

LOK SAMVAD

March 2019

New Delhi

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Cartoon: SATISH ACHARYA

THE GLOBAL

Misinformation Is Endangering India's Election

The country's political parties are spreading propaganda about their opponents to gain votes. It's working.

SNIGDHA POONAM AND SAMARTH BANSAL | THE ATLANTIC

In the days following a suicide bombing against Indian security forces in Kashmir this year, a message began circulating in WhatsApp groups across the country. It claimed that a leader of the Congress Party, the national opposition, had promised a large sum of money to the attacker's family, and to free other "terrorists" and "stone pelters" from prison, if the state voted for Congress in upcoming parliamentary elections.

The message was posted to dozens of WhatsApp groups that appeared to promote Prime Minister Narendra Modi's governing Bharatiya Janata Party, and seemed aimed at painting the BJP's main national challenger as being soft on militancy in Kashmir, which remains contested between India and Pakistan, just as the two countries seemed to be on the brink of war.

The claim, however, was fake. No member of Congress, at either a national or a state level, had made any such statement. Yet delivered in the run-up to the election, and having spread with remarkable speed, that message offered a window into a worsening problem here.

India is facing information wars of an unprecedented nature and scale. Indians are bombarded with fake news and divisive propaganda on a near-constant basis from a wide range of sources, from television news to global platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. But unlike in the United States, where the focus has been on foreign-backed misinformation campaigns shaping elections and public discourse, the fake news circulating here isn't manufactured abroad.

Many of India's misinformation campaigns are developed and run by political parties with nationwide cyberarmies; they target not only political opponents, but also religious minorities and dissenting individuals, with propaganda rooted in domestic divisions and prejudices. The consequences of such targeted misinformation are extreme, from death threats to actual murders—in the past year, more than two dozen people have been lynched by mobs spurred by nothing more than rumors sent over WhatsApp.

Elections beginning this month will stoke those tensions, and containing fake news will be one of India's biggest challenges. It won't be easy.

raditional media continue to be the dominant source of information for Indians. Among those aged 15 to 34, 57 percent watch TV news a few days a week, 53 percent read newspapers at the same frequency, and about 18 percent consume their news on the internet, according to a 2016 study by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, a think tank based in New Delhi.

But social media is playing a growing role. As many as 230 million Indians use WhatsApp, making the country the messaging platform's biggest market. One-sixth of them are members of chat groups started by political parties, according to another CSDS study. These groups, ostensibly used to organize rallies, recruit volunteers, or disseminate campaign news, are capped at 256 members. In 2018, "horrified by terrible acts of violence," WhatsApp limited the number of chats that messages could be forwarded to in India from 256 users to five, and made it harder to forward images, audio clips, and videos. (Some of these restrictions have since been rolled out worldwide.)

These restrictions are, however, somewhat countered by forming many more groups, which is largely what has happened. A WhatsApp spokesperson said in an emailed response to our questions that the company bans accounts "engaging in bulk or automated messaging" and encourages users to report groups for "a range of potential issues."

Many political groups use WhatsApp to distribute pure propaganda. Consider the description of BJP Cyber Army 400+, a WhatsApp group whose five administrators include Amit Malviya, the head of the BJP's information-technology division: "This Group is Nationalists Group With Hindu Warriors Working To Save Nation From Break India forces Led politically by congress, communist And religiously by Islam and Christianity [sic]."

Modi has campaigned on promoting good governance, but Hindu-Muslim polarization is also central to the BJP's election strategy. The party's messaging aims to consolidate the support of Hindus, who make up 80 percent of India's electorate, by presenting opposition parties as pro-Muslim. For example, in the southern state of Telangana, several pro-BJP groups picked parts of Congress's manifesto that promised government benefits to Muslims, such as free electricity to mosques and scholarships for Muslim students, and presented them as the party's exclusive offerings. Such efforts are widespread. Based on research published in the Hindustan Times, eight of the 10 most shared misleading images in pro-BJP WhatsApp groups ahead of last year's state elections were about the Telangana manifesto, and the claims that Congress favored only Muslims.

Though other parties use similar tactics, the BJP has built the largest social-media system. Malviya, who did not respond to requests for comment for this story, has said that about 1.2 million volunteers will help run the party's social-media campaign for the national elections. In Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, the BJP's IT department has a six-tier hierarchical structure covering the capital city of Lucknow down to the most remote village. At what is known as the booth level, the last point of contact with voters, each party worker has been

directed to create a WhatsApp group with at least 50 users, Brajesh Mani Mishra, the 39-year-old in charge of the party's media and IT division in Gorakhpur, in Uttar Pradesh, told us.

The strategy extends beyond WhatsApp. Another BJP staffer in Gorakhpur, Nitin Sonkar, told us how he was charged with, among other things, promoting downloads of Modi's own smartphone app, known as NaMo. The app—which came preloaded in free Android phones distributed by at least two BJP-led state governments and in low-cost phones sold by Reliance Jio, a domestic cellphone operator—has been installed by more than 10 million people. It is used to promote the prime minister, and has a built-in social network with Twitter-like features. But it, too, is vulnerable to misinformation.

For instance, after February's Kashmir attack, a promoted post on the app suggested that Pakistan's prime minister, Imran Khan, was crying on television after receiving a warning from the "56-inch," a reference to a boast of Modi's regarding the size of his chest, an apparent effort to show his strength. The claim about Khan, however, was wrong; he had not cried. This wasn't a one-off case, either. The app's news feed promotes posts from repeat fake-news offenders, and users aren't given the option to unfollow these accounts.

The BJP's IT department has previously said it is aware of the problem. Malviya has previously admitted to us that there is "some scope for misinformation" on the app, adding that "content moderation is managed by volunteers" and "multiple posts have been taken down." Still, the party's ground staff has been tasked with increasing the NaMo app's use, Mishra said. "Even if five people at every booth install the NaMo app," he told us, "Modi will be PM for the next 25 years."

The BJP is not the only political player whose supporters are manipulating facts. In November 2016, Abhishek Mishra was detained in the central state of Madhya Pradesh for posting derogatory content on social media about Madhya Pradesh's former chief minister. Mishra, who is reportedly close to Congress leaders, published fabricated stories, including claims that the governor of India's central bank had called Modi the most corrupt prime minister in India's modern history, and that the head of a policing body had declared Modi to be "useless."

Then, in January, police in New Delhi arrested him based on a woman's complaint that he had posted "inflammatory" content online. Since his release from police custody, his website, Viral in India, has been shut down, but Mishra reportedly receives police protection in Madhya Pradesh, where a Congress government is in power. He now runs Viral in India as a Facebook page, where he has upwards of 1 million followers and posts and shares anti-BJP updates, some of which appear, again, to be fake. Mishra did not respond to a request for comment.

Other hyper-partisan political pages and groups have similarly sprouted up on Facebook, which has 270 million users in India. Another Facebook page, The India Eye, for example, has more than 2 million followers, but at least six of the 20 most shared posts on its Facebook page from September to November 2018 were misleading or inaccurate. One post, which was shared

more than 19,000 times, claims that Sonia Gandhi, the ex-president of Congress and the wife of a former prime minister, is the fourth-richest woman in the world, which is not true. Completing the circle of misinformation, The India Eye is also a promoted account on the NaMo app.

Facebook and WhatsApp are not the only social networks where this battle is playing out. Smaller platforms such as ShareChat, which has 40 million monthly active users, and Helo, which has about 25 million, operate in 14 Indian languages and target first-time internet users. Both are rife with a litany of false claims and misinformation.

In response to our questions, Facebook pointed us to a press release from the Internet and Mobile Association of India, detailing how it was one of several social-media platforms, along with ShareChat, to adopt a voluntary code of ethics for the election. NaMo did not respond to a request for comment, but WhatsApp (which is owned by Facebook), ShareChat and Helo offered statements, largely echoing one another: They take misinformation seriously, remove posts on a regular basis, and use artificial-intelligence tools as well as large content-moderation teams. ShareChat and Helo also said they had partnered with fact-checking organizations to combat fake news.

While Indians are receiving a greater portion of their daily news from Facebook, WhatsApp, and other social-media platforms, misleading stories that bear the stamp of a traditional news outlet still travel most widely. Doctored newspaper clippings and manipulated television-news screengrabs were among the most shared items in political WhatsApp groups ahead of last year's state elections.

The strategy extends beyond WhatsApp. Another BJP staffer in Gorakhpur, Nitin Sonkar, told us how he was charged with, among other things, promoting downloads of Modi's own smartphone app, known as NaMo. The app—which came preloaded in free Android phones distributed by at least two BJP-led state governments and in low-cost phones sold by Reliance Jio, a domestic cellphone operator—has been installed by more than 10 million people. It is used to promote the prime minister, and has a built-in social network with Twitter-like features. But it, too, is vulnerable to misinformation.

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outlet still travel most widely. Doctored newspaper clippings and manipulated television-news screengrabs were among the most shared items in political WhatsApp groups ahead of last year's state elections.

More difficult to police, however, are the many mainstream news channels that are openly partisan.

Throughout its 14 years on air, Sudarshan News's 200-member national team has focused on issues of Hindu interest through its straight-talking, campaign-driven programs, such as its Save the Cow movement. This included purported exposés of New Delhi restaurants that serve beef (a practice that is illegal in the Indian capital), castigations of state governments for not sufficiently policing slaughterhouses, and proposals that the cow, a holy animal in Hinduism, be officially made "mother of the nation," with killing of the animal punishable by death. As part of that campaign, the channel's owner and public face, Suresh Chavhanke, urged his audience to act. "At a time like this, cow servants like us will have to take the threatening form of cow protectors," he said.

"People are ready to kill and die in order to save cows," Chavhanke told us. "I agree that it's constitutionally wrong, but it is a part of our tradition."

Sudarshan News has listed three priorities it will push for in the next government: a Hindu temple on the site where a Mughal-era mosque was razed by Hindu nationalists in 1992; modifications to the history curriculum in Indian textbooks to glorify the country's Hindu past; and a bill to control India's population.

The third of those demands is a euphemism for a public campaign against what Sudarshan News has said is the rising population of Muslims in India. This is, however, fearmongering. Though Muslims currently have a higher fertility rate than Hindus nationwide, they are still outnumbered by followers of India's majority religion. Chavhanke, who was arrested in April 2017 in Uttar Pradesh to prevent him from visiting a town where there had been Hindu-Muslim clashes, says he is secular and not against Islam. His channel, however, is legitimized by politicians, including ministers in the BJP national government and leaders of the Congress Party, who appear on his shows and give him interviews.

The case of Sudarshan News also spotlights the growing links between political parties, traditional news sources, and social-media networks.

A recent message in BJP Cyber Army 400+, the WhatsApp group with BJP staffers as administrators, reminded its members that they "have the right to vote," before continuing: "We should not vote for any candidate who follows Leftist ideology. They care more about preserving their Muslim vote bank than they care about Hindus, such as the Congress." The message concluded by listing YouTube channels that Hindus should subscribe to "in order to save their existence." One is Sudarshan News.

Imperialist capitalism is heading towards a cataclysmic crisis

John Smith on imperialism

Farooque Chowdhury | COUNTERCURRENTS.ORG

*Today, it's impossible to ignore the question of imperialism in any discussion concerning people as imperialism is distorting and destroying all aspects and areas of life. Ignoring the question of imperialism is synonymous to betrayal of people's cause. John Smith, former oil rig worker, bus driver, telecommunications engineer, longtime activist in the anti-war and Latin American solidarity movements, and author of *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century: Globalization, Super-Exploitation, and Capitalism's Final Crisis* (Monthly Review Press, January 2016), discusses the question of imperialism in the following interview taken by Farooque Chowdhury during July 2018-February 2019. The interview, in slightly abridged form, originally appeared on MR Online on March 19, 22, and 23, 2019.*

The analyses, interpretations and observations made, the narratives presented, the terms used, and the way persons, politics, ideologies and trends characterized in the interview are completely of John Smith, and, those don't always correspond to the interviewer's opinion, interpretation, etc.

Definition

Q1: How do you define imperialism?

John Smith: The most succinct and concrete definition of imperialism that I can come up with is the subjugation of the entire world to the interests of the capitalist ruling classes of a handful of oppressor nations. This contains both the economic and political dimensions of imperialism — 'subjugation' denotes the political subjection of governments, states and peoples to imperialist rule, while 'interests of the capitalist ruling classes' refers to their economic interests, essentially their appropriation of the lion's share of the surplus value generated by the workers and farmers of the world, not just by those resident in their own countries. The summary definition also speaks of the 'ruling classes of a handful of oppressor nations', rejecting the influential view (which exists in many variants and whose most prominent exponents are Leslie Sklair and William Robinson) that these ruling classes have merged into a 'transnational capitalist class', and it therefore implies that the interests of these ruling classes may not coincide, that inter-imperialist rivalries persist. Furthermore, the definition advanced above can be developed to take account of 'sub-imperialism', that is, when the capitalist rulers of a

subject nation in turn subject other, even weaker, nations and peoples to their political and economic domination.

Q2: What is/are the difference/s between the definition you are using and other definitions?

JS: The definition provided above is concrete in that it applies to now, as opposed to a generic definition applicable to all manifestations of imperialism throughout the ages. In the above definition, 'imperialism' is an analytical category that can be developed into a theoretical concept. In contrast, trans-historical, generic definitions of imperialism can only ever be descriptive, highlighting superficial features which different manifestations of imperialism in different periods of human history appear to have in common. As Lenin pointed out in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, "Colonial policy and imperialism existed before the latest stage of capitalism, and even before capitalism. Rome, founded on slavery, pursued a colonial policy and practised imperialism. But 'general' disquisitions on imperialism, which ignore, or put into the background, the fundamental difference between socio-economic formations, inevitably turn into the most vapid banality." The essence of contemporary imperialism is to be found in the contradictory social relations specific to capitalism, not in "human nature" or any other ahistorical abstraction.

That's not to say that generic uses of the term are useless, or that the noun "imperialism" (and even more so the adjective "imperialist") cannot be used to describe diverse forms of chauvinistic behaviour and mentality — but unless we are conscious of the difference between imperialism as a descriptive term and as an analytical category, we will inevitably fall into the 'vapid banality' that Lenin warns against.

What's really involved here is the need to go beyond the sterile formal logic so characteristic of bourgeois social science and learn how to think dialectically. If imperialism predated capitalism, pedants ask, how can it be intrinsic to capitalism? How can it be true that its essence must be found in capitalist social relations and not human society in general? To answer this question I like to use the analogy of patriarchy. It, too, predates capitalism — indeed, as Frederick Engels explained in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, what he called "the world-historic downfall of the female sex" coincided with the transition from fiercely egalitarian hunter-gatherer era to the earliest class-divided society. Not only did patriarchy predate capitalism, like imperialism, it was a necessary precondition for the rise of capitalism. Upon its arrival, and as part of the process of establishing its supremacy, this higher form of social organisation discarded elements of the pre-existing feudal or communal society which were inimical to its own nature — and internalised, made into its own, whatever was favourable to its further development. Both imperialism and patriarchy fall into the second category, which is why it is possible to say that both of these phenomena preceded capitalism but have long since become inherent qualities of capitalism. There are many people in subject nations (not least, their capitalist elites) who oppose imperialism but do not oppose capitalism, just as there are many feminists who oppose the oppression of women but do not acknowledge that this

oppression is rooted in capitalist social relations. So it is that bourgeois nationalism, just like bourgeois feminism, is inherently conflicted and cannot provide a path towards liberation.

