nor a dogmatic field, not to say static. Rather, it is a sophisticated, changing, rich space of contesting and often clashing theories which not only challenge the mainstream discourses but also one another. In the process, it produces a deeper understanding of what this tradition seeks to broadly highlight and pursue.”

The second chapter addressed the concept of class in Marxian theory. After a thorough analysis of class, in their dialogue with ‘classical historical materialism’, the authors have proposed their own seminal argument: “Rather than reducing the explanation of non-class processes (say, caste, gender, race, power, property, etc.), to class process of surplus labour in the order of explanation (hallmark of economic/class determinism), what one has instead is a class-focused theory whereby, even if class is the focus of analysis, both class and non-class processes effect and change one another; each is the cause and effect of the other; none can be reduced to the other.”

There are twenty-one chapters in the book, placed under six sections titled—Beyond Received Marxism; What is the Working Class? Deconstructing Agriculture, Informal Sector and Rural; Rethinking Capitalist Development; State, Nationalism, and Imperialism; Postcapitalist Politics. It is not possible within the limited scope of the present review to do justice to all the chapters

incorporated in the book. The following are some of the important arguments/observations offered in the book in different perspectives.

In exploring the role of labour contractors in a country like India, it is observed: “In countries such as India, we not only come across labour contractors in sectors, such as construction and jute, where they had existed for a long time, but also in the more ‘sophisticated industries’ such as engineering, finance, and IT, where the so-called placement agencies participate in the process of contracting casual labour. It is also not surprising at times to find unions playing the role of labour contractors through their control of the labour supply...” It may be stated in this context that many labour-recruiting companies have come into existence in recent times to supply labour to the big automobile companies in the Delhi NCR.

Post-Covid predicament of the ‘working-class’ has been theorised in the language of Marx in one chapter of the book: “Faced with the pandemic, the Indian state announced a total lockdown... In a matter of days, the workers realised that the city would only be hospitable to them as long as they were a living machine of variable capital supplementing the dead machine of constant capital.” In this context, the authors have made a very important observation: “The return of the urban working class to its rural home, of course, has happened in an extreme distress. However, the return is not just a return to the rural. It is also, in class terms, a return to a form of life in which the landed masses can at least be both performers and appropriators of surplus, actually and potentially... many of the migrants will perhaps once again go back to the cities to look for income and employment; the

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only difference is that they now will have a new experience of who they are and would perhaps have no illusion regarding where they are migrating to.”

While theorising the Indian State in the context of the ‘new economic map’, the authors argued: “Overall, an interesting point emerges regarding the shape of the Indian state. The changing structure of India’s economic map accompanied by the

logic of capitalist expansion has not only produced an ‘economisation of the social’, but also a ‘securitisation of the economic’...The concomitant process of birthing and functioning of global capitalism and neo-liberalism in India is not without, to use Marx, blood and dirt.”

In the light of their theoretical dialogue with Marxism, the authors have formulated their own imagination of ‘postcapitalist praxis’: “With

the change in the script of the analytical register through the arrival of new characters, the script of Marxian ethical-politics too must undergo a change.” This reminds one of Stuart Hall, the renowned Marxist thinker, who pleaded for ‘A Marxism without Guarantees’.

The book written by Anjan Chakrabarti and Anup Dhar is an original contribution to Marxian scholarship in the East. □□□

MODI RETURNS, BUT WEAKER

The Beginning of the End for Modi Raj?

Meneka Doshi

RURAL INDIANS HAVE JUST taught Modi and the stock markets a tough lesson—that millionaires are no measure of a country’s prosperity.

That’s one key reason for a loss of seats in India’s Hindi heartland, especially Uttar Pradesh, that many thought had been won over permanently by Mandir and Muslim politics.

Modi’s party—Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—looks set to win less than 272 seats (the minimum needed to form a government on its own) and much below the 303 it won in 2019.

To be clear, the Bharatiya Janata Party is still the single largest party by seats but regional allies, namely the Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh and the Janata Dal (United) in Bihar, will have more leverage in government formation.

The election result, contrary to the Modi-sweep that exit polls forecast over the weekend, set off a landslide in stocks—the benchmark Nifty50 has now lost all the gains it made this year. Bonds and the rupee weakened too.

Surprisingly the BJP has lost in Faizabad, the constituency home to Ayodhya’s Ram temple—inaugurated by Modi with great pomp earlier this year. ‘Voters have told Modi, keep your Hindu-Muslim nonsense and

give us jobs’, Praveen Chakravarty, chairman of the Congress Party’s analytics cell said to this writer.

Modi, 73, wanted a place in history, but at this point his future and that of the BJP’s hang in the balance.

He is no Vajpayee, the BJP prime minister who had the political savvy and accommodation to lead an alliance government for five years until rising economic inequality ousted it in 2004. Modi prefers hoarding power, often leaving even cabinet colleagues shorn of any real decision making ability. Carrying allies along may require a significant change in his style of governance especially. The JD(U) switched from the opposition alliance to BJP just weeks before the election.

Modi may do it, he is a survivor. Besides, this low seat strength may just serve as an opening balance for the next five years. After all, his team has a history of splitting political parties and acquiring rival legislators, equipped with funds many times higher than what other parties have accrued through political donations.

Add to this mix of ‘ifs and buts’ the widening gap between Modi’s BJP and its parent, the RSS—whose cadre has played a critical role in the leader’s ascent. How the Hindu

nationalist social organisation perceives this near miss may impact leadership at its political arm.

