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Is a Federal Party Possible?

Kuldip Nayar

When former Congress President Sonia Gandhi said that they would not allow the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) to return to power, she hinted at a joint action on the part of the Opposition. It also means that she does not want Prime Minister Narendra Modi to for the second term. On its own, the Congress does not have the numbers to pose any threat to the BJP-run government or Modi.

In all probability, as things stand today, Modi looks good enough to returning to power. The three reverses in recent by-elections to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies notwithstanding, the BJP is capturing power in state after state and spreading its tentacles slowly but surely. Yet, 2019 general elections are some way to go and the impending state election in Karnataka and the subsequent ones in other states later this year would be the real test to assess Modi's strengths and weaknesses.

West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee has taken the initiative to get the non-BJP parties together for a federal structure to contest against the BJP in 2019. To

underline the Congress cooperation, Mamata has said that she is daily in touch with Sonia Gandhi. In fact, the leaders from other non-BJP ruled states are constantly in touch with each other to see the possibility of a federal structure.

If you recall, the Janata Party was a federal structure. It did not last its course and fell because the then leaders, particularly the top ones like Morarji Desai and Chanran Singh, quarrelling in public all the time, much to the exasperation of the people. Then the Jana Sangh wielded power because the opponents were a divided lot. Once the non-Jana Sangh parties came together, the Jana Sangh government was reduced to a minority.

The federal structure that would come up, courtesy the top leaders like Sonia Gandhi or, for that matter, Mamata Banerjee, has to take a leaf out of the book of the Janata Party and learn to work together. The moot question would be who among the leaders has enough support to be the Prime Minister. Once this question is settled, things will fall into place and the federal structure could survive.

The question the country faces

today is that if pluralism, the nation's ethos, is defeated which forces would come to power. The BJP is determined to divide the people. They have been trying for a pro-Hindu government in some shape or the other. The RSS, which is the mentor of the BJP, is playing its role to perfection to help realize the dreams of Modi.

This is where the new federal combination has to be careful about. It is better they come up with a Minimum Common Programme with all parties endorsing the views and aspirations of all leaders. This is just one important issue which the top leaders of non-BJP have to address as the people's interests should be above everything else.

For the idea of India, which is founded on secularism and democracy, the parties based on religion or castes should have no place in the federal structure. The danger is that the various elements would try to pull in different directions to corner power. Even individual leaders should keep the country's unity ahead of personal or their party interests.

If they learn to live together, the warning about their disarray would be repulsed. Secularism would have gone through the fire to prove its intrinsic strength. With coalition politics inevitable in India, the best possible way to defeat the idea of BJP or, for that matter, Modi and his cohorts is stay together and learn in the process to rule together.

The BJP cannot defeat the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi, unity in diversity. In fact, what it has done is to prove Gandhi right. Unity of India could face the danger of separatism. Pakistan whom I wish well is the fallout of the mistrust in the Hindu majority. Qaid-e-Azam Mohammad

Ali Jinnah, who was an apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity, said that he could not trust the majority, the Hindus. This mistrust is the reason why people left their homes after partition. One million were killed on both sides and Hindus and Muslims went apart further.

The RSS looks like copying the idea of division. Its philosophy is nothing but making a mockery of Gandhi's preaching. The RSS elements did not succeed as the communal forces could not silence Gandhi. They had to ultimately kill him so that the same voice which the people heard and respected. I had seen the letter which Nathuram Godse wrote in defence of what he did. He avowed respect to Gandhiji but argued that the country would suffer if the Mahatma had lived longer.

I recall one incident from his prayer meetings. I was present when, before the Mahatma started his meeting, one person from Punjab got up and said that he would not listen to the Quran. At the meeting all the three scriptures—the Gita, Quran and the Bible—were read. Gandhi said that there would be no meeting until the objector withdrew his dissent. For days, there was no prayer congregation. It was resumed only after the person finally withdrew his objection.

Today, when the fanatic RSS guides the government in appointment of teachers, librarians and heads of academic institutions, there is little hope for merit to take over. Under the circumstances, how can a federal party fight against such elements? The danger to the nation is from those who think that since the country has 80 percent of Hindu population, they have the right to rule.

Leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel saw to it that there would be no Hindutva. They converted the then assembly into a constituent assembly to have a constitution. India is ruled today not by the 80 percent but by the constitution which assures one vote to one individual. Even when the Hindus are in a majority, they cannot subvert the idea of India because the constitution is supreme.

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BJP's Forays in North Eastern States and Anti Minority Agenda

Ram Puniyani

Over the last couple of decades, one is coming across pamphlets, leaflets and other material containing the propaganda that Christian missionaries are converting people at a rapid pace. The examples mostly given have been those of the North Eastern states. This propaganda has been extensively used at pan-India level, particularly before elections in most of the States. It is this propaganda which formed the base of hate against Christians and we witnessed the ghastly murder of Pastor Graham Stewart Stains, the horrific Kandhmal violence, and low intensity anti-Christian violence and attacks on Churches in different parts of the country. So how come BJP, the party flaunting Ram Temple, Mother cow and Hindu nationalism, could make inroads into an area where in many States Christianity has a good presence, where beef eating is part of the people's dietary habits and where different tribes with diverse and clashing political interests articulate their aspirations by forming various groups which have been asking for a separate State for their tribes.