Q3: What aspects/factors have you taken into account while defining imperialism?

JS: Well, I think it is necessary to take everything into account! No single aspect of reality, especially not one as qualitatively important as imperialism, can be understood unless we have at least a working concept of the total system of interaction of which it is a part. This is an unavoidable difficulty which bourgeois social science attempts to evade by artificially dividing social science into mutually-exclusive “disciplines”, e.g. “politics”, “economics”, “sociology”, “anthropology” etc., each offering rival explanations of social phenomena, using incompatible methodologies, and expressing themselves in terminologies which are mutually unintelligible. The fatal limitations of such pseudo-science have become impossible to ignore, and so “multi-disciplinary” approaches have become more popular — but without the rigorous application of dialectical logic, this inevitably involves arbitrary or prejudiced selection of facts and results in eclecticism and indeterminacy. The one exception to this is the pseudo-science known as “economics” — its high priests resist the contamination of its mathematical abstractions with concepts borrowed from politics, sociology, history etc. Their arrogance knows no bounds, and they sense they would not survive a serious encounter with other disciplines.

So, I have consciously attempted to apply everything that I have learned about human evolution over the past several centuries, especially about the evolution of global political economy since World War II, and most especially about its evolution since the 1970s, the dawn of the so-called neoliberal era. Of course, “taking everything into account” doesn’t get us very far, it is nothing more than a condition for our arrival at the beginning of the road to wisdom; further progress requires sifting, ordering, arranging and analyzing the mass of data, testing concepts against facts and using concepts to penetrate through the surface appearance of facts, searching for what Evald Ilyenkov called the “cardinal points of interaction” of the system being investigated.

To this end, I zeroed in on what analysis of facts soon revealed itself to be the most dynamic and significant transformation of the neoliberal era, namely the large-scale shift of production processes to low-wage countries, a development which was and is touted by capitalism’s apologists — and by far too many who call themselves Marxists — as definitive proof that, thanks to capitalist development, the imperialist North-South divide was fading into history. Instead, as I showed in *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century*, this development signifies the culmination of capitalism’s imperialist evolution, a qualitatively new stage in capitalism’s internalization of imperialism, in which the plunder of nature and super-exploitation of living labor now takes place primarily within the bounds of the capital-labor relation rather than through so-called primitive accumulation, territorial conquest and other forms of naked plunder, which capitalists inherited and enthusiastically adopted from the past and which they have far from abandoned.

Q4: What are the limitations of/problems with other definitions of imperialism?

JS: The liberal/mainstream notion of imperialism that permeates academia and bourgeois political opinion (and which, as I argue in *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century*, contaminates much of what in Europe and North America presents itself as Marxist political economy) proceeds from the elementary observation that the various empires that have existed during the past three millennia share one obvious characteristic, namely territorial conquest accomplished through military force. This is seized upon as the defining characteristic of imperialism, and the dismantlement of the territorial empires and granting of formal sovereignty is then taken as proof that imperialism belongs to the past, not the present. Such an approach rests on a complete divorce between politics and economics — imperialism is defined exclusively by political domination and the application of military force; the motive for such behavior might be economic, i.e. plunder of resources etc., but it might just as easily be geopolitics, megalomania, divine right or anything else.

The Marxist concept of imperialism is diametrically opposed to this. Capitalism's imperialist impulse is rooted in the contradictions of the capitalist value relation. As Marx explained, increasing productivity of labor (through the substitution of living labor by dead labor, i.e. machinery) and falling rate of profit are two sides of the same coin; and as Lenin explained, capitalists in developed capitalist nations are obliged by the class struggle to purchase social peace by using some of their profits to bribe privileged layers of the working class. As a result, these capitalist ruling classes are compelled to augment the surplus value they extract from workers and farmers at home with ever-increasing flows of wealth from abroad. Both of the trends pushing in this direction became pronounced in the closing decades of the 19th century, provoking intensified empire-building and setting these rival ruling classes on collision course with each other, leading to the first imperialist world war.

Q5: Is there any fundamental difference between the way you define imperialism and the way Lenin defined?

JS: No, I don't believe so, but what is different is the world of the 21st century compared to the world as it was 100 years ago. When Lenin, Zinoviev, Bukharin and other Bolshevik leaders developed the Marxist theory of imperialism, the relation between the handful of oppressor nations and the great majority of oppressed nations was a relation between countries and continents where capitalist social relations were fully established and where they were still embryonic, and the techniques of imperialist plunder that were available to the oppressors were largely those they had inherited from the past — brute force, usury, etc. Also embryonic was the rebellion of the colonized and enslaved peoples; this subsequently became vastly more powerful, forcing the imperialists to modify the forms of their domination by handing formal political sovereignty to venal and corrupt elites while negating any meaningful economic sovereignty. So, there has been substantial change in the external forms of continued imperialist domination, and the spread of capitalist social relations in the dominated countries has opened up new ways for imperialists to siphon wealth from these countries, but the

essential nature of the imperialist relation has not fundamentally changed since Lenin's time. On the contrary, capitalists in North America, imperialist Europe and Japan are today vastly more reliant on flows of surplus value from so-called developing nations than they were 100 years ago; in other words, they are even more parasitic than ever they were; and the world is as divided as ever it was between, in Lenin's words, "a handful of oppressor nations and the great majority of oppressed nations," with the significant change that the hard-fought struggle by the peoples have emancipated the national bourgeoisies of the oppressed nations, in other words a place has been found for their snouts in the trough, while the impoverished and dispossessed workers, farmers and small producers still await their day of liberation.

Q6: The same question regarding other Marxists-Leninists.

JS: "Marxist-Leninist" refers to the ideology espoused by the bureaucratic rulers of the former Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China and all those around the world who look to them for leadership, but in my opinion, there is no Marxism or Leninism in so-called "Marxism-Leninism". We cannot get anywhere until we call things by their true names, so I insist on describing both the Moscow or Beijing varieties of these ideologies as Stalinist. This might upset some people or be misinterpreted as factional name-calling, but the alternative is to perpetuate an extremely harmful falsehood — one which is energetically promoted by bourgeois politicians and opinion-formers of all types, from the liberal left to the far right, all of whom are aware of how much damage they can do to the revolutionary workers' movement by identifying socialism, communism and the liberatory ideas of Marx and Lenin with the disgusting brutality and corruption of the bureaucratic castes which once ruled the Soviet Union and which continue to rule over China (indeed, the capitalist ruling class presently in power in Russia is almost entirely composed of former "Marxist-Leninists").

"Marxism-Leninism" served the rulers of the USSR and PRC not as a guide to action, but as a cloak of deception, a means of legitimizing their rule. They claimed allegiance to the same theories and philosophies as do I, but their doctrine of "peaceful coexistence" with imperialism stands in the clearest possible contradiction with everything that Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin stood for.

Q7: Is there any difference between the way imperialism behaved during the Cold War and the way it is behaving now? And, what is/are the reason/s if there's any difference?

JS: An almost impenetrable thicket of myths and falsehoods surrounds the so-called Cold War, which was anything but cold for the billions of people who live in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The dominant narrative is that the war was between the "West", led by the United States, which was trying to spread capitalism and democracy, and the "East" led by the Soviet Union, which was trying to spread socialism and communism. It is absurd to claim that the installation by the USA and its allies of countless bloodthirsty dictators from the Shah to Saddam to Somoza had anything to do with "spreading democracy", but the first part of the dominant narrative is correct: the USA and its imperialist allies were indeed fighting a war to spread capitalism and

crush any resistance to it. What is false is that the Soviet Union was trying to spread socialism and communism. On the contrary, time and again the fake revolutionaries who ruled the USSR provided crucial assistance to the imperialists. The Stalinist “stages” theory of history held that anti-capitalist revolutions were impossible in nations oppressed by imperialism — because the working class was too small and weak and because the task of the day was to abolish feudal and other pre-capitalist obstacles to the spread of capitalism — and its proponents argued that a protracted period of capitalist development was necessary before class contradictions in these nations could come to approximate those in the imperialist nations, and only then could the struggle for socialism could be put on the agenda. So, instead of leading struggles to bring revolutionary governments of workers and farmers to power, Moscow instructed the communist parties under its control to become junior partners in alliances with the supposedly progressive wing of the national bourgeoisie, leading to countless catastrophic defeats, Iran in 1953 and Indonesia in 1965 being two major examples. As Che Guevara said, “the indigenous bourgeoisies have lost all capacity to oppose imperialism — if they ever had any.... There are no other alternatives. Either a socialist revolution or a caricature of a revolution.”

It is notable that the only revolutionary victories during the so-called Cold War occurred under the leadership of communist parties that had broken at least partially from subservience to Moscow (Yugoslavia, China, Korea, Vietnam), or of revolutionary movements and parties that had never been in Moscow’s orbit in the first place (e.g. Cuba, Nicaragua, Algeria). Perhaps the most instructive example is that of Vietnam. At the Potsdam Conference in July 1945, the victors — Truman, Churchill (assisted by Labour Party leader Clement Attlee, whose election as Prime Minister of Britain was confirmed mid-conference) and Stalin, met to share out the spoils of victory. Hoping to continue the USSR’s wartime alliance with the supposed to be the antifascist, progressive wing of imperialism, Stalin agreed that France’s Indochinese colonies should be returned to their rightful owner, namely France.

In defiance of this, on September 2 1945, before half a million people gathered in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed an independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam — but nothing was done to prepare an appropriate welcome for imperialist troops (including 20,000 soldiers of the 20th Indian Division, part of the Indian army under Britain’s colonial command) sent to enforce the nefarious decision taken at Potsdam. Instead, acting under Moscow’s orders, the ICP leadership greeted the first contingents of British troops to arrive (on 12-13 September) with welcome banners and attempted to shake hands with their commander, General Gracey, but were contemptuously brushed aside. Gracey seized government buildings, declared martial law, freed Japanese prisoners of war, armed them and used them as a temporary police force until French military forces arrived to reinstate their colonial rule. Following this utterly avoidable disaster, the Vietnamese liberation forces resumed their struggle and pledged to never again subordinate their interests to the foreign policy of another power.

Vietnam in 1945 was far from the only time that Stalin acted as an accomplice to imperialism’s crimes. Vietnam’s history has similarities with Korea’s, which Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt

agreed should be also divided and placed under military occupation (at their notorious February 1945 meeting in Yalta) — leading to the Korean War, in which the US dropped more bombs than had been used by both sides in the Pacific theatre of World War II. By 1953, two and half million Koreans lay dead, but even this did not crush their resistance to imperialist occupation. Aided by some 300,000 soldiers from China (whose social revolution triumphed in 1949), Korea's working people, led by Kim Il-Sung and the Korean Workers Party, inflicted the first ever military defeat upon the United States, for which they have never been forgiven and for which they continue to be cruelly punished.

Moscow's official policy throughout the Cold War was "peaceful coexistence", code for class collaboration, and can be understood as the continuation of its post-war betrayal of the Korean and Vietnamese outlined above (there are many other nations and peoples on this list, not least the Jews of Europe and the people of Palestine, both of whom were betrayed by Moscow's anti-Semitism and by its connivance with the establishment of Israel in 1948).

These facts are not widely known, not even among left-wing and progressive forces, because neither liberal nor conservative opinion-formers have any interest in reminding us of these facts, and neither do those left-wing movements who have their origins in the Stalin-led 'communist movement'.

The dominant mainstream narrative on the Cold War has yet to be seriously challenged; on the contrary, the truth is buried under more and more layers of rubbish. Yet only a moment's thought is needed to see its absurdity and its deeply reactionary nature. The "East" in the East-West confrontation was Moscow, yet Moscow is, geographically speaking, part of the West, the eastern edge of white Europe. The real East is invisible in this risible, incredibly Eurocentric narrative, and the same fate of invisibility befalls the entire South: the North-South conflict, i.e. the struggle between imperialism and its colonies and neo-colonies, is entirely collapsed into the so-called East-West conflict. Liberation struggles and revolutionary movements from Asia to Africa to Latin America are regarded as mere pawns of Moscow, without grievances of their own, without any agency of their own — this is not only absurd, it is also transparently racist.

Only by exposing the lies that are contained in the term "Cold War" can I answer the question about whether there has been any change in imperialist behavior since it ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Just as the very notion of the Cold War is premised on falsehood, it is also false that the West won the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the partial eclipse of the political forces that looked to Moscow for leadership has severely weakened an important prop of the imperialist world order. Far from inaugurating a unipolar world in which the USA and its imperialist allies could exercise untrammelled power, the post-Cold War world has seen accelerating chaos and disorder. The imperialists convinced themselves that they had won a great victory and celebrated by launching a series of wars in the Middle East and Central Asia, beginning with George Bush senior's war on Iraq in 1991 in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Berlin wall. But their hubris led to overconfidence, and each and every military adventure they have undertaken since the end of

the Cold War has led them into a quagmire of death, division and recrimination, with nothing resembling a victory in sight. Unfortunately, if the imperialists cannot be said to have won the Cold War, neither can it be said that victory belongs to their adversaries, the working class and oppressed peoples of the world. Victory never falls into our lap, it must be fought for. What's lacking are revolutionary leaders of the caliber of Lenin, Che, Fidel, Grenada's Maurice Bishop, Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso and others, and political movements inspired by them, able to take advantage of the imperialists' growing weakness and disarray.

Financialization and imperialism

Q8: Have monopoly finance capital and financialization impacted imperialism? And, how, if there's any impact?

JS: We need some clarity about what these two terms mean. To take the first of them: as Lenin explained in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, monopoly finance capital is the result of two parallel processes that mark the transition to the imperialist stage of development: the process of concentration and centralization of capital, and the separation of ownership from management. The question, therefore, needs to be reformulated, because it suggests that monopoly finance capital is something external to imperialism, and exerts an impact on it from the outside. All of this underlines an essential point – when we talk about imperialism, we are not talking about imperialism in general, as it has existed throughout the ages, we are talking specifically about capitalist imperialism, the imperialist stage of capitalist development. Monopoly finance capital didn't exist when Sargon the Great built the Akkadian empire in Mesopotamia 4,300 years ago, or 500 years ago when the Mughal kings unified the Indian subcontinent!

Financialization can be defined in different ways, but at its most basic it refers, in the words of John Bellamy Foster, to “the shift in gravity of economic activity from production (and even from much of the growing service sector) to finance” (see <https://monthlyreview.org/2007/04/01/the-financialization-of-capitalism/>, where you will also see an excellent discussion of the origin of this term). So, financialization pertains to the sphere of circulation, where titles of ownership are exchanged but where nothing is produced. Yet the “shift in the gravity of economic activity” that John Bellamy Foster talks about is manifested in the fact that banking, insurance and other financial activities make up an ever-growing portion of the GDP of imperialist countries — which just goes to show that what bourgeois economists call “gross domestic product” has less and less connection with what is actually produced within a domestic economy.