Some of Modi’s fanciful ideas like one nation, one election will have to be put on the backburner now as he focuses on the nitty gritty of governance, said Rajdeep Sardesai, television news anchor and author of two books on the 2014 and 2019 elections.

The verdict is a reminder that although India is home to two of Asia’s top billionaires, it also has 800 million Indians who rely on free grain.

If Modi’s \$142 billion food drive wasn’t enough to secure a thumping win, then his economic policies may need course correction.

While the government’s fiscal discipline and infrastructure investment-led approach has been appreciated by investors and ratings agencies, with private investment yet to pick up significantly, jobs and consumption remain weak. While billionaires such as Ambani were shining, things were looking gloomier for the average Indian.

Sajjid Chinoy, chief India economist at JPMorgan, wrote in an op-ed earlier this week that focus must turn to structurally boosting demand through employment, consumption and exports. Indeed, consumption stocks were among the few gainers today in anticipation of that. □□□

04-06-2024

[Source: Bloomberg]

MANY LOOSE ENDS

Minority Status: A Hoax?

Ardhendu Banerjee

SINCE THE EARLY DAYS of independence, the word “minority” has played a significant role in the lexicon of Indian politics. The word “minority” is essentially a quantitative term, as evidenced by its Latin root “minor” and its definition in the dictionary as “the lesser part or smaller number.” It was, however, primarily conventional in Indian politics to use it as a plural noun or an adjective. There were several approaches to identifying a minority. The 2011 Census shows that, when it comes to religious minorities, the nation is home to 79.8% Hindus, 14.2% Muslims, 2.3% Christians, 1.7% Sikhs, 0.7% Buddhists, 0.4% Jains, 0.7% Others, and 0.2 percent who did not wish to mention them. Based on caste and tribe, the percentages are as follows: 8.6% for tribes and 16.6% for scheduled castes. Based on socioeconomic criteria, the percentage of the backward class is 44 percent, as to the NSSO report 563. The census 2011 also indicates that there are 8.58% of persons are “senior citizens,” 0.03% are “beggars and homeless,” and 0.04% identify as “transgender or other.” In addition, minorities can be considered depending on categories like dwarfs, orphans, or any artistic workers etc, because all are very less in numbers while the population of India is considered.

However, the Indian government announced on October 23, 1993, through a Gazette notification (SO No. 816(E), F No. 1/11/93-MC(D)) that five religious’ communities—Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Zoroastrians (Parsis)—were designated as minority communities. Put differently, India’s secular sys-

tem granted minorities recognition based just on their religion, disregarding the other criteria outlined earlier. But there is more to this choice than meets the eye; it has a distinct history that merits further consideration. Once upon a time The Constituent Assembly acknowledged minority reservations should be abolished for the nation’s benefit. Sardar Patel advocated for unity, envisioning India as one community, suggesting the dissolution of majority-minority distinctions for long-term harmony (Constituent Assembly Debates on 25 May 1949). Nehru acknowledged minority safeguards in a democracy but cautioned against their potential to isolate minorities and hinder their integration. He stressed the inevitable dominance of majority will in democracy, despite constitutional protections. He warned against minority actions that might convey distrust to the majority, advocating for unity and mutual understanding in the democratic process (Constituent Assembly Debates On 26 May 1949). So that, without a definite definition, the constitution in Articles 29 and 30 made it clear that these two protect the cultural and linguistic rights of Indian citizens, ensuring the conservation of distinct identities and granting minorities, based on religion or language, the right to establish and manage educational institutions without discrimination in funding by the state. It is important to keep in mind that the term “secular” was not included in the Constitution back then.

However, the real debate began in 1958. In the Kerala Education Bill case, the Supreme Court examined if any provisions violated Ar-

ticle 30(1) of the Constitution. It deliberated on the undefined term “minority,” questioning whether it’s based on numerical minority at the national or state level. The Court highlighted the ambiguity, suggesting the need for clarification regarding whether the 50 percent threshold applies to the entire Indian population or to a specific state within the Union. In the D A V College vs State of Punjab case (1971), it was established that the classification of religious or linguistic minorities is contingent upon the specific legislation being challenged. If the legislation pertains to a state, minorities are defined in relation to the state’s population; emphasising contextual determination within the legal framework under examination. Noteworthy here is the inclusion of the phrase “secular” in the Preamble, which was added by the 42nd Amendment in 1976. According to this, not only is there no state religion, but all religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Christianity, and Islam—are equally respected. However, the establishment of the Minorities Commission in 1978 aimed to address minority concerns of inequality and discrimination, promoting secular traditions and national integration. In 1984, the Minorities Commission shifted from the Ministry of Home Affairs to the Ministry of Welfare. In 1988, the Ministry of Welfare amended the resolution from 1978, removing the commission’s authority over linguistic minorities. The National Commission for Minorities Act of 1992 defines minorities as communities designated by the Central Government, granting exclusive authority to the Central Government for such designation. As a result, the Indian government declared five religious’ groups as minority communities through a notification in 1993.

June 16-22, 2024

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What advantage does this “minority” status offer? The same question was posed by the UPSC in 2011. The correct answer was it can establish and administer exclusive educational institutions and it can derive benefits from the Prime Minister’s 15-Point Programme. Let’s examine the answer. Reservation and minority status are often mistakenly equated, but they are not interchangeable terms. While there’s a widespread belief in this distinction, it’s inaccurate. On 9 December 2015 Shri Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi specifically said in Lok Sabha that, currently, there is no reservation for minority communities in Civil Posts, Services, or admission to Central Educational Institutions as designated by the Central Government under the National Commission for Minorities Act, 1992. So, what extra benefits do minorities receive? Do minorities receive better treatment than the majority in areas like food, water, transportation, health care, education, and so forth?