While the situation in each State is different, there is a pattern in the BJP strategy, which in a flexible manner, supplemented by massive resources, near perfect electoral machinery and the backing of its parent organisation's swayamsevaks, is winning the majority in State after State. In Assam it focused mainly on Bangladeshi immigrants, alleging that Muslims are swamping the state and threatening that Hindus

will be reduced to a minority. It was clever enough to strike alliances even with separatist organisations. Most of the regional organisations in the area look at Congress as the party which has not focused on development work. The BJP, while it abuses those differing with its ideology as 'anti-nationals', has no compunctions at all in allying with those who have been talking of a separate State or even secession. In Tripura, the left government, despite its clean record, failed to fulfill the aspirations of tribal and OBCs in matters of reservation. It also failed miserably in creating employment opportunities for the youth which gave the ground to BJP to promise and create the illusion of development.

The BJP here mainly harped on two major factors. One is the promise of development. While in the rest of the country its slogan of development stands exposed as a mere vote catching slogan, in the North East it could still sell Modi as a development man. Manik Sarkar's failure to implement the new Pay Commission pay scales must have hurt large numbers as they are still stuck at Fourth Pay Commission scales, while talk of Seventh Pay Commission is in the air. In Tripura, they could also harp on 'Hindus are Refugees: Muslims are infiltrators' to influence the Bengali Hindu votes. In the tribal areas, RSS swayamsevaks have worked consistently since long in organising religious functions,

opening schools, etc. and thus succeeded in turning the tables, taking advantage of the fact that the Manik Sarkar Government failed to address the needs of tribals in matters of opportunities. In matters of beef, BJP openly took a hypocritical line that their ban on cow slaughter and eating beef, which is being imposed in different parts of country, will not be enforced in North East. It is by now well established that like most other issues raised by the RSS-BJP combine, holy cow is a political tool for dividing society, and when the crunch comes they manipulate the issue as they have done in Kerala and Goa.

In a very loud manner, towering over Christian voters, Mr. Modi talked of rescuing 46 nurses in ISIS captivity in Iraq and Father Alex Prem Kumar from Taliban captivity. What can one say on these issues? Were they rescued as they were Indians or were they rescued because they belonged to a particular religion? As is the wont with Modi type politics, they take advantage of these incidents in a crass political manner. Despite the fact that their ideology regards Christians and Muslims as foreigners, they do at the same time manipulate these identities for electoral gains. In Tripura, the majority of Congress and TMC MLAs migrated to BJP as well as the electoral support shifted to BJP. What worked for BJP here was the anti-Bangladeshi sentiment along with the illusory promise of development.

In Meghalaya, the situation is different. Though Congress did emerge as the single largest party and logically it should have been given the chance to form the government, the Hindu nationalist Governor thought otherwise and the second largest party, in alliance with practically everybody including the BJP, is going to form the government. Here the failure of BJP to win over the electorate is writ large on the results. But what is putting it in the camp of power is the alliance with a regional party, which does not have amicable relations with the Congress. The role of BJP's all-round clout, including money and

muscle power, is the undercurrent of the story.

There are a lot of lessons the Left can learn from Tripura. The issue of addressing problems of youth, tribals and OBC is paramount. In addition, the issue of BJP manipulating in all possible ways to come to power is something which can only be ignored at the risk of a severe decline in the electoral power of the Left and other parties. What is being labeled as the Karat line, not allying with Congress, will surely decimate the Left in times to come, probably sooner than later, as this line underestimates the potential and the deeper agenda of BJP–

RSS. It ignores the threat of the powerful electoral machine built by the BJP over a period of time, and its capability to manipulate issues like beef and conversion by Christian missionaries, even to the extent of taking opposite positions in different parts of the country and getting away with it!

The emotive politics unleashed by BJP–RSS is visible again in the form of attacking Lenin's statue and attacks on CPM workers. What is in store for future of the region if democratic forces don't rise to the occasion is anybody's guess!

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India Needs Draupadi And Not Savitri

Rajindar Sachar

Everyone knows that Indians are sensitive about their religion. Before the elections they are very particular about doing such actions which they think will result in a favorable verdict. And so, Rahul Gandhi is openly saying that he respects old traditions; not only that, he is going further and publicly showing his respect for these traditions while making his programmes.

As reported by the press, he showed this during the Gujarat elections by visiting many temples; even the press had no choice but to highlight this fact. Some of Nehru's admirers have expressed regret that Nehru's views on keeping religion outside politics are being abandoned by his own family.

In support of his actions, Rahul Gandhi is openly saying he would go by the conduct of the Pandavas, and has labelled the opposition as

Kauravas. However, he has not stated what will be his policies or programme of action as a Pandava, as against his opponents whom he has accused of being Kauravas.

Tradition says that the Kauravas were 'neech' because they did not show respect for women and had no respect for womanhood. The most important incident which is the basis for labelling the Kauravas as being disrespectful towards women is the disrobing of Draupadi by the Kauravas. But the question that needs to be asked is, what led to this incident taking place. Both Pandavas and Kauravas agreed to gamble, so to that extent, both are equally to be blamed.

Furthermore, it is the Pandavas who while gambling with the Kauravas put Draupadi at stake. Not only that, they did not even lift a finger when Draupadi was

being disrobed and crying out to be saved from this insult. Not only they, but the elders like Bhishma Pitamaha and Dronacharya too kept a cowardly silence when she was being disrobed and asking for help.

Now let us examine what Rahul means by calling himself as a Pandava. I would have been happy if he was promising that in present India bullets will never be used for maintaining law. Death by police firing raises a very important question as regards the responsibility of the State or the Central Government. I may in this connection point out that the Socialist Party of JP and Dr. Lohia had proposed a policy regarding police firing in independent India. It was a simple one, namely that in a free and democratic country like India, any police firing leading to the killing of citizens must automatically lead

to the resignation of the concerned State government. The leaders should promise that in independent India, no State government or the Central Government should have legal sanction to open fire on the crowds. And if a situation reaches that stage, it only shows the complete incompetency of the State government, and therefore should result in immediate resignation of the government.