With the notable exception of the Monthly Review school, recent studies of this phenomenon by avowedly Marxist and left-Keynesian economists attempt to theorize financialization in isolation from the transformations that have taken place in the sphere of production, especially the globalization of production processes and their large-scale relocation to low-wage countries. This is a serious flaw, but not so surprising, since these same schools of thought deny

the centrality or even existence of imperialism. Nevertheless, many of these studies do shed light on the complex processes that make up this important phenomenon, especially the financiers' ingenuity in converting hypothetical future income streams into present-day wealth, thereby generating vast quantities of what Karl Marx called fictitious capital, that is, financial assets whose value is disconnected from the actual productive activity (if any) they give title to.

Debt is the principal tool used to accomplish this. As Martin Wolf said shortly after the beginning of the financial crisis (Financial Times, April 1, 2008), "Between its low in the first quarter of 1982 and its high in the second quarter of 2007, the share of the financial sector's profits in US gross domestic product rose more than six-fold. Behind this boom was an economy-wide rise in leverage [debt-financed investment]. Leverage was the philosopher's stone that turned economic lead into financial gold. Attempts to reduce it now risk turning the gold back into lead again." Yet the attempts to reduce debt that Wolf speaks of have been feeble, to say the least — according to the International Institute of Finance, aggregate debt (that is, sovereign, corporate and domestic debt) now stands at 320% of global GDP, compared to 270% on the eve of the global financial crisis in 2007. What's more, some especially risky categories of debt are growing much faster, in particular, debt owed by private non-financial corporations in so-called "emerging economies", who have been tempted by historically low interest rates. We can be certain that the next financial crisis — and there surely is one waiting for us around the corner — will wreak its havoc far beyond Europe and North America, where its effects were concentrated post-2007.

So, to answer your question, once again it's not a matter of financialization impacting upon imperialism, but of imperialism revealing its own essential character — its increasing parasitism, i.e. the ever-greater importance of monopoly rents of all kinds and of rent-seeking behavior versus unmediated profit-making from productive activities.

Q 9: Is it possible to differentiate monopoly finance capital and imperialist capital? Or, is there any need/requirement to make the differentiation for studying imperialism?

JS: I think it follows from my answers to earlier questions that "monopoly finance capital" and "imperialist capital" are synonymous. More important than the labels themselves are the meanings we attach to them, this depends on the context in which they are used, on what else we say. Technical terms and the names of theoretical concepts can all too easily be used to mystify rather than to clarify, to impress rather than to express.

Constraints of imperialism

Q 10: What constraints is imperialism facing today?

JS: Just six words, but you could not ask a bigger question! The financialization phenomenon discussed in preceding answer, and the immense over-accumulation of capital, which it has fostered, is the surest sign that imperialist capitalism is heading towards a cataclysmic crisis, since the financiers' ability to use debt to amplify profit streams and inflate asset values is

finite. Their ability to resume this peculiar form of “wealth generation” despite the temporary interruption of the global financial crisis, has crucially depended on the zero interest rate policy (ZIRP) implemented by the central banks of the imperialist nations — the USA’s Federal Reserve has raised its interest rate nine times since November 2015, each time by 0.25%, but once inflation of around 2% is subtracted from its current level of 2.5%, the real interest rate in the USA is barely above zero. Central banks in the UK, Europe and Japan are yet to follow the Fed in moving away from ZIRP, their real interest rates are strongly negative.

Official interest rates (sometimes called the “base rate”) reflect the cost of money to private banks, large corporations and wealthy investors, and are much lower than those charged on loans to households and small businesses. It should not be thought that power over interest rates allows governments and central banks to dictate market conditions — rather, it is the markets, i.e. the owners of finance capital, who exercised dictatorship over governments and central banks. The official interest rate reflects the so-called “natural rate of interest”, determined by the supply of and demand for investment funds. The supply is vast, yet it is faced with a dearth of productive investment opportunities — there is plenty that needs doing, but capitalists calculate that expected profits are insufficient to balance risks.

Why is this so important? Unless capitalists think they will make more money by investing their cash in the production of goods and services than what they’d earn in interest if they left it in the bank, they will not invest. By pushing interest rates down towards zero or even into negative territory, central banks hope that capitalists will be stimulated to invest their cash and not just stash it in the bank. Ultra-low interest rates are therefore a sign of deep crisis — signifying that capitalists are exceedingly reluctant to invest, either because of a dearth of profitable investment opportunities, or because they perceive the risk of losing their money to be too high, or both. Given that real interest rates are lower than at any time in the history of capitalism, for the rate of investment to be so low (whether this is measured as a proportion of GDP or as a fraction of available funds for investment) in the imperialist economies and in much of the rest the world, is truly astonishing.

There are lots of complications which could be explored and qualifications which could be made about all of this, but I now want to move to a slightly different subject: given that ultra-low interest rates are a sign of deep malaise, how could they also be a means to support and further inflate the value of all manner of financial assets, from stocks and shares to bonds to real estate? Simply, because ultra-low interest on cash deposits in banks encourage the owners of this cash to purchase stocks and shares, residential or commercial property, bonds — anything which gives them title to a stream of profits or of rents or of interest payments that include a risk premium. Not only that, ultra-low interest rates encourage banks, large corporations and very rich people to borrow money in order to purchase even more financial assets, leading one Morgan Stanley banker to describe zero-interest-rate policy as “crack cocaine for the financial markets”. And, so it is that the extreme monetary policies pursued by central banks since 2008 (and indeed in the decade before the financial crisis!) have created

money-making opportunities for the super-rich on a scale never seen before in human history. An indication of this can be gleaned from Cap Gemini's annual World Wealth Reports, which report that the total wealth in the hands of the world's "high net worth individuals" (that is, people who own more than \$1 million in investable assets), more than doubled in the 10 years following the beginning of the global crisis, growing from \$32.8 trillion in 2008 to \$70.2 trillion in 2017 — an increase of 114% in just 10 years, yet during the same period global GDP increased by only 27% (adjusted for inflation, these figures translate to 100% growth in HNWI wealth compared to a 24% growth in global GDP).

The final detail to be added to this picture concerns the consequences of these extreme monetary policies. Ultra-low interest rates have encouraged capitalists to borrow money to finance investments; but instead of investing in new means of production, the bulk of it has financed speculation in markets, inflating asset bubbles that are reflected in ballooning HNWI wealth discussed above; or in so-called intellectual property (IP), which generates monopoly rents for its owners but does not increase social wealth (and in many cases reduces it); or to finance share buy-backs, which increase the wealth of shareholders but which, again, do not result in any increase in the production of goods and services. Governments and central bankers are aware that all of this is storing up immense problems for the future, yet the capitalists they serve have become addicted to this "crack cocaine", and so far only the USA has taken timid steps to restore interest rates to what they call "normal" levels.

The great fear is that, if ultra-low interest rates have stimulated asset inflation, higher interest rates will result in asset deflation, in other words another financial crash. And if they leave interest rates where they are, not only will asset bubbles, debt mountains and other pathological disorders continue to get worse, central banks will be deprived of the chief tool they need to prevent the next cyclical recession from rapidly gaining momentum and provoking another financial crash. Recall that, in the last three recessions in the United States, the Federal Reserve has slashed interest rates by an average of 5%, but this option is unavailable right now (because the Fed's "policy rate" is currently 2.5%, or 0.5% when inflation is taken into account); and still less is it available to central banks in the UK, Europe and Japan where real interest rates are currently well into negative territory.

"Global yields lowest in 500 years of recorded history. \$10 trillion of negative rate bonds. This is a supernova that will explode one day," in the words of leading bond trader Bill Gross. The metaphor is apt — a supernova occurs when the energy fueling a star's expansion becomes balanced by the gravitational force pulling it towards the centre. It may take eons to arrive at this moment, but when it does the star collapses on itself in seconds, and then explodes, scattering debris throughout its galaxy.

So, to get back to the question, the chief constraints confronting imperialism are those that arise from capitalism's own internal contradictions, and these manifest themselves in the systemic crisis briefly described above. Their fundamental root lies in the nature of capital, which can be defined as self-expanding wealth, that is wealth which appears to grow magically

by itself, a goose which lays golden eggs, but whose growth, as Karl Marx proved in *Capital*, depends on unpaid wealth generated by exploited workers, which Marxists call surplus value; augmented by wealth captured from working people employed in non-capitalist sectors of the economy, so-called accumulation by dispossession. As briefly described above, the financial system has allowed capitalism to turbo-charge capital accumulation, through the generation of vast quantities of fictitious capital, but in the end every single one of the \$70 trillion in the hands of HNWIs can only become capital and remain as capital thanks to surplus value extracted from living labor. Thus, the fundamental constraint is the extreme and growing disproportion between the total mass of wealth in the hands of capitalists, on the one hand, and the quantity of surplus value it is capable of extracting from living labor in order to convert this wealth into capital on the other. And as Lenin explained, it is precisely this disproportion, which impels capitalism onto its imperialist trajectory.

Q 11: Is it different from the days Lenin defined imperialism?

JS: Fundamentally, it is no different. What is different is that these contradictions are many magnitudes deeper and are also far more extensive. When Lenin wrote his famous book on imperialism in the middle of World War I, capitalism had yet to fully impose its social relations on the peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America; the relation between imperialist nations and subject nations was a relation between capitalism and pre-capitalist social formations. This is one reason why I believe that capitalism's contradictions are immeasurably deeper now than they were in the period that led to World War I and to the Russian revolution.

Q 12: How is imperialism trying to overcome the constraints it is facing today?

JS: By escalating its assault on workers and poor people, by fighting to reverse the expensive concessions it has made to pacify the working class in imperialist countries, by intensifying its rape of mother Earth, by increasingly resorting to "beggar-thy-neighbor" policies, as manifested in currency manipulation, trade wars and the disintegration of multilateral institutions.

Imperialist camps

Q 13: Is it possible now to define imperialist camps? What these camps are? How these camps are behaving with each other? It's observed that one faction of imperialism is opposed to a free trade agreement while another faction is going after it. Fights among imperialist powers are going on in the World Trade Organization. There's increase in protectionism. What signifies these developments?

JS: The process by which economic contradictions translate into political rivalry and military confrontation is extremely complex and depends on many things — including contingencies such as the emergence onto the stage of history of mavericks like Donald Trump or the outcome of a finely-balanced referendum such as the one that led Britain to decide to withdraw from the European Union. It is not possible to predict with any degree of certainty how the post-WWII US-led imperialist world order will break up, just that it will break up. Will the

Franco-German alliance survive the next stage of the European Union death agony? Will the USA maintain its close embrace of Japan, the country it nuked in 1945? Will China forge its own sphere of influence and take the next steps towards becoming an imperialist power?

Only by discussing the past and the present can we get a glimpse of the future. All I can say for sure is that there is a massive storm coming, and that the only way out is for workers to cease their reliance on any wing of the bourgeoisie and do what Russia's workers and farmers did in 1917 and what Cuban workers and farmers did in 1959 — to take power into their own hands, to carry out a socialist revolution.

Climate crisis and imperialism

Q 14: How is climate crisis impacting imperialism?

JS: "Climate crisis" is a euphemism for the capitalist destruction of nature, and is an extremely dramatic and terrifying manifestation of capitalism's destructive and imperialistic nature. So, imperialism is certainly impacting the climate crisis! How, and in what sense, is the climate crisis impacting upon imperialism? Capitalism/imperialism is extremely proficient at externalizing the costs of its destructiveness, making other peoples and future generations suffer the consequences of its marauding nature, as the people of Bangladesh know only too well. Yet it is not immune from "blow-back" effects, such as when overfishing and run-off from intensive farming causes blooms of jellyfish that destroyed tourism and clog the water-cooling inlets of power stations, or the droughts and heat waves causing forest fires and the collapse of farming in large tracts of Australia and the United States. The climate crisis also poses a major political challenge to imperialism — they are working very hard to prevent public opinion and the world's scientific community from coming to the conclusion that system change is necessary if we are to avert climate change.

Benefits and resource flow

Q 15: Is there any benefit from imperialism?

JS: Yes — to the imperialists. And yes — to the middle class and the elites of the subject nations, who are given a place for their snouts in the trough that is filled by the world's workers and farmers. And yes — to the workers in the imperialist countries, whose rulers divert some of the proceeds of imperialist exploitation to bribe privileged layers and purchase social peace. But these benefits are temporary and the price that workers in the imperialist countries are paying for being led into an alliance with the enemies of humanity is already high and will grow without limit. Which imperialist country will be the first to see a fascist movement come to power — France, the UK, Italy, USA...?

Q 16: Has there been any change in the direction of flow of resources and benefits in imperialist system?

JS: No.

Q 17: How do you define the claim that claims resources flow to neo-colonies/countries being exploited by imperialism from imperialism?

JS: I define it as complete and utter nonsense. (The following is drawn from my response to claims by David Harvey that the flow of resources from imperialist to developing countries has changed direction.)

In 2015, researchers based in Brazil, India, Nigeria, Norway and the USA published *Financial flows and tax havens: combining to limit the lives of billions of people*, which they fairly claim to be “the most comprehensive analysis of global financial flows impacting developing countries compiled to date.” Their report calculates “net resource transfers” (NRT) between developed and developing countries, combining licit and illicit inflows and outflows — from development aid and remittances of wages to net trade receipts, debt servicing, new loans, FDI and portfolio investment and repatriated profits, along with capital flight and other forms of financial chicanery and outright theft. They found that in 2012, the most recent year for which they could obtain data, what they call “developing and emerging countries” (which of course includes China) lost \$2.0 trillion in net transfers to rich countries, equivalent to 8% of emerging nations’ GDP in that year — four times larger than the average of \$504 billion in NRT transferred annually from poor to rich countries during the first half of the 2000s. When informed estimates are included of under-invoicing and other forms of rip-off and criminality that leave no statistical trace, NRT from poor countries to imperialist countries in 2012 exceeded \$3 trillion, around 12% of poor nations’ GDP.

More generally, they report, “both recorded and unrecorded transfers of licit and illicit funds from developing countries have tended to increase over the period 1980-2011”. As for Sub-Saharan Africa, they report, NRT from this continent to imperialist countries (or tax havens licensed by them) between 1980 to 2012 totalled \$792bn, that illicit transfers from Africa to imperialist countries as a proportion of GDP are higher than from any other region, and that capital flight from SSA is growing by more than 20 percent per annum, faster than anywhere else in the world.

In what they called “an ironic twist to the development narrative” the researchers concluded that “since the early 1980s, NRT for all developing countries have been mostly large and negative, indicating sustained and significant outflows from the developing world... resulting in a chronic net drain of resources from the developing world over extended periods of time”.

Where does China fit into this broader picture? Using sophisticated methodologies and on the basis of conservative assumptions, the researchers calculate that China accounts for no less than two-thirds of the total recorded resource transfer deficit of all “emerging nations” between 1980 and 2012, \$1.9 trillion in all; the explanation for this high proportion being “China’s large current account surpluses and associated capital and reserve asset outflows,” and it accounted for 21%, or \$2.8 trillion, of the total of \$13.4 trillion in capital flight drained from all “emerging countries” to rich nations during these three decades.