Indeed, they have the authority to establish and manage their own educational establishments. Then one must ask that, are Ramakrishna Mission schools and colleges, as well as different Vedic schools, unconstitutional? Since everyone in the nation has access to education and religion according to the constitution, what purpose does the term “minority” serve when it comes to separate madrasas or Christian universities and colleges? Does that specific faith guarantee the right to work or study for its members only? On March 24, 2022, Shri Naqvi said in the Lok Sabha that the NCMEI Act, 2014, which emphasises the educational empowerment of minority communities, establishes the National Commission for Minority Educational Institutions without making provisions for reservations for poor minority students. Further-

more, if a curriculum is adopted, it must adhere to a set general framework, like the National Education Policy 2020. If you do not recognise the framework of the curriculum, you will be left behind in various competitive exams. Then where is the relationship between minority status and educational institutions?

Conversely, the remaining 15-point programme makes up a public welfare programme. The government may choose to implement these security measures without labelling certain citizens as religious “minorities”, only if government has goodwill. Because many of these opportunities are available to the majority and the underprivileged masses through different names. So the ‘minority’ status ought to be eliminated since it is unquestionably a means of separating oneself from the core of the country. Labelling individuals as minorities, particularly those born in India, is deemed divisive and likely to fuel hatred and hostility between different groups, questioning the necessity of a minority class in Indian politics. Why then does this title still exist?

It is nothing more than a political party’s election strategy. The party with the most votes wins government in a parliamentary democracy. The BJP received 31.36 percent of the vote in 2014 and 37.36 percent in 2019. By contrast, if one takes ruling and opposition dichotomy, around 69 and 62.64 percent of the votes were cast against the BJP. Alternatively said, the BJP won with a percentage below fifty percent. This was made possible by the separation into multiple religious groupings, castes, sects, parties and other groups. Thus, insofar as the populace is separable, an exiguous-voting party can facilitate the establishment of a stable majority government. So in reality instead of the affection and sympathy that the

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"minority" had anticipated, they were given a hoax. It is not simple, though, as the "minorities" of today must choose between speaking up for equal citizenship rights and clinging to their status as a religious minority without any special benefit and remaining in subordination.

In 1992, Advani strongly opposed the granting of minority titles. In 2005 the Supreme Court refused to classify Jains as a minority under the National Commission for Minorities Act, citing the T M A Pai Foundation Case. It emphasised that treating minorities based on religion at a national level could undermine India’s secular fabric and exacerbate social divisions. However, on 27.01.2014 Jains notified as minority community by the then Central Government. Dattatreya Hosabale recently brought up this issue to review, though ten years have gone, yet the Modi administration has done nothing about it. The numerical notion has thus evolved into a qualitative concept, or, to put it another way, it has transformed into a singular noun. But one question remains: why? □□□

CORPORATISATION OF HEALTHCARE

WHO and Its Transformatory Journey

Jayanta Bhattacharya

THE ALMA-ATA DECLARATION of 1978 (6-12 September, 1978) emerged as a milestone of the twentieth century in the field of public health, and it identified comprehensive primary health care as the key to the attainment of the goal of "Health for All by 2000 A.D." It was jointly sponsored by the World Health Organisation and the United Nations Children's Fund. Some Christian Missionary groups also played a vital role in convening this international conference. Conference on Primary Health Care (PHC) in Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan, in 1978, brought together 134 countries and 67 international organisations (China was notably absent). Chief architect of this Conference was Dr Halfdan Mahler.

The Conference emphasised on the point: Primary health care is essential health care based on practical, scientifically sound, and socially acceptable methods and technology made universally accessible to individuals and families in the community through their full participation and at a cost that the community and country can afford to maintain at every stage of their development in the spirit of self-reliance and self-determination. It forms an integral part both of the country's health system, of which it is the central function and main focus, and of the overall social and economic development of the community. It is the first level of contact of individuals, the family, and community with the national health system bringing health care as close as possible to where people live and work, and constitutes the first elements of a continuing health care process.

It also emphasised—"A genuine policy of independence, peace, détente, and disarmament could and should release additional resources that could well be devoted to peaceful aims and in particular to the acceleration of social and economic development of which primary health care, as an essential part, should be allotted its proper share."

More specifically speaking, the Conference brought two public health related issues to the centre stage—(1) instead of disease-centered intervention, there should be community-based programmes, and (2) instead of "vertical" interventions "horizontal" interventions should be preferred in public health, and comprehensive primary health care must be prioritised.

The message of the Conference had its reverberation in the speech of Indira Gandhi too, at the 34th World Health Assembly held at Geneva, 4-22 May, 1981. Gandhi, as the prime minister of India, said:

"Life is not mere living but living in health. The health of the individual, as of nations, is of primary concern to us all. Health is not the absence of illness but a glowing vitality, a feeling of wholeness with a capacity for continuous intellectual and spiritual growth. What is our ultimate goal? Is it the mere accretion of medical and other knowledge, the building of better machines and even hospitals, or are all these meant for a higher purpose, to make man better and more capable of handling the emotional and other stresses posed by material progress, increasing pace, and the utter lack of privacy in contemporary living? ... Dr Mahler and his colleagues deserve congratulations