In fact, the Socialist Party had to face this situation early in free India. The party was expected to do well in elections, considering the sacrifices and contribution to freedom struggle made by the socialists, especially their heroic role in the 1942 Quit India movement which was undoubtedly the most important phase of the freedom struggle.

However, the Socialist Party was able to form a government in only the State of Travancore-Cochin (which was renamed as Kerala State in 1956), with the socialist leader Thanu Pillai as the Chief Minister. Some time later, there was an agitation in Travancore and police firing took place, leading to the death of some demonstrators. Immediately Dr. Lohia and many others like us demanded the resignation of our government of Thanu Pillai. I am still of the view that in free India, killing of the demonstrators by police must automatically lead to the resignation of the government if human right violations are to be avoided. This has been proven by subsequent events in India; official figures released by Government of India show that over 50,000 people have been killed in police firings—this has happened because correct human right standards have not been accepted and followed, namely the

automatic resignation of the State government in such an eventuality.

I do not know why Rahul thinks that Pandavas should be supported against the Kauravas, whom he calls 'neech'. In the matter of gambling, both of them were in agreement, so both share the blame equally. During the play, the Pandavas lost their balance and chose to put Draupadi on stake, and for this they are primarily to be blamed. Even when Draupadi was crying for help, the Pandavas shamefully kept silent. The only explanation for this is that both Pandavas and Kauravas did not consider Draupadi as their equal, but a mere chattel of man.

Draupadi of course never forgot the incident, and took the stand that she will not keep contact with Pandavas till Duryodhana was killed. But even today, most people consider that keeping silent was the only correct answer. These people do not treat women as equal to men; that is why the cry of Draupadi when she suffers discrimination and is treated as personal chattel remains unanswered till today.

The only way this attitude towards women can be changed is by accepting women's demand that they should initially be given one-third representation both in the State legislatures and the Parliament, that is, one-third of all MLAs and MPs should be women (to start with). Women should press ahead with this demand and make it an election issue both in the State and Lok Sabha elections; in this fight for justice, it should be hoped that quite a large number of Indian men will vote with women.

Women must strongly put forth the demand that that they will no longer suffer any insult to their womanhood. Women must boldly

declare their resolve that they are determined to have an independent identity. This will be a befitting reply to all those who still consider women to be chattel today. This alone will give respect to womanhood. India does not need Savitri, India needs Draupadi.

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Anti-Muslim Riots in Sri Lanka

Irfan Engineer

The recent anti-Muslim riots in Kandy, Sri Lanka, once again demonstrate that religion is becoming more salient in public domain, including politics, in South Asia. Anti-Muslim riots were witnessed in Ampara town in Eastern Province on February 26 and in Teddeniya and Udispattuwa in Kandy district from March 2. Riots in Ampara were triggered when Sinhalese customers in a restaurant found lumps of wheat flour in the meals served to them by a Muslim chef which they suspected to be contraceptive pills. A video of the Muslim chef nodding (whether out of fear or misunderstanding) on being asked whether it was contraceptive was uploaded. Instead of conducting proper inquiries or reporting the matter to the authorities, mobs mobilised by extremist Sinhalese organisations attacked mosques and properties belonging to Muslims. Investigations later established that it was a false suspicion, and indeed there aren't any tablets that can cause permanent sterilisation.

Riots in Kandy were sparked when a Sinhalese truck driver was assaulted on February 22 by four reportedly drunk Muslim youth after a traffic accident. The truck driver died on March 2 due to injuries inflicted on him. The accused youth were arrested on the day of the incident itself and remanded till March 7. Sinhalese mobs began attacking Muslim properties in the region, resulting in widespread damage to property. According to the government, 465 houses, businesses and vehicles were damaged. The Sri

Lankan Government declared an emergency (which some felt was an over reaction by the government), clamped down on social media and imposed curfew. Emergency was last declared in 2011 during the civil war.

Both the incidents show the widespread fear, suspicion and prejudices prevalent against the Muslim community. Muslim community is diverse including the Moors, Malays, Bohras, Khojas and Memons, and constitutes 9.66% of the population of Sri Lanka according to the 2012 census. Moors speak Tamil language and are the largest ethnic group within the Muslim community, constituting 9.30% of the population of Sri Lanka. Islam arrived on the shores of Sri Lanka in the 7th century C.E. along with Arab traders, who married and settled on the island. They adopted the local Tamil language and culture. Sri Lankan Moors are descendants of Marakkar, Mappilas, Memons and Pathans of South India.

The LTTE targeted Moors when they resisted the claim that Moors were Tamils converted to Islam. Moors claimed their separate identity as progeny of Arabs. Few hundred Moors were killed while hundreds of thousands were displaced from their homes and their properties destroyed by the LTTE as they claimed the northern and eastern territories for Tamil Eelam. Sri Lankan Moors and Sinhalese then joined hands during the 26 year civil war. Under attack from LTTE on one hand, and rise of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism on the other

hand, the Muslim community turned to Islam for stronger bonds among themselves. Prior to May 2009, the principal adversary of extremist Sinhalese Buddhist movements was the Tamil ethnic community. The Moors were not on their radar. However, after the threat from Tamil Eelam became subdued, extremist Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism turned its attention to new adversaries. New adversaries are necessary to project themselves as saviours, nay, custodians of Sinhalese Buddhist community, and achieving hegemonic power over not only the 'others' but also within the Sinhala Buddhist community itself. They now turned against the already besieged Muslim community, and with Islamophobia on rise globally, it was easy to target them. During my recent visit to Sri Lanka, a Buddhist monk asked me as to why the Muslims who had assimilated into the Sinhala culture were asserting their Islamic identity since the 1980s?

Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) or the Buddhist Force Army was founded by monks Kirama Wimalajothi and Galagoda Aththe Gnanasaara after they parted ways with the Jathika Hela Urumaya. In their first national convention held in 2012, they launched a virulent attack on Muslims and Islamic identity. They demanded a single legal system, opposed halal food and Muslim women wearing abaya or burqa, use of Buddhist monks to teach history and other subjects in schools and preferential treatment

in university admissions for students who attended Buddhism classes. They demanded ban on birth control measures for the Buddhist community. They thus demanded privileges for Buddhists on one hand, and cultural assimilation of Muslims or rather de-Islamisation on the other hand. The BBS stands for strong centralised authoritarian state which would ensure protection of Sinhala Buddhist cultural and religious traditions and is against multi-racial, multi-religious and multicultural nature of Sri Lanka.

The extremist Buddhist Sinhalese nationalism seeks to mobilise the majority Buddhist Sinhala community by instilling fear of the minority Muslim community which is less than 10% of the population. They problematise ‘mosques springing up everywhere’, ‘faster growth of Muslim population’ and ‘conversions by Christians’. They argue that Sinhala Buddhists have only one country, unlike Muslims, Hindus and Christians who have other countries. The fact is, the Moors too have only one homeland, and so do Sinhala Christians!

The BBS General Secretary Gnansara welcomed the victory of Narendra Modi Government in India. He claimed they were having discussions with the Hindu supremacist organisation RSS in India to form what he called ‘Hindu-Buddhist peace zone’ in South Asia, together with Myanmar’s extremist Buddhist nationalist organisation, the Wirathu Group 969. Though Ram Madhav, General Secretary of the BJP, denied that they were in talks with BBS, he posted comments appreciating BBS. He wrote, “The Bodu Bala Sena essentially talks about protecting the Buddhist culture of the country

from foreign religions”. RSS too claims to do the same – protecting Hindu culture of India from foreign religions. Wirathu Group 969, BBS and RSS have common imagined enemies in followers of Islam and Christianity, and profess a duty to save their respective ‘sole homelands’ from the threat from these ‘foreign religions’. All three Buddhist and Hindu supremacist organisations posit imagined threat from imagined enemies and hype up fear within the majority community in order to project themselves as protectors of their respective cultural heritage. They have little respect for truth, established procedures and democratic institutions. In the case of recent anti-Muslim riots in Kandy, the Muslim youth had been arrested by the police on the charge of beating up the truck driver on the very day of the incident itself; and in Ampara, prejudices against Muslims led the Sinhala customers of hotel owned by Muslims to imagine contraceptive pills in meals served to them, notwithstanding the fact that there are no contraceptive pills that cause permanent and irreversible sterilisation. They did not wait for an investigation of their suspicion. Even if their suspicion was true, who should inflict punishment upon whom and in what measure?

The right wing extremists use insignificant everyday incidents as an excuse to inflict collective punishment on all members of the ‘other’ community, even those and those who have no role or control over the incident. In order to purge the ‘other’ from their midst, they hype up the conflict to the level of continuous and ongoing war with the ‘other’. In this war, the weak, insufficient and often reluctant protection afforded to the ‘other’

by law is immediately stigmatised as appeasement of the ‘other’. The extremist supremacists are actually at war with democracy, and rule of law and war with the ‘other’ is only an excuse. At a rally in 2013 attended by 16,000 people, including 1,300 Buddhist monks, the BBS general secretary Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara unveiled the ‘Maharagama Declaration’. He stated, “This is a government created by Sinhala Buddhists and it must remain Sinhala Buddhist. This is a Sinhala country, Sinhala government. Democratic and pluralistic values are killing the Sinhala race.” He called upon the Sinhalese Buddhists attending the rally to “become an unofficial civilian police force against Muslim extremism. These so-called democrats are destroying the Sinhala race.” The Wirathu Group 969 has always supported the Military Junta in Myanmar and the RSS has always been unhappy with the Indian Constitution which they say is based on western traditions, in a veiled attack on equal citizenship rights.

The BBS has also learnt a tactic or two from the RSS. In a rally held in Kandy on March 17, 2013, BBS announced that the 10th-century mosque at the Kuragala Buddhist monastery complex in Ratnapura District had been constructed on a Buddhist heritage site by Muslim fundamentalists. Medieval India was ruled by Muslim Emperors and this provides the basis for the Sangh Parivar to claim that Babri Masjid was built after destroying Ramjanmabhoomi Temple; but Sri Lanka was never ruled by Muslim kings. It was a first a Portuguese colony and later a British colony. BBS general secretary Gnanasara also accused the Muslim owned

Fashion Bug and No Limit retail chains of converting its Buddhist Sinhalese employees to Islam. The Muslim owned Fashion Bug clothes shop in Pepiliyana, Colombo District was attacked on March 28, 2013 by a mob led by Buddhist monks. While these right wing supremacists vilify Muslim cultural influences as foreign, they themselves freely borrow from other foreign political ideologies, including more than a leaf from the Nazis and fascists.

However there are inherent contradictions and inconsistencies in their ideologies. While they complement each other's electoral victories as good for the stability of the region, share common 'enemies' in Islam and Christianity and have 'held high level talks', their political goals are actually going to pit them against each other in the long run. While the BBS talks of protecting Sinhalese Buddhist homeland, RSS's goal is Akhand Bharat whose boundaries not only include Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, but also Myanmar and parts of China! Sri Lanka is the land where Lord Ram waged war and rescued his wife Sita from Ravana's custody, so therefore it forms an important part of Akhand Bharat.