Progressives and imperialist intervention

Q 18: What are the confusions/misunderstandings among a group of progressives/pro-people forces while they lend support to or invite imperialist intervention as they are to simultaneously face autocratic/despotic/anti-democratic rule? Should the group yet claim that they are pro-people/progressive/revolutionary while they extend their support to imperialist intervention?

JS: No, of course they shouldn't. But it is easy to make glib denunciations of peoples who are in an extremely painful and difficult situation – I think, for instance, of the Kurdish people, who have no state of their own because of the crimes of British, French and American imperialism, and also because of the chauvinism and extreme brutality of the Arab and Iranian capitalist rulers; and I also think of Jewish people who are confronted by virulent anti-Semitism, which, as history and contemporary politics shows, becomes inflamed at times of systemic capitalist crisis, when gentile capitalists seek to deflect popular resentment onto scapegoats. So, I'd like to avoid making generic statements and consider each specific example individually, and state that before we as socialists, as communists, as workers, criticize other peoples we have to demonstrate in deeds as well as words, that we, not hypocritical imperialists, are their most reliable allies.

For learners

Q20: What are the problems in studying imperialism today?

JS: To study capitalism is to study imperialism, and vice versa. And the only way that can be done, unfortunately, is by starting with the total system and the entire history leading up to it. Whether we like it or not, we cannot form a theoretical concept of any part of the total system of interaction unless we have at least a working concept of this total system. This is what Karl Marx meant when he said there is no "royal road to wisdom", there are no shortcuts. So, we should not pretend that the task is easier than it actually is — but neither should we underestimate our own capacity to make progress, to stand on the shoulders of others, to rejoice in the fact that the hard work of those who have gone before us enormously amplifies the fruits that we can reap through our own efforts. Most important of all is honesty, integrity and hard work.

Q21: What are the confusions in the study of imperialism today?

JS: The most fundamental confusion is the one discussed in my answer to Q2 and Q8. To repeat this extremely important point, but in a different way, we could say that there are two ways to approach the question "what is imperialism?" One would be to make a list of all of the different types of imperialism that have existed in known history, list the features they have in common, and generalize a theory out of this. The other is to study the actually existing socio-economic system, i.e. capitalism, and ask "what is it about capitalism that caused it to evolve into a new form of imperialism?"

The first approach, which at first glance seems perfectly reasonable, deals exclusively with forms of appearance and can only result in a description rather than a theoretical concept. A theory can only be generated from this approach by the addition of other premises, e.g. something about human nature – or about the nature of men, since the vast majority of emperors and imperialists have been male. This is, in my opinion, a bourgeois, positivist, pseudo-scientific approach that either ends up justifying imperialism (“it’s just human nature”), or denying it, since modern, 21st-century capitalist imperialism does not include one feature that is common to all other forms of imperialism, namely territorial occupation and domination.

The second approach is the one that is recommended by dialectical materialism and followed by Marx and Marxists. Capitalism must be studied both empirically and theoretically, including what makes this social system different from others that have existed in history and that have developed their own forms of imperialism. We then discover that the transition to capitalist imperialism was necessitated by the centralization and concentration of capital (i.e. monopoly capitalism), over-accumulation, or what could be called the hypertrophy of capital (when the mass of capital expands far beyond that which can be valorized solely by surplus value extracted from workers “at home”), and, connected to this, the long-term tendency of the rate of profit to fall that results from the replacement of living labor (the sole source of value) with dead labor, i.e. machinery. Imperialism – or rather, a historically new and very distinctive form of it — is then revealed as an increasingly important way to counter the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, a tendency which distills the very essence of the contradictions of capitalist social relations.

As for the “human nature” which plays such a role in bourgeois pseudo-scientific theories of imperialism, we can say that human nature combines many qualities and potentialities – e.g. for selfishness and for solidarity, for love and for hate – which of these potentialities become realized is profoundly influenced by the socio-economic system you live in and your place within it.

Another major source of confusion results from the artificial separation of economics from politics; imperialism is then seen as a relation of domination and subordination rather than as a relation between exploiters and exploited. This is quite typical of the bourgeois approach, since apologists for capitalism have great difficulty acknowledging exploitation of any type, or that a great part of the wealth currently being accumulated by capitalists in London, Paris and New York was extracted from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Unfortunately (to say the least!), many avowed Marxists resident in imperialist countries deny this reality, I explain in my critique of David Harvey (see <https://mronline.org/2018/03/22/imperialist-realities-vs-the-myths-of-david-harvey/>). In other words, students of imperialism should cast an extremely critical eye on everything they read on this subject, especially the opinions of people who claim to be Marxists (and I invite you, indeed I urge you, to cast an extremely critical eye on everything I say in this interview!).

Q22: What aspects of imperialism should a learner look into?

JS: Whichever aspects you find most interesting, whichever seem to you to be most important, whichever seem to be most puzzling and in relation to which existing answers seem insufficient. There really are a million different points of departure, but there is only one mountain peak!

Q23: From where should a learner begin study of imperialism?

JS: We should begin with what is happening today, we should begin by opening our eyes to the world around us and formulating questions about everything we see that we don't understand.

Thank you, John, for helping understand aspects of imperialism.

Thank you, Farooque, for asking such interesting questions. I look forward to hearing opinions of readers on the issues covered in this interview.

THE POLITICAL

Mahatma and his Mock Assassins Visual Text Analysis

Syed Ali Mujtaba | COUNTERCURRENTS.ORG

A Professor from Madras University was describing the background of Champaran Satyagrah of 1917, at an International Conference on India Vietnam Relations through the Prism of Gandhian and Ho Chi Minh Philosophies at Centre of Southeast Asia and Pacific Studies Sri Venkateshwara University Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh on March 18, 2019.

As the learned Professor was speaking why Mahatma Gandhi launched the mass movement from Champaran, my mind was jogging the memory lane doing the the visual text of Pooja Shakun, leader of the Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha, who had enacted the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi on October 2, 2018.

Professor was saying that a Gandhiji's disciple, Raj Kumar Shukla, goaded Gandhiji to visit Champaran and do something about the plight of the indigo farmers and their families who are reeling in penury and living in inhuman conditions.

Gandhiji asked Acharya J.B Kirpalani, Dr. Rajendra Prasad and others to go to Champaran and prepare a report on people's sufferings there. The Congress workers came up with a detailed survey of the villages, accounting the atrocities and terrible episodes of suffering, including the general state of degenerate living.

Gandhiji after going through the report pulled up Acharya Kirpalani saying; you have written so many things in this, but they all are about men, you have not all mentioned anything about the condition of women in Chaparan, why?

Acharya told Gandhiji that social equations in Champarn did not allow any outsider that too a male to talk to female and that being the reasons of non-inclusion of any information about the women there. He suggested to Gandhiji to send a women team to assess the condition of women in Champaran.

Gandhiji immediately asked his wife Kasturba to immediately go to Champaran and meet women there and prepare a report on their condition. Kasturba and a few associates traveled to Champaran for this purpose.

As they roamed in the streets they found only men folk and children on the streets and to their utmost surprise no woman were there in public view. They realized that most of them were living inside the closed houses.

Kasturba haggard and tired knocked the door of one of the houses in the street of Champaran. A very feeble female voice emerged from inside asking their whereabouts. Kasturba told them they are woman travelers and like to have a glass of water to quench their thirst.

And after a while the door was opened ajar and a female hand with a glass of water emerged from the door. Kasturba drank the water and asked for more for her colleague and then asked for permission to be let inside the house.

After getting inside the house, Kasturba told the women that they have come to assess the conditions of the women in Champaran and ask them the reason why most of them remain indoors.

The woman gave a chilling account of the plight of woman in Champaran. She said there are three women in the house and between them there is only one SAREE, to wrap their bodies. So they take turns in the morning to fetch water from the well and go to attend the nature's call after the sunset in the fields.

When Kasturba submitted the report, Gandhiji was deeply moved by the condition of the people living in Champaran. The sufferings of the people there compelled him to change the strategy of freedom struggle in India. Thus Satyagrah became the main weapon of Gandhiji to protest the presence of British rule in the country. The Champaran Satyagrah was the first mass movement that has a seminal place in the struggle for freedom in India.

Now coming to the Visual Text Analysis of well clad Pooja Shakun, leader of the Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha, the only words that come to my mind is 'arrogant', 'ignorant' and 'pitiable.'

Pooja Shakun, well fed and well clad lady who had enacted the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi hailing his murder Nathuram Godse as her hero if had undergone even a little of pain and suffering of the women in Champaran, she should have shuddered to train her guns at the father of the nation even though symbolically.

The Champaran Satyagraha was the first Satyagraha movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi in 1917. It was a farmer's uprising against Indo cultivation that forced them to live in live in abject penury.

As Indigo was used to make dye the British forced the North Indian farmers to grow indigo for its exports value. Under Colonial laws, many tenant farmers were forced to grow some indigo on a portion of their land as a condition of their tenancy. Since this cash crop barely gave any returns to the farmers there was much resentment and anger among the farmers for growing this crop.

When Gandhiji returned to India from South Africa in 1915, he saw peasants in Northern India oppressed due to indigo plantation. He was moved by their conditions and used the methods to Satyagrah as a mass protest movement against injustices going on in the country.

The Champaran Satyagrah is a major landmark in the Indian Independence Movement. The mock assassination by Pooja Shakun, on October 2, 2018 is another landmark in the history of the country. Well these are some of the inchoate images of changing India.

The Violent Toll of Hindu Nationalism in India

A populist Prime Minister has legitimized India's more militant groups, and targeted attacks against religious minorities are on the rise.

Eliza Griswold | THE NEW YORKER

On April 1, 2017, Irshad Khan, a slight twenty-six-year-old with glossy black hair and the faint shadow of a beard and mustache, helped his eighteen-year-old brother, Arif, and their father, Pehlu, load two cows into the bed of their white Mahindra pickup truck. The Khans were heading from a cattle market in Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan, to their village of Jaishingpur, a four-hour drive away. Muslims and lower-caste Hindus, or Dalits, live side by side in the village, harvesting mustard from fields of yellow flowers. The village, home to six hundred people, is relatively well-off, and has grown more prosperous, as Delhi has mushroomed into a megacity of twenty-seven million and the price of land surrounding the city has skyrocketed. Some Muslim families in the village, including the Khans, are wealthy traders who transport goods like sand and vegetables to the cities around Delhi.

That afternoon, Irshad climbed into the truck alongside his father and brother. Cows are sacred to Hindus but Irshad had made this trip dozens of times since he was a boy. He'd heard rumors of potential trouble for Muslims at roadside checkpoints, where members of a militant Hindu youth group called the Bajrang Dal were intimidating Muslim traders in the name of protecting cows. Still, Irshad wasn't nervous. "We had no fear at all," he told me recently. "We were coming from a government-organized fair, and buying and selling cows is a legal business."

The militant Hindu nationalism that the group espouses is not new. Nathuram Godse, who assassinated Gandhi, on January 30, 1948, was a member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or R.S.S., a violent right-wing organization that promotes Hindu supremacy. Members of the Bajrang Dal are the movement's foot soldiers, deployed in instances of mob violence or for targeted attacks against Muslims and other religious minorities. Founded in 1984, the group was part of a movement to destroy the Babri Masjid, a sixteenth-century mosque located in Ayodhya, India, which was built by the emperor Babur. (The mosque was ultimately demolished during a violent R.S.S. rally in 1992.) Since its early days, the group has formed some twenty-five-hundred cells across the country. I first reported on these cells, called akhadas, in 2005, in Dharavi, Mumbai, Asia's largest slum, where, in the name of protecting cows, the militants recruited impoverished Hindu boys to their violent cause. Paul Richard Brass, a professor emeritus of political science at the University of Washington, has called the Bajrang Dal "a somewhat pathetic but nevertheless dangerous version of the Nazi S.A."—or the Brownshirts, the Nazi Party's first paramilitary organization.

For much of the past thirty years, the Bajrang Dal has either been banned or has lurked at the margins of Indian society. But in 2014 Narendra Modi, the leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party, or the B.J.P., a right-wing political party that was an offshoot of the R.S.S., was elected Prime Minister. Since then, the militant group has been legitimized and grown exponentially more powerful. In the past seven years, according to Factchecker.in, an organization that tracks hate crimes, there have been a hundred and sixty-eight attacks by Hindu extremists, in the name of protecting cows, against Muslims and other religious minorities. The attacks left forty-six people dead. "It's really a very, very bad moment for Muslims in India," Salman Khurshid, India's former foreign minister and the author of a forthcoming book, "Invisible Citizens," on the systematic oppression of Muslims in the country, told me. He laid out several setbacks for Muslims in Indian history. "First, in 1857, the failure of the war of independence," he said, citing the brutal British repression of a popular uprising, in which Muslim and Hindu soldiers rose up together against the colonialists. Then partition, when British India divided into two independent states, predominantly Hindu India and predominantly Muslim Pakistan, and more than a million people died in sectarian violence. Khurshid cited the destruction of Babri Mosque as a third example. And then told me, "the next big setback is the rise of this government." Under Modi, incidents of communal violence rose 28 per cent between 2014 and 2017.

When Irshad and his family got stuck in traffic in Alwar, about halfway home from the cow market, a gang of eight men surrounded the Khans' truck and demanded to know what was in the back. "Cows," Pehlu said, and handed one of the men the official papers to prove that the cows were legal. "We're Bajrang Dal, and we don't care about these papers," the man replied, tearing them up and throwing them on the road. Then the men pulled the Khans from the truck and passed them around, angrily asking questions. The Khans had driven by a police station about half a mile back, and they were still almost within sight of it. Irshad thought that if they could just hang on for a few minutes and keep the militants talking, the police would arrive to help them. But the minutes passed, and the police didn't come. Instead, dozens more men pressed in around them and began beating them; Irshad felt a stinging cuff to his ear, and then the blows became heavier and more regular, drawing blood. Arif fell to the ground and curled into the fetal position. Pehlu, who was dressed in all white and had a small beard, a sign of religious devotion, was beaten unconscious.

Eventually, the police broke up the crowd and carried the Khans to a local hospital. An angry mob of villagers followed and surrounded the building. A kindly doctor locked Irshad and his brother in a room for their protection, and the boys recalled listening to the sound of feet as the villagers clambered onto the hospital's roof. "We could hear them shouting they wanted to kill all three of us," Irshad told me. Over the next two days the boys began to recover, but, on April 3rd, Pehlu died of his injuries. When the news of his death spread, the boys said that the mob returned and demanded his body so that they could desecrate it. The doctor hid the corpse in the hospital basement, and a police unit moved the boys to another hospital for their safety. When the brothers were in stable enough condition to go back to Jaishingpur, hundreds of people arrived from their village and neighboring ones to escort them home.

This spring, Modi is up for reelection, and campaign season in India has sometimes sparked violence between Hindu nationalists and Muslims in the past. The B.J.P. is especially anxious this year, because of a series of unexpected losses in recent state elections. In Rajasthan, India's first Minister of Cows, who presided over a sanctuary for the animals, was soundly defeated. These electoral losses have little to do with a backlash against right-wing Hindu nationalism. Instead, they reveal growing dissatisfaction with the failure of Modi and the B.J.P. to deliver on the economic development that they promised five years ago. In 2014, most Indians voted for Modi in the hopes that he would lift their economic status. In fact, India's economy is the fastest growing in the world, and more than two-hundred and seventy-million people have risen out of poverty over the last fifteen years. Yet, under Modi, growth is lower than promised and India is facing its highest rate of unemployment in forty-five years. Over the past several weeks, Modi has announced a new round of economic measures designed to placate frustrated voters, including delivering cash handouts to struggling farmers.