and encouragement on their vision of health for all by the year 2000. This envisages strengthening of public health programmes of developing countries, where most diseases are concomitants of economic backwardness ... We do need excellent modern hospitals. But the desire for ever larger hospitals, more often than not oriented towards high-cost modern technological medicine, has to be resisted. Primary health care must be within reach, in terms of distance as well as money, of all people. The world has found to its dismay that resources are not unlimited. Hence waste of any kind and in any form, particularly in health and hospital care, should be strongly discouraged; and the countries' resources must be more equitably distributed. If this is true of the national scene it is even more so internationally. In India we should like health to go to homes instead of larger numbers gravitating towards centralized hospitals. Services must begin where people are and where problems arise ... but we have not yet been able to reach out to all our rural people ... Health is neither a commodity to be purchased nor a service to be given; it is a process of knowing, living, participating and being ... We have acquired the capability of placing satellites in orbit which give useful information ... Life is and perhaps always will be a struggle, although the nature of it keeps changing. To meet it we need vision, faith, courage and dogged perseverance. These are the qualities I admire in individuals and in organizations. These are the characteristics of the role of WHO. That is why I have come all this way to express our appreciation of its work".

Transformations within the Matrix of the WHO

Against this perspective, one can do some stocktaking about the WHO's gradual transformation over the

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years 1978 to 2024. On 21 March, 2023, WHO published a report “Commercial determinants of health”. Some of the key facts enunciated in it were:

- Commercial determinants of health are the private sector activities that affect people’s health, directly or indirectly, positively or negatively.
- The private sector influences the social, physical and cultural environments through business actions and societal engagements; for example, supply chains, labour conditions, product design and packaging, research funding, lobbying, preference shaping and others.
- Commercial determinants of health impact a wide range of risk factors, including smoking, air pollution, alcohol use, obesity and physical inactivity, and health outcomes, such as non-communicable diseases, communicable diseases and epidemics, injuries on roads and from weapons, violence, and mental health conditions.
- Commercial determinants of health affect everyone, but young people are especially at risk, and unhealthy commodities worsen pre-existing economic, social and racial inequities. Certain countries and regions, such as Small Island Developing States and low and middle-income countries, face greater pressure from transnational actors.

It also talked about “social determinants of health” – “The social determinants of health are the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, the systems put in place to deal with illness, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life. These forces and systems include economic policies and systems, development agendas, social norms, social poli-

cies and political systems. Social determinants of health matter because addressing them not only helps prevent illness, but also promotes healthy lives and societal equity.” Such an admittance on behalf of the WHO regarding “commercial determinants of health” exposes the pressure on WHO from the corporate. It also shows the helplessness of WHO as it does not have its own fund. It has to depend on various countries, organisations, and, sometimes, on some individuals.

In 2015, on behalf of the Third World Network, a special issue of Resurgence was published the cover of which was noteworthy – World Health Organisation Corporation.

David Legge commented – “Since the 1990s, concern has grown that the integrity and independence of the World Health Organisation (WHO) may be compromised as a result of corporate influence. When in May, the World Health Assembly - the supreme decision-making body of WHO - met in Geneva, much of the debate centred on the funding of WHO and the rules regarding this UN agency's relationship with the private sector ... The outcomes of these tensions will determine the prospects not just for global health but for the democratic vision and for an equitable and sustainable future.”

The Editorial of the same issue observed that “Indeed by 2013 the foundation (the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) was the WHO’s largest funder, providing \$301 million, which exceeded United States’ combined voluntary and assessed contributions of \$290 million.”

Early Years of Transmutations

Within one year of the Alma-Ata Declaration, one important article was published in the esteemed medical journal New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM). This paper was originally presented at a meeting on Health and Population in Develop-

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ing Countries, cosponsored by the Ford Foundation, the International Development Research Centre and the Rockefeller Foundation and held at the Bellagio Study and Conference Centre, Lake Como, Italy, April, 1979. We must note the cosponsors of the conference. The authors of the paper argued that “Three billion people of the less developed world suffer from a plethora of infectious diseases ... The best solution, of course, is comprehensive primary health care, defined at the World Health Organization’s conference held at Alma Ata in 1978”. In the guise of seemingly innocuous words what they tried to do was put disease-centred programs at the centre, NOT otherwise, which was termed as “selective primary health care”.

Barring the period of the historic Alma-Ata Conference (1978) giant pharmaceutical corporations of the world (who had undergone transitory hibernation for some time in the aftermath of the Alma-Ata Conference) have always pursued the path of technology-intensive vertical care programmes. Since 1960s and even before, medicine and health/healthcare have become the focus to make it a commodity of open market and private insurance. Two Nobel Laureate economists—F A Hayek and Kenneth Arrow—categorically advocated for such state policies. To Hayek, “there is little doubt that the growth of health insurance is a desirable development... Beveridge scheme and the whole British National Health Service have no relation to reality.” Hayek did not hesitate to downplay the welfare and historic health scheme NHS of UK.

Arrow specifically emphasised that “the subject is the medical-care industry, not health.” He even added a subtitle of one chapter as “A Survey of the Special Characteristics of the Medical-Care Market”.

There appeared some publica-

tions at quick succession—(1) Allan Enthoven prepared a draft for open/liberal market “A National-Health-Insurance Proposal Based on Regulated Competition in the Private Sector” and put it before the Carter administration. They gave him go-ahead signal. It was published in two parts in NEJM. (2) In 1980, Arnold S. Relman published his historic essay. (3) In 1999, an important article in Lancet showed the nexus between World Trade Organisation and domestic policies of health care.

The paper noted—“The WTO is stage-managing a new privatisation bonanza at Seattle. Multinational and transnational corporations, including the pharmaceutical, insurance, and service sectors, are lining up to capture the chunks of gross domestic product that governments currently spend on public services such as education and health. The long tradition of European welfare states based on solidarity through community risk-pooling and publicly accountable services is being dismantled.”