Through their hypes, the right wing supremacists create massive insecurity among the marginalised minorities who are also practically abandoned by the state, which in turn pushes them to seek refuge in stronger unity around their exclusive symbols. The halal food being problematised after 2012 is not a new cultural practice and it should not concern non-Muslims as to how Muslims choose to consume their food. Halal meat only means that blood of the slaughtered animal is

allowed to flow out fully before it is consumed. The extremists push the 'other' towards more exclusivism, instead of creating an environment of cultural exchanges and dialogue.

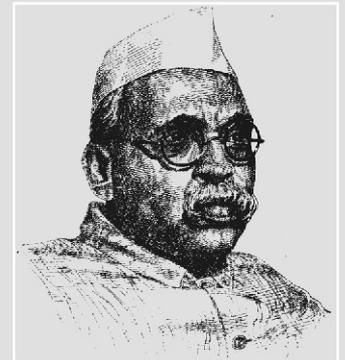
Musthafa Nihmath, member of Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN) told this writer that there were about 3,000 mosques in Sri Lanka and all services were being conducted in Tamil. However, in the recent past, 5 mosques have begun their Friday sermons in Sinhala language in Colombo in rotation. The Moors are hard working and a large proportion of them are business entrepreneurs. The cab driver told this writer that every other shop or business belongs either to Moors or Tamils. It is possible that it is because of the prosperity of the Moors that their business and mosques are being made targets.

The extreme right wing nationalists in all the countries are able to exploit the feelings of relative deprivation that the poor among the 'majority' community feel, and convert it into hatred against others belonging to more or less the same class but following different cultural traditions, and then channelise this hatred into violence. These feelings could be checked by appropriate education and dialogue between and within communities. The Constitution of Sri Lanka, as indeed of India too, mandates the state to treat all citizens, regardless of their religions, equally, and guarantee all citizens adequate environment and space to freely practice their religion. However, the executive of these countries has failed to administer the law impartially, both in letter and spirit. As a Sri Lankan minister told a group among whom this writer was present, few people involved in violence are put to

trial and even fewer are convicted. The impending violence can be prevented if hate crimes are checked in time, intelligence strengthened and acted upon and bureaucrats are made accountable. Though the Sri Lankan Government took stern steps by declaring emergency to control the riots and also clamped down upon social media, the executive misused emergency provisions against the minorities. As the levels of inequalities in Sri Lanka are increasing, the economic elite finance right wing nationalism to problematise perceived or factual growth of the rich from the 'other' marginalised communities, so as to divert attention from their own wealth and from the structures that allow their enrichment.

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Fiery Death of Workers in Real Paint Factory in Sonapat: A Fact Finding Report

Five workers in Sonapat, Haryana, burnt to death due to a fire which broke out in Real Paint Factory in the Rai industrial estate in Sonapat, Haryana. The dead include a woman worker with her child on her chest. Sixteen jumped from the third floor to various serious injuries. But nothing appears in the news. This is not some random incident either. Workers work almost as bonded labourers for a pittance. In the entire area, there is no ESI, no Provident Fund, no labour laws, no pretence of safety measures, no union, only 'acche din'.

A fact finding team constituting of representatives of Inqilaabi Mazdoor Kendra, Nagrik Akhbaar, Jan Sangharsh Manch Haryana, Mazdoor Patrika and Grameen Mazdoor Union, Bihar went to the site of the accident on March 20, 2018. The team prepared the following report based on their physical inspection of the site and conversations with workers working in nearby units.

The Rai industrial estate is situated in Sonapat district of Haryana. It is on the GT road, between Delhi and Sonapat, around 47 kms from ISBT, Kashmiri Gate, Delhi. The factory which caught fire was situated on plot number 291, 292, 293 in the Rai industrial estate. The factory used to manufacture industrial paint for automobiles. On March 20, when the investigating team reached the site, smoke was still emanating from the factory.

There were some workers standing in front of the factory who

worked in factories nearby. Three policemen were seated on chairs along with a journalist from Punjab Kesari and some persons from the Intelligence Bureau. The workers informed us that the fire broke out in the night of March 17-18 at around 2.30 am. The factory used to produce paint thinner which is extremely inflammable and that there was a huge stock of paint thinner and solvent inside the factory. Thirty four workers worked in the factory but there is no conclusive information as to how many were working when the fire broke out. According to people nearby, five persons have already died due to the accident while police and intelligence report claim four deaths. The workers told us that sixteen workers saved themselves by jumping from the third floor of the factory. Many of them got charred, one of the female workers broke her spine, and the rest too are in very critical condition. They have been sent to PGI Rohtak and Khanpur Kalan for treatment.

When we reached the site we found that the main door of the factory was unlocked and open—in fact the metal door had melted and was completely deshaped, indicating the intensity of heat caused by the fire. We could see a pile of paint cans inside. The workers informed us that one of the worker's dead body was found stuck to a can of paint and another's charred skeleton was found near the stairs. Like the factory in Bawana, Delhi, there was a metal grill in front of the gate and the factory premises

had only one exit which used to be kept locked. In spite of producing highly inflammable substances, the factory had only one gate. The factory seemed like a prison where the workers were made to work like indentured labour, and that too at a grave risk to their lives. There were no safety norms followed. The basement had an enormous tank to store chemicals—the storage capacity was 15000 litres.

The factory was a three-storey building and the workers and their families lived in the same building. Production facilities were in the first two floors (ground floor and the first floor)—5 workers used to reside on the first floor and 16 people lived on the third floor. A woman and her child got burnt to death in one of the rooms on the third floor—she was clutching her child to her breast when they died. One of the workers is still feared to be trapped under the debris. It was

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evident from the remains that none of the mandatory safety norms were followed in the factory. According to the norms, at least 40 percent of the space of the plot in which a factory is constructed (around the building) has to be kept free. In this case there were thick sheets of iron covering the space, the same as in every other factory building in the vicinity. All the factories had generators and compressors on their roofs, which could lead to a serious mishap at any time. The real cost of human lives in a profit driven economy was evident from the accident we had gone to investigate and those waiting to happen.