Some analysts worry that he will try to distract voters from the slowing economy by doubling down on nationalist rhetoric. "With little to show in terms of economy or development, Modi's only remaining platform is nationalism," Tanweer Alam, a political analyst, told me. Many critics argue that the rhetoric espoused by Modi and the B.J.P. has also intensified tensions in Kashmir, where the Indian government is struggling to quell a year-long spike in violence. In February, forty Indian soldiers were killed by a suicide bomber, who blew himself up by driving into a paramilitary convoy. The bomber claimed to be a local man named Aadil Ahmad Dar, who, in the past year, had left home to join the militant group Jaish-e-Muhammad, which is based in Pakistan. It was the most lethal attack in the region in decades, and Modi responded by threatening "a befitting reply," and then launched air strikes against northern Pakistan. Pakistan subsequently shot down at least one Indian jet, further heightening tensions.

The B.J.P.-controlled national government has passed several laws in recent years that have made life more difficult for religious minorities. In several states, local governments have also passed "anti-conversion" laws that make it illegal to forcibly convert people to a new religion. The ostensible purpose of the measures is to shield Hindus from aggressive Christian proselytizing, or to protect them from Islam. But conversion has historically also provided members of lower castes a way out of the caste system's repressive strictures. The Bajrang Dal also cited the statutes as a justification for attacks against Muslims and Christians. In 2016, in Uttar Pradesh, the Bajrang Dal falsely accused a pastor of forcibly converting Hindus to Christianity, shaved his head, and paraded him through town on a donkey. The United States has generally remained silent regarding the repression of minorities in Modi's India. In 2015, when Modi was selected as one of Time magazine's hundred most influential people in the world, President Obama wrote a glowing tribute and said nothing of the militant nationalism that helped bring Modi to power. Despite President Trump's public support of religious freedom, he has not criticized the oppression of religious minorities in India. Modi has made several high-profile visits to the U.S., including a state visit in 2017.

For the international community, the dominant narrative of India under Modi has been a story of economic success, not an account of religious violence and repression. “Do you really think that American businessmen care what is happening here?” Amitabh Kundu, one of India’s leading economists, asked me, in his office in Delhi. “It will take moderate Hindus to push back against this rabid Hindutva.” Kundu is the author of a study, published in 2014, that documents the socioeconomic status of India’s Muslims, who make up roughly fifteen per cent of the population. Kundu has documented that, although caste-based discrimination has fallen considerably in the last few decades, discrimination against Muslims is on the rise. Despite an influx of people into urban centers across India, the rate of Muslim migration to large cities is decreasing, because they are largely shut out of the labor market. Their names are also frequently removed from voter rolls. In 2018, Hindu nationalist groups called for a ban on public prayer by Muslims Gurgaon parks which led to mob attacks in the name of enforcement.

After speaking with Kundu, I visited Sarim Naved, a young Muslim lawyer, in his windowless, basement office in a law firm in south Delhi. Naved works on human-rights cases involving mob killings, and police brutality, against Muslims. He had left a job at a high-profile bank and committed himself to advocacy in part because he had grown up in an era of rising Islamophobia in India. “If you’re a Muslim, you’re born political,” he said. He was a child in 1992, when the Babri Mosque was demolished, and images of its destruction have stayed with him. “People say that there was once a political left in India, but my generation has never seen it,” he said. “We’ve only seen Hindu nationalism.”

On a recent afternoon, I visited Irshad and Arif, the brothers who survived the mob attack, in their home village with local human-rights activists. They still live in their father’s large compound, which is set in a warren of muddy roads lined with neem trees. In an open courtyard, a buffalo grazed on a tether; a goat and three kids pressed their heads against a wall, trying to warm themselves in the winter sun. Irshad dragged his bed into the sunshine so that we could sit down. Irshad and Arif told me that the attack had ruined their lives, not only because they had grown up wealthy and were now facing poverty but also because of the shame associated with being attacked by a mob. “People look at us with contempt,” he said. Some people had tried to help. Behind him, a green and yellow John Deere tractor, which had been a gift from supporters, sat in the center of the courtyard beyond a patch of spinach. Irshad said he was grateful for the tractor, but the mustard harvest was seasonal, and couldn’t support the family year-round. They had lost their cows in the attack, and their father’s dairy business was now closed. Irshad had abandoned working as a trader. The roads were too dangerous, he said, regardless of what he was transporting. Cows, or a rumor of cows, are now enough to get him killed. He left the village only for work as a driver, when he could find it, earning around seventy-five dollars a month.

Last July, the pattern of killings of Muslims grew so dire—in 2018, there were thirteen fatal cow-related lynchings—that the Indian Supreme Court demanded that the legislature formulate laws against the practice, which it has yet to do. Last month, Human Rights Watch released a

hundred-and-four-page report documenting the violence, and the inaction—and abuses—of the government officials charged with investigating the crimes. “Lynching has become a nationalist project,” Mohammad Ali, a prominent Indian journalist who is currently working on a book about the phenomenon, told me. He said few perpetrators are punished, which has created a culture of impunity. Killers are lauded in some quarters as heroes for defending the faith and eradicating Muslims.

The Khans’ case was rare in that Pehlu, who briefly regained consciousness before dying, was able to identify several of his attackers by name, none of whom were charged. Instead, nine other men were indicted for Pehlu’s murder. Although Irshad knew it was dangerous, he decided to return to Alwar to testify at the trial. As he approached the town, he said a car pulled up behind him and masked men inside started firing at his vehicle. They missed, and he escaped, fleeing back to Jaishingpur. He never made it to court, and all nine of the men accused of killing his father were let go on bail. This impunity is especially troubling given the evidence. A video of the attack, recorded by one of the perpetrators, was posted on a YouTube channel related to the Bajrang Dal. It quickly accumulated more than six hundred thousand views.

At the Khans’ house, Shabnam, Irshad’s wife, walked into the courtyard carrying their third child, an infant son, who screamed at the presence of strangers. She told me that their life had grown more chaotic with Pehlu gone; they missed his income, yes, but also the quiet order that he instilled in the family. “There’s no one to bind the family together now,” she told me. She had first heard of the attack a few hours after it happened. A police officer called from a nearby village to inform her and, soon after, someone sent her the YouTube video.

I asked her if it was still online; she nodded, and one of the local human-rights activists pulled out his phone and brought up the YouTube channel. We scrolled through it, looking for the attack. There were dozens of similar videos showing killings of Muslims, which were deeply disturbing both for their violence and for the obvious pride that the attackers took in being Internet stars. In one, a man wearing white pants and a bright pink sweater beat a Muslim man to death with a stick and sets him on fire, accusing him of committing “love jihad”: falling in love with a Hindu woman. After recording the murder, the attacker turns to the camera and says, “I am appealing to all Hindu sisters that don’t get into the trap of these jihadis. These people will win your heart and satisfy their lust.” In the another, a Bajrang Dal member leans into a truck’s open window. “What is your name?” he shouts, slapping the driver. “Mubarak,” the driver replies. The cameraman slaps him again. “Say ‘Mubarak Muslim,’ ” he demands. Finally, we found the video of Pehlu’s murder. It begins with Pehlu sitting on a curb, his palm upturned as he pleads with someone off camera. Then one of the attackers knocks him backward, and he disappears from the frame.

How New India Developed its Own Lynch Culture in Just Five Years

HARSHVARDHAN TRIPATHY | THE CITIZEN

On Holi, March 21 after the burning of the witch, a mob in Bhondsi, Gurgaon assaulted a Muslim family. In a video of the incident which went viral on social media, a group of young men can be seen entered the family's home and assaulting another young man with iron rods and hockey sticks, while the other family members barricade themselves on the above floor, watching, recording, and crying for help.

According to reports at least 12 members of the joint family, including a year-old infant, were injured in the attack. One can only imagine the horror and terror which would have engulfed the entire family.

In another incident the day before, the night of Holika Dahan, a 20-strong mob beat a 50-year-old Mohammad Anwar to death in Parsoi, Sonbhadra, Uttar Pradesh.

As is increasingly accepted, such lynchings are not stray incidents but are targeted. They are part of a broader lynch mob phenomenon that has engulfed Indian society over the last five years.

Ever since the Bharatiya Janata Party assumed power at the centre, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the helm whose chief ministerial tenure saw the murders of over a thousand Gujaratis in 2002, there have been over 60 recorded lynchings in the name of 'cow protection' alone. And dozens more where mobs have lynched Muslim, Christian, Sikh and Dalit Indians over rumours and suspicion.

The perpetrators have all been Hindus. Often the police have stood by and watched. Politicians have come out in support of the attackers, often found to be political workers themselves. Cases have typically been filed against the victims and not the mob. The lynchings have occurred disproportionately in states governed by the BJP.

Last year in response to a PIL the Supreme Court noted that 'Lynching is an affront to the rule of law and to the exalted values of the Constitution itself... Lynching by unruly mobs and barbaric violence arising out of incitement and instigation cannot be allowed to become the order of the day'.

The apex court asked state and central governments to formulate laws to prevent mob violence. Three days later, a mob beat Akbar Khan to death in Alwar, Rajasthan, on suspicion of cattle theft.

Predictably, the tide has risen to engulf victims beyond the usually targeted communities.

Last year a mob assaulted Professor Sanjay Kumar of the Mahatma Gandhi Central University for allegedly 'dishonouring' former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

The Arya Samaji social activist Swami Agnivesh was attacked by a mob in Jharkhand last July, when he was on his way to adivasi villages to further the Pathalgadi movement (pdf, page 19). Agnivesh was again chased away by a mob while trying to pay homage to Vajpayee in August.

These incidents show that mob violence hitherto centred on 'cow protection' has mutated into something yet more sinister. Criticism of the government, its RSS mentors, or prominent politicians have also become accepted reasons for lynching.

Lynchings have been normalised to such a degree, the mobs are so sure of safety and impunity and support, that they can now enter homes and assault and terrorise families at will.

The unabated continuance of mob lynching as a form of violence can be understood as lynch mob culture, or lynch culture.

According to an annotation to The Autobiography of Malcolm X, 'the term lynch culture has often been applied to the informally organized system of brute violence and murder carried out by whites in the Ku Klux Klan and smaller localized groups such as the Black Legion. These lynchings often took place without benefit of trial or legitimate charges. Notorious for the sadistic methods used against victims, they were carried out in a carnival-like atmosphere. Photographs were taken to be made into postcards, and bloody "souvenirs" taken from the victim.'

In our situation a lynch culture is visible among specific sections of Indian Hindus, that has seemingly developed since 2015, and mainly victimises Muslims and Dalits.

Lynchings are often recorded by the perpetrators, and uploaded and circulated on Facebook or YouTube. The most infamous case is perhaps Shambhulal Regar, who hacked Afrazul Khan to death and burnt the body on video, and has been offered a ticket to contest the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

In our lynch culture too, no proper legal process is followed to determine the guilt of the accused, and often there is a carnival-like atmosphere with the culprits seen enjoying the whole 'drama'.

The question arises, what and who is perpetuating this lynch culture? Some possible reasons are considered in the second part of this article, to follow.

THE LOCAL

Is the BJP Rising in Eastern India?

In the first of a five-part series on opinion polls about the forthcoming Indian elections, pollsters agree that the BJP-led coalition is poised to make gains in the east of the country.

Yashwant Deshmukh | FAIR OBSERVER

As India goes to the polls in 2019, election fever has hit the country. Two of India's pollsters, Yogendra Yadav and Sanjay Kumar of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), differ starkly in their assessments about the fortunes of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Shekhar Gupta of The Print invited these two gentlemen to have a debate in "the spirit of healthy disagreement." I joined that conversation and Gupta extended the invitation to me. Since then, Gupta seems to have changed his mind and, therefore, this author's side of the argument is appearing on Fair Observer.

THE ART, NOT SCIENCE OF OPINION POLLS

Opinion polls are a treacherous climb even under fair weather. After all, they are based on a miniscule sample of voters, susceptible to several errors and products of judgment, not exact scientific methods. Still, when done well, opinion polls tend to be within range of each other.

For instance, the Centre for Voting Opinion and Trends in Election Research (CVoter), which this author leads, and CSDS do not differ greatly in their predictions for the states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. In Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, CVoter predicts a narrow victory for the Indian National Congress, while CSDS forecasts a slim majority for the BJP. In Rajasthan, both CVoter and CSDS envision victory for the Congress and defeat for the BJP. The only difference is that CVoter foresees a landslide win, while CSDS anticipates a slimmer margin.

While differences between CVoter and CSDS might be marginal, these two organizations differ dramatically with Yadav's assessment. He opines that the BJP is staring at a loss of nearly 100 seats from its 2014 tally. Yadav takes the view that the BJP would gain a few seats in the east, losing many in the west and the south. In Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, the BJP is likely to lose its current hold. The same holds true for the rest of the Hindi belt, a term analogous to the Bible belt in the US.

CVoter and CSDS estimate that Yadav is erring on the high side. Therefore, this author will examine the eminent pollster's prognostications, region by region, starting with the east.

Yadav argues that the east of India is the only region that offers the BJP a growth opportunity. In 2014, the BJP won a mere 11 seats of 88. Since then, opinion polls have indicated growing support for the party. In Odisha, the increased support base has come at the expense of the Congress. On the other hand, the BJP has snatched support away from the Left Front coalition led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in West Bengal.

Yadav concludes that the BJP will be a force to reckon with in eastern India. The key question for 2019 is whether it can convert its votes into additional seats this election. The first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system left behind by the British can often be unkind to parties with significant vote shares. An increase in votes may not necessarily lead to the same corresponding increase in seats. Despite the pitfalls of FPTP, Yadav estimates that the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) will win an additional 20 seats in the east.

This author largely agrees with Yadav's observations when it comes to the eastern part of the country. The latest CVoter Tracker forecasts a gain of 24 seats for the NDA in the east, a mere four seats more than the eminent pollster's estimate. As per the data of CVoter Tracker, the NDA has increased its vote share from 24.2% in 2014 to an estimated 36.2% in October 2018, a massive upswing of 12%. Curiously, this vote share is not coming at the cost of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA). The UPA vote share has gone up from 19.3% to 19.7% during the same period. What is going on?

THE LEFT IS BEING LEFT OUT

The key development in the east is that the NDA is taking away votes from the Left Front. The communists have always claimed to lead national parties but, in reality, have led regional parties with two bases: the southern state of Kerala and the eastern giant West Bengal. The NDA is shifting the electoral landscape in eastern India and emerging as the only credible challenger to Mamata Banerjee, the chief minister of West Bengal and leader of All India Trinamool Congress (TMC). As a result, the Left Front is getting left out.