In his above-mentioned paper Relman clearly showed—

‘However, there has been a steady trend away from individual ownership and toward corporate control. During the past decade the total number of proprietary hospitals has been increasing again, mainly because of the rapid growth of the corporate-owned multi-institutional hospital chains ... Last year, about \$15 billion was spent on diagnostic laboratory services of all kinds. The number of laboratory tests performed each year in this country is huge and growing at a compound rate of about 15 per cent per year ... We Americans believe in private enterprise and the profit motive. How logical, then, to extend these concepts to the health-care sector at a time when

costs seem to be getting out of control, voluntary institutions are faltering, and the only other alternative appears to be more government regulation.’

In later studies, researchers have identified—

“Since the 1970s, neoliberal health and social welfare policies around the world have shifted resources from the public to the private sector, reduced benefits to recipients, and affected the lives of clients and workers alike. While many researchers have studied the negative impact of these policies on the well-being of the clients of health and human service agencies, and of workers in the private sector, less is known about the adverse effect of neoliberal disinvestment on the well-being of health and human service care workers ... The shared interests of care workers and the people they care for in the “fight-back” against neoliberalism suggest the potential for aligning care workers’ health and safety with client/patient needs in public policy formation. The health and safety of care workers in the global economy is an important dimension for evaluating public policies and envisioning better ones.”

Despite these consistent and powerful attempts to make community-centred health programme topsy-turvy and to reduce comprehensive primary health care to “vertical” programmes, dissenting humane voices came from within the mainstream publications. One paper emphasised that the trouble is that the patient, when he thinks something is wrong with him, is not an economic man. He is a fearful, ignorant, helpless, miserable creature. He does want health, almost at any price. Here one should note the term “economic man” or consumer cul-

ture in medicine. It was also clearly enunciated that the ailing and helpless person wants no second best. He certainly does not want his needs to be weighed against the claims of other patients. The patient, in short, is looking for a trustee, not a 'provider'. Such a proposition goes starkly against—(1) equating “health” and corporate “healthcare service”, and (2) the reduction of patients to an “economic man”/consumer instead of a person.

The Intriguing Phase of Health Being “Forgotten”

Karl Evang, one of the three doctors whose efforts brought health as an agenda in international economic and political scenario, has chronicled an intriguing phase in the history of mankind. In his own words—“One interesting historic example is that health was “forgotten” when the Covenant of the League of Nations was drafted after the first World War. Only at the last moment was world health brought in, producing the Health Section of the League of Nations, one of the forerunners of the present FAO, as well as of WHO. Although international participation in the League of Nations was limited, the Health Section of the League developed into one of the most successful and non-controversial parts of the organization, making itself indispensable through its statutory functions.”

Further, in the same article, Evang

exclaims—“Who would have thought, therefore, that health would again be “forgotten” when the Charter of the United Nations was drafted at the end of the Second World War? However, this was exactly what happened, and the matter of world health again had to be introduced more or less ad hoc at the United Nations conference at San Francisco in the spring of 1945.”

At the initiative of three doctors—Karl Evang (Norway), Paula Souza (Brazil) and Szeming Sze (China)—health was included in the charter of UN. Evang foretold us—“Under circumstances where the political balance in a country is at stake and where individual parties therefore have to think of something special to attract votes for the next election, this may sometimes lead to political “overbidding” in the field of health.”

Concluding Remarks

Recently, Intergovernmental Negotiating Body (INB) which is tasked under WHO has drafted a new Pandemic Treaty which, it is apprehended, might be disastrous for general well-being and rightful living for citizens in future. Lancet observes—“Even the anaemic commitments of the agreement are in jeopardy. Independent monitoring of whether countries are complying with their commitments is essential for the efficacy and longevity of the treaty. Yet, as the likes of Nina Schwalbe and colleagues have pointed out, all indica-

tions suggest that the governance and accountability mechanisms of the treaty are being further undermined. There is little in the way of clear enforceable obligations to prevent zoonotic disease outbreaks, implement One Health principles, strengthen health systems, or counter disinformation. Heads of states and the INB might not see pandemic governance as a priority now, but it is fundamental to the success of any agreement.”

To mention, one offshoot of corporatisation of healthcare is “medical tourism”.

A few years ago, Raman Kumar raised three important issues—(1) “Immediately after independence, India pushed aside the recommendations of the Bhore committee, which was for implantation of comprehensive primary healthcare. Instead, we opted for the path of selective primary care modelled on vertical disease-based programmes under the guidance of international development agencies”, (2) “Super-specialty care, fragmented public health programmes, and quackery have become three pillars of the Indian health system”, and (3) “Will the Indian economy be able to sustain the double burden of UHC and the vertical programmes?”

All these observations are very much relevant now when seen through the window of family medicine and primary care. □□□

A CROCODILE CATCHER

Narendra Modi and ‘God Complex’

Ram Puniyani

DEMOCRACY IS A SYSTEM of society won after long and intense struggles. The preceding society had mostly Kingdoms. A typical kingdom was an alliance between the Feudal lord-King and clergy. While the clergy

was representative of the religious power, the king was presented as the son of God whose decisions and actions had the sanction of the clergy.

With democracy coming with lots of hiccups, the Kings were replaced

by the elected leader, who was bound by the set of laws, mostly outlined in the constitutions. There is a lot of variation in the process of transition from kingdoms to democracy. The democratic process is not static and there are many factors that can reverse the process with the head of state assuming total powers and in places getting legitimacy from the religious authority. This needs a brief recall as in some of the coun-

tries globally and particularly in South Asia, the hard-won democracy is being replaced by authoritarianism laced in the language of religion (Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Pakistan, and India). At places, the Supreme Leader assumes the twin roles of head of the state and chief priest, as is seen currently in India in particular.