Rai industrial estate was established in 1995-1996. At that time, the going wages was Rs 1,200 to Rs 1,500 a month. The employers on principle did not employ local workers; most of them were migrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The Rai industrial estate mostly constitutes of tiny units and the workers are given the lowest wages in the entire Delhi NCR region. On an average, a male worker earns Rs 8,000 per month for an eight hour shift while female workers earn Rs 4,500, way below the legal minimum wages declared by the Haryana government, which is Rs 9,600 for unskilled workers, Rs 10,826 for semi-skilled workers, Rs 11,429 for skilled workers and Rs 12,900 for highly skilled workers.

Workers informed us that helpers could manage monthly wages of Rs 9,000–10,000 by working 12- hour shifts. Further, only 20 percent of the factories in the area had registered their workers for ESI facilities. In any case the so-called 'reforms' by which the Central Government is conspiring to dismantle labour laws in the interests of the capitalist class

have already been implemented in the BJP-ruled states, including Haryana. Thus in Haryana, the capitalists have been offered complete freedom to exploit their workers, unhindered by legal constraints or any sanctions by the government. The situation is not likely to improve unless there is a collective resistance by the workers.

The police officials present (including a sub-inspector) refused to answer our queries on the case. The only information we could gather was that the owner Gulshan Mata was on the run. The owner Gulshan Mata, his son Abhishek Mata, the manager Meenu and three supervisors have been booked under section 304 A of the IPC—causing death due to negligence. It is telling that while the police routinely slap workers with much more serious charges including murder, treason, sedition, Gangster Act, etc., they seem to get all soft and generous when it comes to the crimes of the capitalists and their henchmen.

The state government has

announced compensation of Rs 5 lakhs for the dead and Rs 1 lakh for the injured. One wonders what difference would a lakh rupees make to a worker (or his family) who has been rendered permanently invalid.

On March 22, we came to know through an associate that the government and the administration have not been following up with the 8 severely burned workers admitted in PGI Rohtak. The announcement made by the government of ensuring proper medical attention to the injured workers is all a lot of hot air. One of the workers in a very critical condition has been referred to Safdarjung Hospital in New Delhi for treatment.

The state of the factories in Rai industrial estate and the work conditions would lead anyone to conclude that the painful deaths of these workers were not due to an accident but were wilful murders in the ruthless pursuit of profits.

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15 Years After the Iraq Invasion, What Are the Costs?

Stephanie Savell

March 2018 marked the 15th anniversary of the US-led invasion of Iraq.

In 2003, President George W. Bush and his advisers based their case for war on the idea that Saddam Hussein, then dictator of Iraq, possessed weapons of mass destruction—weapons that have never been found. Nevertheless, all these years later, Bush’s “Global War on Terror” continues—in Iraq and in many other countries.

It’s a good time to reflect on what this war—the longest in US history—has cost Americans and others around the world.

First, the economic costs. According to estimates by the Costs of War project at Brown University’s Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, the war on terror has cost Americans a staggering \$5.6 trillion since 2001, when the US invaded Afghanistan.

\$5.6 trillion. This figure includes not just the Pentagon’s war fund, but also future obligations such as social services for an ever-growing number of post-9/11 veterans.

It’s hard for most of us to even begin to grasp such an enormous number.

It means Americans spend \$32 million per hour, according to a counter by the National Priorities Project at the Institute for Policy Studies.

Put another way: since 2001, every American taxpayer has spent almost \$24,000 on the wars—equal to the average down payment on a house, a new Honda Accord, or a

year at a public university.

As stupefying as those numbers are, the budgetary costs pale in comparison with the human toll.

As of 2015, when the Costs of War project made its latest tallies, up to 165,000 Iraqi civilians had died as a direct consequence of US war, plus around 8,000 US soldiers and military contractors in Iraq.

Those numbers have only continued to rise. Up to 6,000 civilians were killed by U.S.-led strikes in Iraq and Syria in 2017—more civilians than in any previous year, according to the watchdog group AirWars.

In addition to those direct deaths, at least four times as many people in Iraq have died from the side effects of war, such as malnutrition, environmental degradation and deteriorated infrastructure. Since the 2003 invasion, for instance, Iraqi health care has plummeted—with hospitals and clinics bombed, supplies of medicine and electricity jeopardised, and thousands of physicians and healthcare workers fleeing the country.

Meanwhile, the war continues to spread, no longer limited to Afghanistan, Iraq or Syria, as many Americans think. Indeed, the US military is escalating a shadowy network of anti-terror operations all across the world—in at least 76 nations, or 40 percent of countries on the planet. Last October, news about four Green Berets killed by an Islamic State affiliate in the West African nation of Niger gave Americans a glimpse of just how

broad this network is. And along with it comes all the devastating consequences of militarism for the people of these countries.

We must ask: Are these astounding costs worth it? Is the US accomplishing anything close to its goal of diminishing the global terrorist threat?

The answer is, resoundingly, no.

US activity in Iraq and the Middle East has only spurred greater political upheaval and unrest. The US-led coalition is seen not as a liberating force, but as an aggressor. This has fomented insurgent recruitment, and there are now more terrorist groups in the Middle East than ever before.

Until a broad swath of the American public gets engaged to call for an end to the war on terror, these mushrooming costs—economic, human, social, and political—will just continue to grow.