Once, West Bengal was the bastion of the Left Front. From 1977 to 2011, the communist-led Left Front ruled the state. To put this in perspective, this government outlasted the collapse of the Soviet Union by 20 years. Now, the TMC and the NDA are duking it out in a two-horse race. As per CVoter Tracker data, the former is polling at 41% while the latter at 31%. If identity politics grows and communal polarization increases, then Muslim votes could shift from the Congress to the TMC even as Hindu votes might move from the Left Front to NDA.

This could lead to 35% voting for NDA and 45% opting for TMC, which might give all 42 seats in West Bengal to the TMC. However, this is unlikely. As per CVoter Tracker data, the NDA is poised to win nine seats because its voters will have a majority in some constituencies in the

state. Although the TMC might command a 10% lead is for the state as a whole, this lead varies dramatically in the state's five regions.

The TMC leads the NDA by 21% in the north border regions and by 13% in deltaic region, but its lead narrows to about 5% in the northern hills and is merely 2% in the southern plains. In the highlands, it is the NDA that leads TMC by about 3%. This region comprises districts like Jhargram and Purulia, where the TMC is understandably accusing the NDA of joining hands with Maoists for electoral gains. Were there to be a vote swing in just two of the five regions of West Bengal, a 21-21 tie between the TMC and the NDA is not outside the realms of the possible, even though it is not very probable.

The NDA may still trail the TMC in West Bengal, but its fortunes are burning bright in Odisha. Southwest of West Bengal, the state of Odisha has long been dominated by Biju Janata Dal (BJD), a regional party led by Naveen Patnaik. Like many parties in India, the BJD is a family fiefdom. Chief Minister Patnaik is the son of Biju Patnaik, a larger-than-life figure who made his name as a pilot in World War II and the post-independence conflict in Kashmir.

In Odisha, the NDA is polling 38% while the BJD is flailing at 33%. As in the northeastern Indian states of Tripura and Assam, the NDA might be about to win big in Odisha. Of course, there is always the possibility that the BJP makes a realpolitik deal with the BJD. Patnaik could join the NDA and retain his throne as a regional satrap to the BJP. Odisha demonstrates that the east is turning saffron — the color of the Buddha, Hindu priests and, most pertinently, the BJP.

BJP Allies Will Suffer Losses in Western India

In the second of a five-part series on opinion polls about the forthcoming Indian elections, pollsters agree that the BJP-led coalition will lose seats but disagree about the scale of the losses.

As election fever heats up, pollsters in India are debating outcomes. Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen once wrote about “the argumentative Indian,” and I have entered an argument with Yogendra Yadav and Sanjay Kumar of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS).

I must thank Shekhar Gupta of The Print who invited us to have a debate in “the spirit of healthy disagreement.” Since then, Gupta seems to have changed his mind. Therefore, I am publishing my argument on Fair Observer.

THE WEST IS THE CRADLE OF THE BJP

The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has close ties with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The RSS translates in English as the National Volunteers’ Organization and is controversial to say the least. Many, including the BBC, describe it as a right-wing, Hindu nationalist organization that is “the ideological fountainhead of the BJP.” Tellingly, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was a full-time RSS worker before he became a politician.

Most people forget that the RSS was born in Nagpur. In 1950, Jean A. Curran Jr. published a remarkable paper on the organization that is now prescribed reading in most universities. As he observed, the founder of the RSS was a Marathi Deshashtha Brahmin from Nagpur. The American scholar failed to point out that Marathi Brahmins nearly replaced the Mughal Empire in the 18th century before the British took over. Even today, Nagpur, a historic town in the western Indian state of Maharashtra, continues to be the headquarters of the RSS.

Therefore, it is little surprise that Maharashtra and Gujarat have been strongholds of the BJP. Modi, the first backward caste prime minister of India, was the chief minister of Gujarat for 13 years before he captured power in New Delhi. For a party that won merely two seats in 1984, the landslide victory in 2014 represented a remarkable rise. Needless to say, western India voted almost en bloc for the BJP.

THE YADAV CRYSTAL BALL FOR THE WEST

The eminent pollster Yadav estimates that western India is likely to witness a business-as-usual election with a small dent in the BJP tally. In 2014, it won all but six seats in this region. Things have certainly changed since.

Gujarat has experienced rural unrest with a prominent agrarian community agitating to gain advantage of India's controversial reservation policy. As per this policy, a certain percentage of government jobs are reserved for communities designated as backward or oppressed. As if trouble in Gujarat was not enough, farmers in Maharashtra marched 180 kilometers to Mumbai to protest against the Bharatiya Janata Party. Shiv Sena, the party's coalition partner in the state, has turned into a bitter rival and is fighting the BJP for supremacy. In Goa, the BJP is battling "disgruntled partymen and impatient allies" as the state chief minister's health fails.

As per Yadav, the BJP will contain its losses. He opines that Gujarat may be restive, but it will end up voting for a Gujarati prime minister. Shiv Sena might make up with the BJP and their coalition is likely to win in Maharashtra. As per Yadav, the BJP could limit its losses to 15-20 in this region.

ALLIES, NOT BJP LOSING IN THE WEST

The CVoter Tracker is revealing numbers different to what Yadav predicts. Although it is too early to make firm predictions with parties still jostling and alliances yet unformed, it is clear that the vote share of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) has fallen from 54% to 43.8% in October. In the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system, this would lead to the BJP winning 50 instead of 53 seats. That does not seem to be a significant figure, but there is a sting in the tail.

So far, Shiv Sena has been a part of NDA. CVoter Tracker has assumed it might part ways with the BJP. In that scenario, it would suffer a catastrophic loss of as many as 14 seats. There is a real risk that this regional party might be decimated and even their bastion in Mumbai might fall. Yadav's estimate about seat loss for the BJP applies more to the Shiv Sena. As of now, the NDA would lose seats, but the BJP, the biggest party in this coalition, is escaping with a minimal loss.

In the long run, Shiv Sena's potential meltdown might be good news for the BJP. The two parties have been described as frenemies. They are both battling for the same core support base. Shiv Sena is based on both Hindu identity and Marathi pride. This focus on regional identity is a problem for the BJP, which is trying desperately hard to be a national party. The BJP has been trying to sublimate Marathi pride into Hindu pride and has outsmarted Shiv Sena so far.

Led by Devendra Fadnavis, the shrewd chief minister of Maharashtra, the BJP has been stealing Shiv Sena's clothes as well the opposition's. Most recently, he has been appealing to the Maratha community, traditionally supporters of the Indian National Congress and local strongman Sharad Pawar. Shiv Sena is a fiefdom of the Thackeray clan that has been weakened

by a family feud. Its dynastic leadership has become disconnected with its supporters and Fadnavis is taking advantage of it.

Goa sends only two members of parliament to New Delhi. Even here, the BJP might be in a better position than what Yadav estimates. The key state is Gujarat, though. This is Modi's home turf where he earned his chops as a potential national leader. In 2017, the opposition mounted a rather strong challenge to the BJP here. Yet this strong showing disguised the fact that the BJP won 49% of the votes in comparison to 41% for the Congress party. It resulted in the former winning 99 seats, primarily in urban conglomerations, while the Congress won 77 seats, largely in rural areas.

In 2014, all 26 of Gujarat's members of parliament belonged to the BJP. CVoter Tracker estimates that 55% of Gujaratis are likely to vote for the BJP in the national elections, with 38% opting for the Congress. It appears that the pull of the son of the soil cannot be underestimated. Gujaratis draw great pride from the fact that Modi is the first full five-year term prime minister from this coastal state. This makes it quite possible that 26-0 might be the BJP-Congress score in Gujarat once again, giving the ruling party a big boost in its home turf of western India.

Might the Congress Make a Comeback in Northern India?

In the third of a five-part series on opinion polls about the forthcoming Indian elections, pollsters agree that the Congress-led coalition is on the ascendant but disagree as to what degree.

As election fever heats up, pollsters in India are debating outcomes. Yogendra Yadav and Sanjay Kumar of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and this author are crunching numbers and justifying their inferences to the public.

The three of us have Shekhar Gupta of The Print to thank for this series of articles. He invited us to have a debate in “the spirit of healthy disagreement.” Since then, Gupta seems to have changed his mind, but Fair Observer has stepped in to publish my side of the story.

THE YADAV CRYSTAL BALL FOR NORTH INDIA

Yadav believes that the state of Jammu and Kashmir hardly affects the national equation. In Punjab, the implosion of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which literally translates as the Common Man’s Party, plays to the advantage of the Indian National Congress. He estimates that the Congress party will make small gains in Punjab and cites local body elections as an indicator of the swing in popular sentiment toward India’s oldest political party. Yadav predicts a loss of three to four seats for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in Punjab.

He takes the view that the BJP will lose in Haryana on account of the unpopularity of the chief minister of the state, Manohar Lal Khattar. He forecasts that the BJP will suffer in Delhi too and is unlikely to sweep all constituencies as last time. Yadav sees only one fly in the ointment for the Congress. It is none other than Rahul Gandhi. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is far more popular than Jawaharlal Nehru’s great-grandson. The former is seen as self-made while the latter as a feckless heir.

Yadav says that a presidential-style contest between Modi and Gandhi would benefit the former. Therefore, the BJP is likely to shift attention from Khattar to Modi. They are likely to keep the focus on the more credible central government instead of the unpopular state leaders to boost their electoral prospects.

TROUBLES FOR THE BJP

The BJP's troubles in India's northernmost state, Jammu and Kashmir, have made headlines around the world. The state is under governor's rule for the eighth time since June. Till then, the Bharatiya Janata Party was in an opportunistic alliance with the Jammu and Kashmir Peoples Democratic Party (JKPDP). This experiment has completely backfired for both parties, but the BJP has the consolation of the captive Hindu vote in Jammu that remains loyal despite the staggering ineptitude of its local leadership.

The same cannot be said for the BJP's hold on Buddhist Ladakh. This spectacular land could have become a stronghold of the BJP by now, but the party took the Ladakhis for granted in much the same way as the Hindu inhabitants of Jammu. Consequently, the BJP's hold on his plateau region is gone for a toss and it is a big loss.

The beneficiary in the state will be the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference (JKNC), the traditional ruling party of the state. Led by the second and third generation scions of the Abdullah family, JKNC is yet another family fiefdom like Shiv Sena. Now, it will benefit from the backlash against the JKPDP and make yet another comeback.

In Punjab, Yadav might be underestimating the support for the Indian National Congress. The Aam Aadmi Party faces complete meltdown. CVoter Tracker indicates that the Congress is poised to win nine of 13 seats for parliament. Until 2017, it appeared that the AAP might break out of its stronghold in Delhi and notch up a victory in Punjab. CVoter called the election in AAP's favor, but the results in favor of the Congress proved it wrong. Since the heady days of 2017, the AAP's support base has whittled away.

Speculation about the decline of the AAP has already begun. Controversy over links with Khalistani separatists has hit them hard. Khalistanis are Sikh radicals who have long wanted a separate nation state called Khalistan. Far too many forget that the Punjab insurgency was once bloodier than the Kashmiri one. The Indian military had to enter the Golden Temple to flush out extremists who fought a spirited gun battle. This operation led to such resentment that Sikh bodyguards assassinated Indira Gandhi, India's most powerful prime minister to date.

The AAP's association with Khalistan has evoked ghosts from the past. Voters have moved back to the Congress, the BJP and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), the regional party of the Sikhs and the fiefdom of the Badal clan, despite their manifold flaws. As things stand, all four members of parliament from the AAP will lose in the election. The biggest beneficiary will be the Congress, where Captain Amarinder Singh has proved to be a canny chief minister and has put his party into pole position.

In the two states of Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir, the BJP is losing three seats but its current and former allies, the SAD and the PDP, are losing a further six. This means that the BJP-led NDA is losing nine seats.

IT'S COMPLICATED IN HARYANA, DELHI AND RAJASTHAN

CVoter Tracker data differs from Yadav in its forecast on Haryana. Yet the data agrees with Yadav in his assessment that BJP leader Khattar is an extremely unpopular chief minister in Haryana. The BJP is helped by what pollsters have termed the Index of Opposition Unity (IoU). India has the first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system left behind by the British. In such a system, the largest party can win with even 30% or less of the vote if the remaining 70% is divided among other parties and the second largest party gets 29.99% support. If IoU is low, a relatively unpopular party can win because of a divided opposition.

For decades, the Indian National Congress was the big beneficiary of FPTP. Now, the BJP has inherited that advantage. In Haryana, the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) is the major regional party led by Devi Lal's descendants. In the land where siblings once fought the epic Mahabharata battle, Devi Lal's grandsons, Ajay Chautala and Abhay Chautala, have declared war on each other, fragmenting the Jat vote and wrecking INLD in the process. Like Shiv Sena, these dynasts are removed from grassroots realities and alienated from their voter base.

The implosion of INLD is bad news for the Congress party in the short run. The former is polling at 20% while the latter at 30%. Sadly, for both, the BJP, despite its incompetent and unpopular chief minister, still has the support of 40% of the voters as per CVoter Tracker data. This might allow the BJP to win seven out of 10 seats they won in 2014, limiting their loss to three seats in Haryana. In 2004, the Congress won nine out of 10 seats in parliament with 42.1% of the vote.

As in Haryana, the BJP is benefiting from a divided opposition in Delhi. It is not only the bickering between the AAP and the Congress, but also the implosion of the AAP that is playing out in favor of the BJP. Yadav, one of the most eminent of India's pollster was a founding member of the AAP. Arvind Kejriwal, the temperamental chief minister of Delhi, has kicked out Yadav and other heavyweight intellectuals. This benefits the BJP but is a godsend for the Congress. In 2015, the AAP won 67 of 70 seats in Delhi, getting 54% of the popular vote and leaving the Congress with a mere 9%. The rest of the vote went to the BJP.

While the BJP vote share has remained largely steady, people in Delhi are shifting back to the Congress from the AAP. For the first time since 2013, CVoter Tracker data shows that the Congress has pulled ahead of the AAP. If the AAP and the Congress ally, then the BJP is toast. If not, then the low IoU and the FPTP system favors the BJP, which may repeat its 7-0 performance of 2014 albeit with a lower vote share.

Finally, another phenomenon deserves attention. Termed, the "split-vote" phenomenon, this author was the first to flag it 10 years ago. Simply put, Indian voters have been voting for different parties depending on the level of the government. They may vote in Party A to local councils, Party B to the state legislature and Party C to the national parliament.

In Rajasthan, the slogan "Modi tukhse bair nahin, par Rani teri khair nahin" is on almost everyone's lips. This literally translates as, "Modi, we have no enmity with you, but we are not sparing the local queen." The current chief minister of Rajasthan, Vasundhara Raje, is from one

of India's former royal families that had cozy relations with the British and then reinvented itself in modern electoral politics. She has a reputation for incompetence and arrogance. Furthermore, Rajasthan continues to suffer from rampant corruption and she has failed to improve the state administration. Unsurprisingly, Rajasthan's public is hell bent on booting her out, even though it retains some sympathy for Modi. As a result, the Congress will win a landslide in the state legislature, but that might not translate into seats in the Indian parliament.