There are no uniform patterns. Indians earlier saw Indira Gandhi being hailed as Goddess Durga, when she led the country in the 1971 war against Pakistan, which led to the formation of Bangladesh. She ignored this 'honour' being bestowed upon her. Divinity was not on display in her pronouncements or actions.

Narendra Modi the present Prime Minister is very different. To begin with, he is a Hindu Nationalist, a trained Pracharak of RSS which has the goal of the Hindu nation. Such sectarian nationalisms have the avidity for dictatorships under the cover of religion or race. The promotion of a great image for the top leaders is part of the religious nationalist project. Such nationalisms do preferably need a charismatic leader, whose position is made above questioning due to the aura created around them. As Narendra Modi became the Chief Minister of Gujarat, the exercise of creating charisma

around him began. On one hand APCO, an image-creating firm, was hired to create his powerful image. On the other, his childhood was also glorified to back up his image. A comic book was published, 'Bal Narendra'. In this, the story was elaborated that while as a child, when playing with his friends, he entered the river to retrieve the ball and along with the ball he also brought a baby crocodile.

With his taking over as the Prime Minister, the Cabinet system, the Prime Minister is first among equals, was replaced by a powerful Prime Minister, with the Ministers' powers reduced abysmally. No doubt he called himself, Pradhan Sevak (Chief Servant of Nation). His participation in religious functions and places of worship increased. With the media being taken over by his corporate friends, his image as a great ruler was deliberately created. This trend continued and in the 2019 elections, he was presented as Chowkidar (Security guard of the Nation) as more and more National assets were given over to his favourite industrialists. His longings for becoming the head of religion were gradually surfacing as seen in the consecration ceremony of Lord Ram's idols. In this, he combined the roles of the head of the state and the head of religion.

The concentration of power in his hands is more or less too strong by now. On top of this as he is campaigning for the 2024 Parliament elections he has stated in an interview, "When my mother was alive, I used to believe that I was born biologically. After she passed away, upon reflecting on all my experiences, I was convinced that God had sent me. This energy could not be from my biological body but was bestowed upon me by God. I believe God has given me abilities, inspiration, and good intentions for a purpose... I am nothing but an

instrument. That's why, whenever I do anything, I believe God is guiding me". He also stated that those who will vote for me will get the punya. What good has Modi been doing? Subversion of democracy, making policies for the benefit of his cronies, marginalising Muslims and Christians, and glorifying the values of hierarchies of ancient times among others are major outcomes of what he has been doing.

This statement is also a delayed response to the Godi media anchors who have been asking him where he gets so much energy. While those around him have no spine to question him on his policy failures, they also add up in taking his image a few notches up. Already many of his devotees, Kangana Ranaut e.g. are calling him the reincarnation of God. Now he is convinced that he is so and that is the source of his endless energy.

One does know that all other dictators also present themselves as being God etc but there is one dictator, who believed in his being God. Interestingly he enunciated this in a book, ghostwritten by him. That is none other than Adolf Hitler. His biography, 'Adolf Hitler: His Life and Speeches' was published in 1923. This compared him to Jesus Christ. It mentioned German Aristocrat and War hero, Victor Von Koerber as the author. One research scholar has shown that it was Hitler himself who wrote this book to enhance his image.

India is in a unique situation now. Chronology of Narendra Modi from crocodile catcher as a child to behave like Nero when the Gujarat carnage was going on, Pradhan Sevak in 2014, Chowkidar selling nation's assets from 2019, and now 'sent by God', God incarnate with infinite stamina sleeping only three hours and eating only once as day as per his acolytes. □□□

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USING RELIGIOUS CARDS

Muslim Vote, Hindu Vote

Nilofar Suhrawardy

IT IS INDEED IRONICAL THAT the Muslim vote is accorded so much importance during elections in India. Numerically, do they really carry any importance? Politically, do they really matter? Of course, Muslims do vote, practise their religion, earn their bread and butter and so forth. But these are basic practices which most Indians indulge in. Now, should a Muslim's vote be accorded "religious" label simply because of his/her religious identity. This would have carried some relevance, if all Indian Muslims were followers of one particular party/leader of their religious community. Such is not the case. Besides, divisions among Muslims of numerous kinds cannot be ignored. So why should their vote be categorically labelled as "Muslim-vote?" Why?

If Muslims chose to cast their votes only in keeping with their religious dictates, it is possible; most of them would have opted to vote for only Muslim candidates. But such has not been the case. Of course, there is no denying that such an impression is created. Attempt is also made to distract their support for key parties by fielding "Muslims" against their candidates. This strategy has been exercised time and again by fielding Muslims as Independent candidates to create dent in votes of candidates viewed as either "secular," "non-communal" and/or popular among Muslims as well as non-Muslims. It is apparently assumed that this strategy will lessen votes of popular candidates and help the key rival candidate win even if the latter secures less than fifty percent votes. This strategy certainly worked in 2019 elections as indi-

cated by numerous candidates contesting for one seat, with several among them probably having been paid to do so. The same strategy is exercised by smaller parties whose dominance is primarily confined to a few seats in their respective states. But when they try and extend their reach elsewhere, they hardly win in name of religion but do succeed in dividing votes. Specifically, these points- that of numerous candidates, identified as Muslims, contesting for the same seat as Independents or representing different parties further supports the point of there being no Muslim vote. If one did exist, why would so many- viewed as Muslims- fight for same seats?