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Arvind Kejriwal's Apology Letter and Middle Class Standard of Ethics

Nishikant Mohapatra

I have been keenly observing the multitude of reactions to Arvind Kejriwal's unconditional apology letter in the various defamation suits filed by the political opponents across the country. Some of our own friends are deeply hurt as their perceptions of Kejriwal as an uncompromising, stubborn leader has given way to an image of a meek surrender. Of course the media and the Opposition chorus have tried to give strength to this perception but in vain.

But for people who are pursuing a passion for a change of system in a hostile atmosphere, this is not a surprise at all. It is only a tactical retreat. It is not a clean chit to the corrupt. His apology letter only says that "I apologise as I found that there is no evidence with me to substantiate my allegations." But the allegations as such stand as Arvind Kejriwal was not making them alone. He was only amplifying them with audacity and clarity. Any agency and government willing to book these criminals will in no way find Kejriwal's apology letter a hindrance to their purpose. On the other hand, defending false defamation cases throughout the country with money, time and energy forgetting the original objective is not desirable at all. In the Indian judicial system, everybody and anybody can file a defamation suit and can compel a person to

toil hard to save himself from penal provisions. In a defamation case, if you win then it does not automatically establish that what you have said about a person is true. It only establishes the fact that what you have said is without malice and intent to harm the other's reputation. It saves you from penalty and is a win of ego only. On the other hand, if you lose you are penalised.

Kejriwal as a visionary and true leader of the masses can distinguish between the fallacy of fighting defamation cases at the cost of concentrating on the fight for systematic changes. From the beginning, in his fight for change he has assiduously kept himself away from all the distractions that don't contribute to his effort for fundamental changes. He knows his accusations are based upon material available in the public forum and require proper investigations to nail the culprits in the court of law. This requires investigation by independent agencies and through proper judicial monitoring. Right now all investigative agencies like the CBI and CVC have become a part of the corrupt system. It is only wishful thinking to expect that the agencies will investigate and apprehend the accused persons. We have seen how the 2G case and coal corruption cases were thrown into the dustbin. Even the recent bank fraud cases revealed how the

administration and politicians are in connivance and let free the culprits. Furthermore, the objective is not to punish the alleged persons only as they are mere soldiers in the edifice of the corrupt governance system operating in India and the kingpins are well protected without any trail of evidence.

Therefore the middle class standard of ethics should not be applied to Kejriwal's tactical and pragmatic retreat through his apology letter. The people pursuing this ethics are silent when confronted with BJP's blatant disregard for democratic norms, the Lieutenant Governor's hegemonic rule in Delhi, data manipulation, u-turns by major parties, denial to come under RTI Act, retrospective provision to cover foreign funding to BJP and Congress, and the attack on the autonomy of the CBI, the judiciary, the banking system and educational institutions. The same middle class ethics is a party to social media manipulations, communalism and contempt for constitutional bedrocks. I call it middle class ethics as both the poor and the rich have ditched it for good. For example, on issues such as the opportunistic alliances of BJP-PDP and SP-BSP or cross voting by MPs, the rich, the politicians and the opinion makers are silent on it. They conveniently bury their ideological differences in the name of larger good. Navjot Singh Sidhu

can sing both that Manmohan Singh is “sardar beasardar” and “sardar asardar”. Similarly the poor and unemployed who accuse the government for their plight can stand for the governing party in the name of caste, religion, region, bribe and other non-governance elements and inducements. But there will be hardly any heart burning.

In this context Kejriwal’s decision is very pragmatic, logical and in the interest of the common man. He has done no harm to our purpose. Rather he should be strengthened to make his fight more vigorous to change the system. Despite heavy obstacles by the

Lieutenant Governor and the BJP, we are witnessing a sea change in Delhi’s governance system. His work against corruption and in the field of education, health, public distribution and services are watched world over and greatly appreciated. He has successfully exposed the fallacy of governance by the BJP, Congress and other political parties. He is solidly on his path for a corruption free, transparent, participatory, accountable, outcome oriented governance model. Pygmies and self centered politicians can him names such as bhagoda, but only time will tell how successful he is and what will be his contribution to modern governance in India.

I appeal to all change agents to concentrate on the task at hand, i.e. to expose the communal and corrupt elements and contribute towards strengthening Aam Aadmi’s alternative model of politics towards a political revolution. It will need sustained treading in the muddy path where issues will blur your vision and hurdles will be there in your path to derail your mission. A fight against the crony capitalist model hiding behind multiple layers of protective identities is not going to be easy. You need to accept and collaborate with AAP’s determination and single mindedness to fight it.

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Every Year Hundreds of Lives Can be Saved Just in Marriage-Related Accidents

Bharat Dogra

On March 6, 31 persons belonging to a marriage party were killed in a road accident in Gujarat on Bhavnagar-Rajkot highway. This is just one among several serious accidents involving marriage related travel and celebrations which have been reported during the last one year.

Several such accidents were reported were reported one after another during the marriage season in May . An analysis of reported marriage related accidents in India during just about one week of May revealed that in about seven separate accidents over 50 people were killed and around 200 were injured.

The reported accidents in media are just a small part of the total number of smaller accidents which go unreported or else are reported at

a very local level.

On May 10 a long but hurriedly and precariously constructed wall of a marriage hall in Bharatpur (Rajasthan) collapsed, leading to the death of 26 persons and injuries to a higher number of people. The baraat (marriage group from the groom’s side) had not yet arrived, or else the mortality in this accident would have been much higher.

Subsequent inquiries revealed that most of the marriage celebration halls in the state suffer from poor safety conditions but are owned or controlled by influential people.

On May 9 a vehicle carrying a baraat group met with an accident in Khargone district (Madhya Pradesh) leading to the death of 9 persons including the groom while several others were injured.