It is a well-known secret that, in many states run by the BJP, chief ministers would lose and the opposition would triumph. However, the same voters might cast their vote for the BJP candidate for the national parliament for a simple reason. They prefer Narendra Modi to Rahul Gandhi, making the half-Italian, rather good-looking Nehruvian heir the most unlikely best friend of a rustic, hirsute and plebeian Modi.

Elections in Southern India Are Always Different

In the fourth of a five-part series on opinion polls about the forthcoming Indian elections, pollsters concur that regional parties hold sway in the south, but disagree as to seat numbers.

South India has a different historical memory to the rest of the country. Neither the Mauryan Empire of ancient times, nor the Mughal Empire of medieval times ruled the south entirely. Only under the British Empire was the south knit together with the north politically. In a discussion on the forthcoming elections conducted by Yogendra Yadav and Sanjay Kumar of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and this author, the south is perhaps where we disagree most.

For this series, we have Shekhar Gupta to thank for inviting us to air our views, even though he failed to keep his word and publish my work. As a result, Fair Observer has agreed to publish me.

THE YADAV CRYSTAL BALL FOR SOUTH INDIA

Yogendra Yadav argues that the national parliamentary elections in the south cannot be on the presidential pattern as in the north. Here, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) cannot project Prime Minister Narendra Modi against Rahul Gandhi, president of the Indian National Congress. This means the election will perforce revolve around regional issues and local personalities.

Yadav points out that the BJP has low stakes in the region. It won a mere 22 seats in the south, of which 17 came from the state of Karnataka alone. In Yadav's estimation, the BJP will continue to be a marginal player in this region. In the state of Tamil Nadu, M. Karunanidhi, the longstanding leader of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), is dead. So, is his bitter rival Jayalalithaa of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). The DMK and AIADMK have dominated Tamil Nadu for decades. Neither the Congress nor the BJP have been able to hold sway in this most proud of southern states. Yadav argues that the BJP's attempt to acquire the AIADMK in the post-Jayalalithaa era has failed spectacularly. The anti-BJP DMK seems to be in the ascendant after two terms of AIADMK rule.

As per Yadav, the BJP might fare a bit better in the state of Kerala. Here, it is stirring primal passions over the controversy over the Sabarimala Temple. This might lead to a breakthrough in electoral representation in Kerala. However, the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system is likely to lead to higher vote share, but not necessarily seats in the national parliament.

He argues that the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) might not fare well in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Chandrababu Naidu, the chief minister of Andhra Pradesh and leader of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), is forging a broad-based front against the BJP. Telangana Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao of the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) has declared he is “a warrior, not a beggar” and hit out at both national parties. For Rao, both the Congress and the BJP centralize power in New Delhi instead of delegating it to the states. Therefore, he is trying to create a national third front of regional parties to challenge the two dominant national players and this might play out well with his voters.

Yadav predicts that the BJP might lose its hold on Karnataka as well. In the 2018 elections for the state legislative assembly, the saffron party won 104 seats and emerged as the largest party in the state. However, the Indian National Congress with 80 seats and Janata Dal (Secular) with 37 seats combined to keep the BJP out of power in Karnataka. It is important to note that the BJP did not get the highest vote share. It managed only 36.3% of the vote as compared to 38.1% for the Congress party. In the forthcoming national elections, the BJP faces a coalition of Congress and Janata Dal (Secular), making a landslide defeat a distinct possibility because the latter garnered 18.3% of the vote.

Yadav estimates that the Bharatiya Janata Party might lose five to 10 seats in the south. This means that it is likely to win a mere 10-17 seats in this part of the country, making it a marginal party in the south.

YADAV IS RIGHT ON BIG PICTURE, NOT ON DETAILS

It is hard to disagree with the broad thrust of Yadav’s analysis. However, the devil lies in the details and pollsters know that fine margins lead to victories or defeats. The Congress party is certainly likely to gain seats, but this is unlikely to occur in Karnataka. Instead, it will gain a boost in Kerala and Telangana.

In Kerala, there is a big upswing in support for the BJP. CVoter Tracker reveals that the BJP might win 17% of the vote, but it needs a further 5% swing to win a single seat in the state. This is possible but not probable. More importantly, the BJP is rising in Kerala by whittling away the vote share of the communist-led Left Front. This is deeply ironic because it is in Kerala that the first democratically elected communist government in the world assumed office in 1957. Yet the FPTP system means that the BJP will not benefit from this increased vote share. Ironically, it will only help its national rival, the Congress, to sweep the state. As per CVoter Tracker data, the Congress would gain eight seats and allies of its United Progressive Alliance (UPA) another four. A gain of 12 seats for the Congress-led UPA would definitely shake up politics in Kerala.

In Andhra Pradesh, Naidu’s dumping of the BJP and embracing the Congress will lead to a loss of 18 seats for the NDA. Yet life is never uninteresting in Indian politics. Another regional party named the YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) is going hammer and tongs at Naidu. Although YSRCP

has declared that it will not ally with the Bharatiya Janata Party, politics makes strange bedfellows and the situation in Andhra Pradesh might not be as cast in stone as it seems.

There is another pertinent point most pollsters forget. First, the BJP has long had a powerful presence in both Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. In 1998, the party polled 19.5% of the votes in the parliamentary elections. The Naidu-led TDP won 12 seats as compared to 22 won by the Congress. As a result, the canny Naidu entered an alliance with the BJP for the 1999 elections. It is important to note that the BJP sacrificed Banjara Hills in Hyderabad for Raisina Hill in New Delhi. Simply put, the interests of the local BJP leadership were sacrificed at the altar of gaining power at the national level.

The same story holds true in Telangana. The BJP was the first major party to demand the creation of a separate state but shelved this demand because of pressure by TDP, which wanted an undivided Andhra Pradesh. As a result, the Rao-led TRS was able to take up the battle flag dropped by the BJP and ride to power on the back of his unremitting campaign for the new state of Telangana.

Most analysts forget that the BJP polled more than the TDP in the 17 seats in Telangana. The BJP's alliance with the TDP and abdication of the Telangana cause was pure hara-kiri. It contested a mere 15 out of 119 assembly seats and five out of 17 national parliamentary ones, handing the region on a platter to the TDP along with its own sacrificial head. Local BJP leaders still bemoan this historic blunder.

Five years after 1999, the TDP lost in Andhra Pradesh and took down the BJP-led NDA government of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The Congress and the TRS now emerged as big winners in 2004 at the national and regional level respectively. In 2009, the Naidu dumped the BJP and, as a result, the TDP suffered a humiliating defeat. In 2014, the BJP made amends by striking up an alliance on better terms, but Rao rode to power on the euphoria of the creation of the new state of Telangana. That euphoria might have worn off and things might take an interesting turn not only in Andhra Pradesh, but also in Telangana.

STICKY WICKET IN KARNATAKA AND THE TAMIL NADU GOOGLY

Yadav makes a valid point but forgets one thing. The Old Mysore region is very different to the rest of Karnataka. The Janata Dal (Secular) commands overwhelming support in the Old Mysore region but is a spent force elsewhere. This means that its alliance with the Indian National Congress might not lead to such an advantage in the forthcoming polls for the national parliament. The recent by-elections for three seats to the parliament demonstrated that the BJP increased, not just retained its vote share.

In fact, CVoter Tracker data reveals that the UPA coalition of Congress and Janata Dal (Secular) in Karnataka would command a staggering 57% lead in Old Mysore, wiping out the BJP entirely. However, the BJP commands a 50% plus vote share in two out of six regions and has a vote share near or above 40% in three out of six regions. As of now, the UPA stands to win 21 out of

28 seats in Karnataka, but there has been a recent swing in favor of the BJP and it might fare better than Yadav estimates at the elections for the national parliament.

Yadav and this author largely agree on our predictions for Tamil Nadu. Yet it is important to remember that this is a state in flux. Both Karunanidhi and Jayalalithaa are dead. In a film-obsessed state where all its towering leaders for nearly five decades have come from the film industry, superstar Rajinikanth is apparently poised to enter politics. This has set the cat among the pigeons in Tamil Nadu, leaving both the DMK and the AIADMK in a tizzy. Such is Rajinikanth's popularity that he could very well become Tamil Nadu's next leader, but it is also possible that his popularity might not translate into seats.

The reason Tamil Nadu matters is because its leaders played kingmakers in New Delhi from 1996 to 2014. Until Narendra Modi's resounding victory over four years ago, the 39 seats in Tamil Nadu combined with 42 in West Bengal made them the de facto swing states for India. These two states rendered Uttar Pradesh (UP), India's most populous state with 80 seats in the national parliament, redundant. The regional parties that dominated UP could not match the savvy operators of the southern and eastern coasts.

By winning 73 out of 80 seats in UP, Modi was able to keep the late Jayalalithaa out of NDA even though they had a perfectly harmonious relationship. In 2019, Tamil Nadu might be back in the spotlight. But neither the Congress nor the BJP matter in this state on the southeastern tip of India. Regional actors will battle it out for dominance and the winner might well decide to support either national party in New Delhi. The next Tamil leader might again be the nation's kingmaker.

Understanding the 2019 Indian Elections

In the last of a five-part series on opinion polls about the Indian elections, national security has overtaken the economy to become the main electoral issue, but things may change by the time the...

The CVoter Tracker, an opinion survey of voters, found that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity dipped after his first year in office. A significant 63% of those surveyed found his government to be anti-poor and anti-farmer. As Modi completes five years in office, his popularity is touching an all-time high despite repeated stories about India's economic woes.

In April 2014, when the coalition led by the Indian National Congress was in power, the top two issues people cared about were corruption and inflation. Six months after Modi won the 2014 elections, unemployment emerged as the most important issue for Indian voters. Till January 2019, this remained the case. Yet voters seem to be less concerned about it right now. What happened?

The explanation is best delivered through an analogy. Imagine you are suffering from many ailments and many parts of your body are aching terribly. You go to a doctor and list down all the problems: headache, stomachache, backache, knee pain, twisted ankle, spondylitis, tennis elbow and a few more aches. But before the doctor begins treating you for all symptoms, you ask him to do something about your backache because you claim it's killing you. When you go to meet the doctor next, you request relief for knee pain, and the next time you beg relief from spondylitis. All this time, you are suffering from a chronic migraine that refuses to go away, but other pains push it into the background. That is precisely what has happened to the Indian voter's chronic unemployment problem.

The answer may lie in public perception. Almost 42% of the people who mentioned unemployment as a problem felt that Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) would solve the problem. In contrast, only 13% believed that the Congress party would be able to do so. Also, 53% of the people surveyed believe that their quality of life would improve in the next 12 months. Only 17% were pessimistic and believed otherwise. This high index of optimism is working in favor of Modi and the BJP.

THE PULWAMA EFFECT AND POPULIST SOPS

The most important factor in the ongoing election might turn out to be the attack on Indian troops in Pulwama. It is an emotive issue that resulted in a national outpouring of grief. Modi's

bold airstrikes won popular acclaim and boosted his popularity. Mainstream media oxygenated the entire episode. As a result, people seem to be willing to forgive Modi's policy failures as honest mistakes of a risk-taking, dynamic prime minister.

In the past, security has not played much of a role in Indian elections. Manmohan Singh was re-elected as prime minister despite the 2008 Mumbai attacks. Terror strikes and security issues have, for the most part, remained a non-issue in CVoter Tracker data. Before the Pulwama attacks, the recall rate of these issues was a mere 3%. This has risen to a high of 26%. It seems India might be changing. For the first time, security issues are competing with bread and butter ones in India's post-independence history.

At the start of 2019, 37% of the people surveyed believed their living standards had improved over 12 months, while 31% felt they had declined. The BJP had lost elections in three states in the Hindi heartland: Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh and Rajasthan. There was real fear that Modi would lose like Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the BJP prime minister from 1999 to 2004. The specter of 2004 was haunting the party 15 years after it unexpectedly lost the election.

Modi is an arch pragmatist and decided to go on a populist spree. He gave reservation to economically backward upper-caste families, a measure designed to retain the traditional vote base of his party. Money for farmers, targeted cash transfers to the poor and a budget full of goodies for different sections of society soothed frayed nerves of voters.

By March 7, 2019, 45% people reported improved living standards and only 22% said these standards had declined. On the same date, 51% respondents said they were very satisfied with the working of the Modi government in contrast to 36% on January 1. The combination of populist benefits for voters and patriotism post-Pulwama boosted the fortunes of Modi. In fact, his personal popularity ratings doubled between January 1 and March 7. People repeatedly contrasted Modi's bold action to Singh's lukewarm response to the Mumbai attacks more than 10 years ago. The fact that Modi is the first Indian prime minister to attack Pakistan in its own territory, on its own sovereign soil, since Indira Gandhi has worked strongly in his favor.

RAHUL GANDHI, MODI'S BEST FRIEND

At the start of 2019, Rahul Gandhi's stock seemed to be rising. This fifth-generation heir of the Nehru family had gone around the world to elite universities such as Berkeley and the London School of Economics. His party, the Indian National Congress, had won three state elections in the Hindi heartland. Hearteningly, his approval rating was 23% on January 1. Recently, his approval rating has plummeted to 8%.

Just as Pulwama worked in Modi's favor, it has worked against Gandhi. Indians no longer trust the Congress party on national security. Most Indians believe that the party has been soft on Pakistan since 2004. Its inability to guarantee security during its time in power and its perceived softness on terror has come back to haunt Congress in 2019.

The BJP has been very clever in its electoral strategy. It has portrayed the 2019 election as a binary choice between Modi and Gandhi. This bipolar choice has resulted in people favoring the 56-inch chested Modi to the weak, inarticulate and ineffectual Gandhi. It has led many pundits to remark that Gandhi is Modi's best friend. And there is more than an element of truth in that comment.

BANANA PEELS STILL REMAIN

In India, anti-incumbency factor has been running strong in elections for the last two decades. Politicians are rarely able to meet people's expectations. So, people vote in the opposition to punish the government. The Modi government is not exempt to this powerful phenomenon. On January 1, 27% wanted to vote it out. By March 7, this number had dropped to 20%, a still significant figure.

Even as the anti-incumbency number has dropped for the government, the number of undecided voters has risen from 42% to 47%. This is evidence of a polity in flux. These voters could swing either way by the time they enter the polls. This is the most worrisome fact for the BJP. If these voters started blaming Modi for their economic woes, then he too could end up with the same fate as Vajpayee.

In 2014, people voted for a non-Nehruvian management of the economy. They wanted less control by the Indian state, which had spectacularly mismanaged the economy. However, demonetization as well as imposition of the goods and sales tax increased the heavy hand of the state. In fact, many have come to believe that Modi is obsessed with increasing tax revenue to exclusion of everything else. This has strengthened the inspector-raj infamously created by Congress.

In fact, the BJP has made no structural or institutional break from the past. It is just seen as a cleaner and more efficient version of the Indian National Congress. Prime Minister Modi offered no new ideas about governance or the economy. For the last five years, the government has launched one scheme after another and initiated many welfare measures, but the sentiment on the street is negative. Consumption has fallen, investment remains low and controversy rages around unemployment figures. Economic woes might still cause the undecided voter to flip into an anti-incumbent one.