Of course, the same point can be made for votes labelled as "religious" of other communities also, particularly- the Hindu vote. This would only be briefly referred to as the focus here is on primarily the so-called Muslim vote. Give a thought, India is home to numerous political parties, majority of which are dominated by Hindus with Hindus being their key leaders. If there was a Hindu-vote or if the vote of this community could be labelled exclusively and only along "religious" lines, Indians- specifically Hindus- would not have carved their political identities in keeping with their regional, ideological and various other differences. Interestingly, this point can also be made about the Muslim vote. The Muslims cast their votes just as other Indians- not in keeping with their religious perceptions- but in keeping with whom they prefer supporting in the national interest and in keeping what they accord great importance. In all probability,

the same logic is exercised by majority of voters but the hype that is raised about Muslim vote hardly prevails for the majority community.

Of course, it cannot be missed that recent history has been witness to undue importance accorded, along communal lines, by certain right-winged, extremist factions to the "Hindu" vote. But such attempt to use religious card doesn't really suggest that all Indian Hindus support these leaders. If this was the case, as suggested earlier, numerous political parties dominated by Hindus would not have held their respective dominance across the country. Equally important is the need to understand the importance accorded to "secularism" by majority of Indian Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and of other communities. If secularism was not believed in and actually practised, India would have probably remained home to only right-winged communal extremists. The so-called Muslim vote also needs to be understood in this context. Why cannot their electoral practice be understood in keeping with principles of Indian secularism? If they choose to support "secular," non-communal parties against right-winged, extremist, communal parties, their decision is not based on the "religious" identity of the former.

Whichever party they- Muslims support, the same is also supported by in most cases by a larger number of non-Muslims. And yet, the general trend is to accord religious label to only Muslims' electoral practice as the Muslim vote. Why? Indian Muslims- spread across various parts of country- do not cast vote for any one political party or support any one leader. Their votes are as divided as that of other communities. If only Muslims' vote was cast for only Muslims of any particular party or if their vote favoured only one

party, in keeping with their own religious concerns, there may have been some logic in labelling the entire community's vote as one, even categorising it as the Muslim vote. But such is not the case here. By voting for a secular, leftist or any such party should a Muslim or group of Muslims from the same constituency be viewed as symbolic of the Muslim vote? Well, it is indeed mind-boggling that the religious label is tagged to them but not to others who also choose to cast their vote for the same candidate because of similar ideological, political and/or social perceptions.

Yes, there prevails the trend, that of most Muslims preferring to support other parties against those with right-winged, communal leanings. But the same trend prevails, as suggested earlier, among non-Muslims too. This may be said in context of votes cast for candidates representing Congress, Samajwadi Party, Trinamool Congress Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal or several other parties against right-winged, extremist, communal candidates. Yet, as evident during recent electoral campaign,

some leaders chose to pay special attention to Congress allegedly favouring "Muslims." Attempt has been made to create the impression that this party's priority to secure the "Muslim" vote. Pray, how can any party succeed in securing the needed majority in Lok Sabha (Lower House of the Indian Parliament) on the basis of only and/or even primarily the Muslim vote? Muslims don't constitute even 20% of the country's population. Yes, a few constituencies and parts of Jammu & Kashmir do have majority of Muslims. However, Muslims of these areas do not support only one party. Or in other words, here too votes of residents—Hindus, Muslims and of other groups—are given to different parties; which can from no angle be viewed as representing only or entirely the Muslim vote.

Certainly, the impression about the so-called Muslim vote is created by some to secure their support by propagating their "secularism" and by others to target their rivals along communal lines. The ones engaged in these exercises are certainly not Muslims, but a hype is created about

the so-called Muslim Vote. Just as Muslims decide their electoral priorities along secular and anti-communal lines, the same strategy is also exercised by a larger number of non-Muslims. Except in few states, the percentage of Muslim votes is less than 15% of most Indian states' population. But, however much one may debate and argue about this, till the so-called "religious-cards" hold sway in deciding campaigns, the hype in all probability shall continue to be accorded to the Hindu-vote as well as the Muslim vote even though majority of Hindus and Muslims may not really be moved by same in view of their secular and national priorities. Certainly not in context of communal hype raised about the so-called Muslim vote! □□□

[Nilofar Suhrawardy is a senior journalist and writer with specialization in communication studies and nuclear diplomacy. She has come out with several books. These include:— Modi's Victory, A Lesson for the Congress...? (2019); Arab Spring, Not Just a Mirage! (2019), Image and Substance, Modi's First Year in Office (2015) and Ayodhya Without the Communal Stamp, In the Name of Indian Secularism (2006). Originally published in countercurrents.org]

PROPHETS OF PROFIT

Merchants of Death Matter

Bharat Dogra

THE MOST IMPORTANT Issue of the present-day world is that earth's life-nurturing conditions are badly threatened. At a time when maximum efforts need to be made for protecting these life-nurturing conditions within a framework of justice, peace and democracy, unfortunately a lot of power has got concentrated in some giant multinational companies and several multi-billionaires whose fortunes have been steadily growing at a fast pace, even more so in times when most people of the world have faced increasing economic difficulties, as

can be seen most clearly during the recent pandemic crisis.