This turned to be a killer day for baraatias as in another accident near Sheopur in the same state a tractor trolley carrying a marriage party had an accident, killing six persons . 20 other persons of the marriage party including 9 children were seriously injured.

Another bus returning from Satna in this state was taking baratis back to their home when it got out of control . Three persons died immediately while six were reported to be struggling for survival . About 33 others were injured in the same accident.

Earlier on May 5 near Ambikapur (Chattisgarh) two vehicles, both carrying baratis collided, leading to two immediate deaths and serious injuries to 22 others.

In another accident in Patraatu

valley in Jharkhand an overcrowded bus carrying baratis was involved in an accident in which 9 persons were killed and 'several dozen' were injured. A subsequent meeting in the village imposed a fine of Rs. 3 lakh plus on the groom's family. Villagers who spoke at the meeting said that the driver and khalasi (assistant) of the bus were both drunk.

These reports of accidents involving marriage parties within the time span of just one week or so indicate the very high toll of such accidents. The marriage season in India is often concentrated within a few weeks. Hence there is a big demand for marriage halls and vehicles to transport baratis and others during these days. In this situation compromises are often made regarding safety precautions. Even otherwise safety aspects generally get less attention.

As regulation on the part of authorities is also low, this increases chances of accidents.

Marriages in India are elaborate and expensive affairs involving a lot of completely avoidable tensions. So people tend to become very tired either from dancing too much or worrying too much. Hence safety can be compromised particularly at the time of return journeys.

Add to this the increasing flow of alcohol in many marriage celebrations. This greatly increases the chances of accidents (as well as ugly scenes) at the time of return journeys in particular.

There is a very absurd but not so uncommon practice of firing guns at the time of marriage celebrations. This sometimes leads to accidental injury or even

death.

Some marriage parties carry firecrackers with them as these are used in marriage processions including on busy roads. The transport of a significant stock of firecrackers with marriage parties increases the chance of fire and explosions accidents in vehicles and trains. The use of firecrackers in marriage processions passing on busy roads also increases the risk of accidents.

Any marriage time accident brings great grief very suddenly at a time of celebration and happiness and so can be additionally disruptive and traumatic for all those affected by such an accident. Hence counseling is badly needed for those affected by such accidents but this is seldom available in India.

On a longer term basis such accidents, even smaller ones, can be particularly difficult and traumatic for the young brides who are typically accused of bringing bad luck with them. Hence help for them is needed from within the community first but later also

from authorities if her harassment is prolonged.

Clearly much can be done to reduce the risk of accidents associated with marriages and other such celebratory occasions. On the one hand better regulation of marriage halls, banquet halls etc. is needed. Safe community buildings with modest facilities should be provided by public authorities and community organizations at a low cost. Serving of liquor at marriages should be prohibited. Essentials of safety in this context should be well established, well publicised and implemented strictly.

In addition public campaigns are needed to improve the safety while reducing the expenses and tensions of marriage ceremonies in India. All newly married couples and their families should be encouraged to save unnecessary expenses and donate them instead for some worthy cause which would be the best way of blessing and solemnizing the marriage.

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Press Release

Killing of Indian Workers in Iraq : Workers should Protest Against Government Apathy

Harjit Masih, the lone survivor among the 40 abducted Indian workers, in his interview published in *The Hindu* (24 March 2018) has given detailed description about the tragic incident. He stated in a clear cut manner that the Indian government officials took him into their custody on his return and told him not to reveal the truth about the killing of his 39 fellow workers. The officials made him believe that the truth revealed by him could put him and his family at risk as relatives of the 'dead' could get enraged. He told the government officials that the workers were kidnapped by Islamic State fighters from the factory at Mosul in Iraq in June 2014 and killed in a lonely place after two days of the kidnapping. The detailed revelation of the incident by Harjit Masih proves that the government had misled not only the Parliament but the families of the deceased for four years.

The Socialist Party condemns this untruthful and inhuman act by the government. In fact, the External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj, who kept misleading the relatives about the safety of the abducted workers, made the announcement in Parliament only under pressure and compulsion. She was forced to make this admission because Iraqi officials had planned a press conference on this matter on the same day, that is, 20 March 2018. This episode has also exposed the hollowness of government's claims

about strong foreign relations under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The Socialist Party believes that the government could dare to exhibit such insensitive behaviour because the victims were ordinary labourers from poor families. The ruling establishment, guided by the market values, has lost its human ground. The government might have assumed that it can barter the shock, anger, sense of betrayal and tears of the poor by offering them some money which it has looted from these very hard working masses.

The relatives of the workers killed in Iraq got the news from TV channels, and not directly from the government. This means that the government does not even consider the poor to deserve that they should be informed of the death of their loved ones. Sardara Singh, father of 36-year-old Gurcharan Singh, expressed his anguish that every time they met Mrs. Sushma Swaraj, she used to swear by 'kali maa' and assured them that 'children are safe'. He questioned the External Affairs Minister, 'Where is that promise now?' The government assumes that it is not necessary to speak the truth to the poor. Therefore, it is not surprising that the government does not feel the need to apologise to the families of the dead.

The Socialist Party demands that the government should immediately tender an apology to the relatives of the victims, if it has any regard for

humanity and civility. At the same time, the Socialist Party invites the Indian workers in the country and abroad to strongly oppose the corporate-friendly government in order to protect their interests. The fact should be kept in mind that the Indian workers who work in the Middle East bring huge amounts of foreign exchange to India. Their contribution is no less than the non-resident Indians in any sense.

Dr. Prem Singh, President,
Socialist Party (India)

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Books by Surendra Mohan

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2. **Samajwad, Dharma Nirapekshata aur Samajik Nyaya** Reissued as second edition; Price 500 rupees
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