In 2014, the BJP ran as an opposition party enjoying the anti-incumbency factor. Today, it faces an opposition that has come together to unseat it from power. Furthermore, India's democracy follows the first-past-the-post Westminster model. Victory in 543 distinct seats decides who forms the government, not the winner of a pan-national election. It is well within the realms of possibility that Modi's BJP might fall short of the magic figure of 272 seats in the Lok Sabha, India's lower house of parliament.

A final factor weakening the BJP is not unemployment of the masses, but the unemployability of a large number of its members of parliaments. Many of its MPs are "good-for-nothing" and

have relied on the goodwill for Modi to get elected. More than external injury, the BJP faces the clear and present danger of severe “internal bleeding” that might damage its chances. Like the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the BJP is a cadre-based party. The communists lost power and relevance once their cadres rotted and lost touch with the people. The BJP faces a similar risk as its cadre and elected representatives seem to be following the communist path.

THE SOCIAL

Mark Zuckerberg: The Internet needs new rules. Let's start in these four areas.

Mark Zuckerberg | THE WASHINGTON POST

Technology is a major part of our lives, and companies such as Facebook have immense responsibilities. Every day, we make decisions about what speech is harmful, what constitutes political advertising, and how to prevent sophisticated cyberattacks. These are important for keeping our community safe. But if we were starting from scratch, we wouldn't ask companies to make these judgments alone.

I believe we need a more active role for governments and regulators. By updating the rules for the Internet, we can preserve what's best about it — the freedom for people to express themselves and for entrepreneurs to build new things — while also protecting society from broader harms.

From what I've learned, I believe we need new regulation in four areas: harmful content, election integrity, privacy and data portability.

First, harmful content. Facebook gives everyone a way to use their voice, and that creates real benefits — from sharing experiences to growing movements. As part of this, we have a responsibility to keep people safe on our services. That means deciding what counts as terrorist propaganda, hate speech and more. We continually review our policies with experts, but at our scale we'll always make mistakes and decisions that people disagree with.

Lawmakers often tell me we have too much power over speech, and frankly I agree. I've come to believe that we shouldn't make so many important decisions about speech on our own. So we're creating an independent body so people can appeal our decisions. We're also working with governments, including French officials, on ensuring the effectiveness of content review systems.

Internet companies should be accountable for enforcing standards on harmful content. It's impossible to remove all harmful content from the Internet, but when people use dozens of different sharing services — all with their own policies and processes — we need a more standardized approach.

One idea is for third-party bodies to set standards governing the distribution of harmful content and to measure companies against those standards. Regulation could set baselines for what's

prohibited and require companies to build systems for keeping harmful content to a bare minimum.

Facebook already publishes transparency reports on how effectively we're removing harmful content. I believe every major Internet service should do this quarterly, because it's just as important as financial reporting. Once we understand the prevalence of harmful content, we can see which companies are improving and where we should set the baselines.

Second, legislation is important for protecting elections. Facebook has already made significant changes around political ads: Advertisers in many countries must verify their identities before purchasing political ads. We built a searchable archive that shows who pays for ads, what other ads they ran and what audiences saw the ads. However, deciding whether an ad is political isn't always straightforward. Our systems would be more effective if regulation created common standards for verifying political actors.

Online political advertising laws primarily focus on candidates and elections, rather than divisive political issues where we've seen more attempted interference. Some laws only apply during elections, although information campaigns are nonstop. And there are also important questions about how political campaigns use data and targeting. We believe legislation should be updated to reflect the reality of the threats and set standards for the whole industry.

Third, effective privacy and data protection needs a globally harmonized framework. People around the world have called for comprehensive privacy regulation in line with the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation, and I agree. I believe it would be good for the Internet if more countries adopted regulation such as GDPR as a common framework.

New privacy regulation in the United States and around the world should build on the protections GDPR provides. It should protect your right to choose how your information is used — while enabling companies to use information for safety purposes and to provide services. It shouldn't require data to be stored locally, which would make it more vulnerable to unwarranted access. And it should establish a way to hold companies such as Facebook accountable by imposing sanctions when we make mistakes.

I also believe a common global framework — rather than regulation that varies significantly by country and state — will ensure that the Internet does not get fractured, entrepreneurs can build products that serve everyone, and everyone gets the same protections.

As lawmakers adopt new privacy regulations, I hope they can help answer some of the questions GDPR leaves open. We need clear rules on when information can be used to serve the public interest and how it should apply to new technologies such as artificial intelligence.

Finally, regulation should guarantee the principle of data portability. If you share data with one service, you should be able to move it to another. This gives people choice and enables developers to innovate and compete.

This is important for the Internet — and for creating services people want. It's why we built our development platform. True data portability should look more like the way people use our platform to sign into an app than the existing ways you can download an archive of your information. But this requires clear rules about who's responsible for protecting information when it moves between services.

This also needs common standards, which is why we support a standard data transfer format and the open source Data Transfer Project.

I believe Facebook has a responsibility to help address these issues, and I'm looking forward to discussing them with lawmakers around the world. We've built advanced systems for finding harmful content, stopping election interference and making ads more transparent. But people shouldn't have to rely on individual companies addressing these issues by themselves. We should have a broader debate about what we want as a society and how regulation can help. These four areas are important, but, of course, there's more to discuss.

The rules governing the Internet allowed a generation of entrepreneurs to build services that changed the world and created a lot of value in people's lives. It's time to update these rules to define clear responsibilities for people, companies and governments going forward.

Mark Zuckerberg says he wants to fix the internet. Don't take him seriously

Roger McNamee | THE GUARDIAN

Mark Zuckerberg's recent opinion piece in the Washington Post is a monument to insincerity and misdirection. The essay offers proposals to address four important issues – harmful content, election protection, privacy and data protection, and data portability – but each proposal is transparently self-serving. The popularity of internet platforms cannot obscure or justify the harm they enable. The time has come to address that harm, to consider if and how internet platforms can operate without undermining civil society. While I applaud Zuckerberg for trying to engage policymakers, I do not think anyone should take these proposals seriously.

From the time I first reached out to Zuckerberg in October 2016 with my concerns that Facebook's business model and algorithms allow bad actors to harm innocent people, the company has denied and deflected responsibility for the consequences of its choices. A cascade of evidence has undermined that strategy, enlarging the scope of criticism and forcing Facebook to adopt a more conciliatory tone. That tone stands in stark contrast to that of Google, which is guilty of many of the same business practices and harms, yet has received far less attention for them.

To its credit, Zuckerberg's essay addresses four genuine issues with the Facebook platform. The first of these, harmful content, may be beyond the power of Facebook and regulators to resolve. With more than 2.5 billion active users posting billions of times a day on a platform with no circuit breakers, firewalls, or containment strategy, Facebook has no way to prevent hate speech, disinformation and conspiracy theories. The problem begins with the architecture of the internet, which encourages anonymity, empowering bad actors, while also enabling the disaffected to find each other and coordinate their activities at a scale never previously possible.

While Facebook blocks billions of inauthentic accounts every year, its private groups and advertising tools enable bad actors to gather and do harm with little risk of discovery. In his essay, Zuckerberg recommends delegating responsibility for identifying the kinds of content that can be shared on internet platforms to government, a change that would effectively protect Facebook from criticism and legal responsibility without addressing the underlying problems.

A similar issue arises with Zuckerberg's proposal for protecting the integrity of elections. Election advertising has become indispensable to candidates, and a large business for Facebook, due to an unprecedented ability to target users. Facebook did not police election

advertising through 2016, enabling interference by Russia and other countries in elections in the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe. While Facebook has since implemented some safeguards, in the form of controls on election advertising, it has struggled to distinguish election advertising from ads promoting election-related journalism. Shifting responsibility to government would simplify Facebook's operations and limit its legal exposure.

Zuckerberg's final two proposals – relating to privacy and data portability – are also self-serving, but in ways that go beyond legal liability. With respect to privacy, Facebook has a terrible track record, having made the sharing of private user data with business partners a core part of its strategy for many years. Zuckerberg now calls for extending protections modeled on the European Union's Global Data Protection Regulation to the entire world.

In the context of data portability, Zuckerberg has reversed himself, arguing that user data should be sharable across platforms. While both proposals sound constructive, they are cynical. The Global Data Protection Regulation protects only the data that users contribute to a platform. The same is true of Facebook's proposal on data portability. Neither proposal addresses metadata, browsing history, and data about users acquired from third parties, from which Facebook and other platforms build data avatars of every consumer, including those who do not use their services. Metadata, browsing history, and data about users acquired from third parties enable microtargeting and behavior modification, which create huge value for Facebook and also Google, and I expect both companies to concede just about anything else to protect such data and business practices from regulation.

By draping his essay in the guise of cooperation, Zuckerberg hopes to distract policymakers from the real threat. Internet platforms like Facebook and Google dominate the public square in every country in which they operate. Their code and algorithms influence our daily lives in ways far more intrusive than democratic governments or the law. No one elected these companies and they refuse to be held accountable. That must change. I welcome Mark Zuckerberg to the conversation, but do not believe he should be allowed to frame the debate.

THE MEDIA

'Overarching Climate of Fear in the Media Ecosystem': N. Ram of The Hindu

ARFA KHANUM SHERWANI | THE WIRE

Earlier this week, the Narendra Modi government, through attorney general K.K. Venugopal, informed the Supreme Court that a set of documents concerning the controversial Rafale deal were stolen from South Block. The usage and publication of those documents, the attorney general warned, could be punished under the Official Secrets Act.

This was a warning to news organisations like The Hindu, which over a series of articles, had done exactly that to shed light on the negotiation and pricing details of the fighter jet deal.

In an interview with The Wire's Arfa Khanum Sherwani, N. Ram, chairman of The Hindu publishing group, talks about the role that secret documents play in investigating potential wrong-doing and the government pressures that accompany such journalism.

Edited excerpts:

The attorney general says that the documents you published in The Hindu were stolen from the defence ministry, which is a punishable offence under the Official Secrets Act, and that the government wants a thorough enquiry and investigation.

We have not stolen the documents from anyone. We have not paid for these documents and we are fully protected by Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian constitution – the fundamental right to freedom of expression.

We are also protected by section 8(a)(1) and 8(2) of the Right to Information Act which has overtaken the Official Secrets Act of 1923 – that's what I have been legally advised.

This is not the first time that documents that have been leaked – Mr Prashant Bhushan himself has done that in cases like the coal block allocation case and so on. The courts have looked into it and accepted them. So they are not stolen.

But I also note from the statement by the Editors Guild of India that they are condemning his (attorney general's) comments before the Supreme Court and the threat to go after the media and The Hindu in particular. He later clarified that they are not contemplating any investigation or prosecution against journalists and lawyers who publish this information. So if that is true

and confirmed, then it's good. We are not concerned about it because we are fully protected and we have done the right thing.

This was published in public interest. This matter was suppressed and this information was suppressed.

You can say this information wants to be free (*chuckles*) because they were on the price of fully fledged combat aircrafts, on parallel negotiations, on dissent within the Indian negotiating team, on doing away with anti-corruption clauses, the presence of commission agents, the deal or influence, or denying access to the books of the companies.

Remember that these are not demands made on the French government so much. They are made on commercial supplier like Dassault Aviation and MBDA France – the weapon-fighter supplier. So why on earth would you do away with standard anti-corruption clauses on which penalties are laid down in case of violations?

And finally, the issue of bank guarantees which was discussed in the fifth article.

But they are saying that this goes against national interest. They have gone to the extent of saying that this has actually, in a way, compromised national security. Do you think by raising this issue to this level and making headlines – even if they do not go further with it – they have done their job? Which is primarily making people aware that they are capable of doing that... that they can intimidate and threaten journalists.

Yes, that is a good point, and I think it is that point which the statement by the Editors Guild of India makes. Despite noting this clarification, they say that they condemn the comments made by the attorney general before the Supreme Court. And also made the same point about sending a message out so that there is a chilling effect on independent and especially investigative journalism. So I agree with you on that.

But on the other hand, we must contest this. People should not be afraid because there is an overarching climate of fear in the present ecosystem of media in this government, more than there was at any time in recent memory.

We have to go back to the Emergency days to see this kind and scaled oppression. I am not comparing that with this but in recent times, no attempt has been made this way to create a climate of fear.

I would also like to add that the major media organisations have brought it upon themselves – to play a propaganda role.

This reminds me of some famous lines about British journalists by Humbert Wolfe. It runs like this:

You cannot hope

to bribe or twist,
thank God! the
British journalist.
But, seeing what
the man will do
unbribed, there's
no occasion to.

I think these lines apply very much to many sections of our mainstream media – major media organisations, particularly television channels; many of them – not all of them but many of them which are involved full scale in propaganda role for the government on major issues.

Very briefly, my last question is about the politics around Rafale. After Pulwama and these airstrikes in Pakistan, it seemed that maybe the government was hoping that Rafale would not longer be an issue. But now their nervousness shows that the government still thinks that it is an important political issue which may decide or may impact their fate in May.

Yes, I think that after the Pulwama terror strike and the Balakot action – whatever it was – by India, by the Indian Air Force, I think the BJP thought it could take control of the narrative to some extent, which may have worked particularly in the Hindi speaking region because you have all these hyper-nationalists, jingoists, rhetorics, 'teach them a lesson...we know what to do' and so on. Not just macho, but jingoistic. So they think that this will affect the mood, and to some extent, it may have.

My understanding is that corruption is never the top issue in an election. Whether it was Bofors or the 2G spectrum issue, which finally turned out to be a damp squib in court. It was never the top issue. The top issues are shown in a number of public opinion polls, including the last India Today poll which was quite a serious poll. Usually, issues come around unemployment, underemployment, agrarian distress in a period of high inflation, the price rise, and so on.

Corruption figures in the top three or four, I would say. If there's a focus on major corruption issue – a scandal – it serves as a catalyst. It gives a lot of emotional power to the opposition to take it up, and that I see seems to fit the case. And I would say that Congress president Rahul Gandhi has made full use of this. His aggressive stance is being absolutely uninhibited in campaigning on these issues, bringing it out repeatedly.

I think that would surely have an impact because the Congress still matters in this country. And it's perhaps in some phase of revival. So I think they are determined to make this an issue and independent media should also be on the job.

I appreciate the role of, particularly the digital-only and independent media organisations – The Wire, The Caravan, Scroll, and so on. I think they are doing a good job. In this case, The Hindu has taken a lead – [as] in the Bofors.

But I see this not as the work of one particular media organisation. On the one hand, there is competition, but there is also some sort of collective effort. You build on what other people have.

I think you also have to credit other organisations for information. For example, I used notes from The Wire – the sanitised notes which were shared with the parties before the Supreme Court in the petition filed by Prashant Bhushan the others. I think The Wire had the full text. Even if it was sanitised, it had some interesting information. The Caravan likewise had materials on the benchmark price.

I have also seen M.K. Venu's articles, Siddharth Varadarjan's editorials, and so on. I think we need to compete on one hand, but on the other hand, it's a collaborative exercise.

I think that's how journalism proceeds. You saw that with The New York Times and The Washington Post – at the peak of their investigative efforts, where they were talking about the Pentagon papers.

Later Watergate, WikiLeaks in which The Hindu had a role along with others. That's the point I want to make here on those sections of the media that are still independent in the very difficult and corrupt media ecosystem. This role can be played and has to be played in the near future, including in the upcoming elections.