The enormous concentration of wealth in the hands of several multinational companies and multi-billionaires, together with the high influence wielded by them with national governments as well as international organisations, not to mention media and academia, has enabled them to exercise a huge impact on policy makers as well as public opinion makers. Unfortunately, with a few notable and admirable exceptions, most of them have used this power in highly undesirable ways

to increase existing dangers as well as create new ones. This has happened because they are not looking at increasing welfare, they are striving mainly for maximising their profits and what can be even more harmful, they are making efforts for controlling entire sectors because once they are able to create such control then maximising profit will not be any problem at all for a long time. In the process of controlling entire sectors, they are, together with their political backers in dominant host countries, also acquiring immense political power in the sense it will be increasingly difficult for most national governments to challenge their control and influence, and policies may increasingly have to revolve around the lines promoted by them.

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Here one looks at the increasing influence and power of these big business interests in a few sectors.

Weapons—The weapons industry is increasingly characterised by very high profits, also fraud and corruption, and lack of transparency. Big weapon manufacturing companies are increasingly arrogant about their influence on policy makers.

While the arms industry has been most heavily concentrated in the USA for quite some time, its expansion—and particularly that of the top five companies—was unprecedented soon after 9/11. Harry Stonecipher, then Vice-President of Boeing, told the Wall Street Journal in 2001, “The purse is now wide open...Any member of Congress who doesn’t vote for the funds we need to defend this country will be looking for a new job after next November.” Indeed just the increase in the USA military budget between fiscal year 2002 and 2003 in the USA was greater than the total military budget of any other country.

The capacity of biggest weapon companies to produce huge stocks of highly destructive weapons has been increasing like never before, linked to government contracts. The top five companies in the USA had Pentagon contracts amounting to 286 billion dollars in 2019 and 2020, and 2100 billion dollars during 2001-20. Once such huge stocks of ever-new weapons are being manufactured, to keep the machines rolling, there will be a not-so-openly expressed desire to find opportunities to keep testing these weapons, and using them.

While a no-war situation is the most desirable for humanity and for the entire world, imagine what these giant weapon companies would do in such a world. Hence they are inclined to prefer a world with some wars to a world without wars. However as the budgets and profits of these mega companies have increased rapidly, these probably now desire more wars and longer wars. When deadly wars break out, their

stocks go up, and so do their profits.

There is increasing presence among policy makers of lobbyists from these weapons companies to keep getting more and more contracts for them. These increasing contracts can be justified by exaggerating threats and by war-mongering, preparing the background for real wars. The budget of lobbyists is also in billions of dollars, many politicians depend on their contributions to win the next elections.

Hence a very dangerous situation is being created in which big weapon companies and other military contractors become a major influencing factor towards creating more aggressive policies which result ultimately in more wars.

Space—There has been a fast trend towards high concentration of satellites ownership and control by a few giant corporations, based mainly in the USA. There is increasing risk of space pollution and risk of collisions in space. However the biggest threat comes from the increasing militarisation of space led by the USA but with China and Russia not too far behind, and several other countries active too.

Food and Farming—A few big multinational companies have been gaining increasing control over the seeds sector, with patents, so that they can extract profits even from farmers of those places where the seeds originally belonged. The seed robber can become the seed owner under the new legal dispensation. These companies are frequently also the main promoters of GM crops which have been exposed for their many sided health and environmental risks. These companies tend to tailor their seeds often in ways that high hazard agro-chemicals must be used if these seeds are grown, increasing profits for them and risks for people. The giant multinational companies are displacing small farmers and family farmers, while gaining very big control over food and feed production and trade, including

food processing that emphasises junk food sales on a mass scale.

Energy—Fossil fuels continue to be explored and exploited at rates and in ways that cannot be justified at all in terms of the requirements of checking GHG emissions. Increasingly high risk technologies such as fracking are used, while several virgin areas, such as those opened up by large-scale ice melting in the Arctic and the Antarctic, are likely to be exploited for oil and natural gas.

Communications—On the one hand there is increasing resort to more and more hazardous technology in the name of speeding up and improving communications which may prove very costly in terms of adverse impacts on human health. On the other hand so many ways of spreading disinformation and controlling information are being found, using high technology, that people may be condemned to live in a world of increasing falsehoods—all controlled by big information and communication giants.

Health—Many big pharmaceutical companies became notorious for overcharging for life-saving medicines and providing false information about important medicines or hiding some information which should have been shared. More recent trends have been for imposing very widely used products as essential products while concealing or underplaying their associated side-effects and hazards. Using pandemics as a means of quickly earning vast profits and gaining control over several aspects of the life of people is yet another emerging trend which needs to be watched and understood carefully. □□□

[The writer is Honorary Convener, Campaign to Save Earth Now. His recent books include Planet in Peril, Protecting Earth for Children, A Day in 2071 and Man over Machine.]

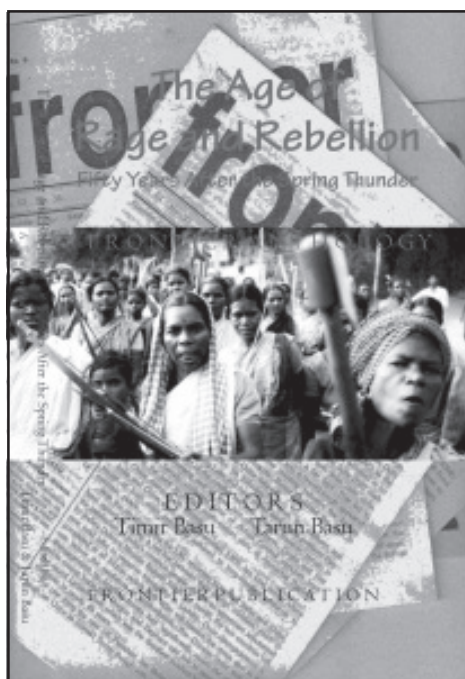
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