

ISSUE #2 FEBRUARY 2022

THE ROSA

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“And in the darkness I smile at life, as if I were the possessor of charm which would enable me to transform all that is evil and tragical into serenity and happiness. But when I search my mind for the cause of this joy, I find there is no cause, and can only laugh at myself.”

— **Rosa Luxemburg**, *Letters from Prison to Sophie Liebknecht*



**KOSAMBI
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Published by Kosambi Reading and Analysis Circle
February 2022

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THE ROSA

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Optimism

While the second issue of The Rosa was being put together, the government announced that it would repeal the farm laws. These laws had been introduced last year through ordinances and rammed through parliament with no discussion. It was an unqualified victory for the year-long farmer's movement, which had resulted in the deaths of hundreds of farmers, the arrests of many more, and accompanied by the abuse and vilification of those involved by large sections of the media.

The defeats suffered by the left over the last few decades, not just in this country, but across the world, have induced a certain psychological response among us. When we hear good news, we have to find the bad in it, because we can't quite believe it. So, we point to the fact that many of the farmers involved are relatively better-off 'middle' farmers with a history of violence against the landless. Or that some of the farm organisations involved in the protests were strong supporters of the ruling dispensation, and could well be again in state elections scheduled in a few months. Or we wait for the other shoe to drop. What will a vengeful government do, we wonder. Who will it arrest now, what other freedoms will it take away to reassert its power, to distract attention from its defeat? All this pessimism has its basis in fact, of course, and so 'Left Wing Melancholia' as the historian Enzo Traverso called this state of mind, is a thing. Or rather, has become a thing, because a hundred years ago it was all very different, of course. Revolution was inevitable, and the defeat of capitalism was imminent. The aftermath of 1789 was a similar time — a euphoric sense that everything was about to change.

So it's important, like the good Marxists we aim to be, to historicise that pessimism. And to be suspicious of any state of being that feels natural, or any sense that this is how the world is, as if capitalism is something baked into our genes, rather than a distinct historical period. Yes, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, but the keyword here is 'imagine'. Our 'imagination' is not all that it is cranked up to be.

And so it may seem odd to theme the second issue of 'The Rosa' around the idea of 'optimism' in a world when millions have died from a pandemic and government indifference, when people are jailed for what they have in their bookshelves, or for what they said and whom they met, or are herded into concentration camps for the sin of being born in the wrong place. But it is important to remind ourselves that very little of this is new. And that when similar violence happened in the past, people didn't just submit passively, but saw it for what it was, they sought to understand it in order to fight against it, as they fight against it every day, even today.

But having looked to history, we need to remember to also look away, because history (or is it just capitalism?) has a habit of making us think that we are lesser than we are. EP Thompson talked of rescuing the Luddites from the 'enormous condescension of posterity', but all of us need to save ourselves from the enormous condescension of history. Marx said: "The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past." To transmute the pessimism generated by history that is there within us, into an optimism that what was not possible before, will be possible in the future, is the real collective task facing us all.

Editorial Team,
THE ROSA



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Prefigurative Politics

Building the new society within the shell of the old one

Saurabh Mathur

In capitalist democracies around the world, the dominant worldview is neoliberalism. Within this framework, despite a global health crisis, an economic crisis, and an intensified climate crisis, even the mildest social-democratic policies are considered impractical and unreasonable. Instead, crises are seen as an opportunity to intensify the attack on labour protections and privatise government services.¹ Neoliberalism has become so hegemonic that “there is no alternative” is accepted as fact even by its victims. This sense of despair has fueled the global rise of reactionary mass movements.

While reaction is the politics of despair, centrist neoliberalism is the politics of delusional optimism. With the defeat of the organised labour movements in the 1970s, many of the ostensibly socialist parties around the world have either been decimated or have diluted their core program in favor of centrist neoliberalism. These centrist parties have restricted themselves to defending the remnants of the welfare state through purely parliamentary means. However, efforts to retain the status quo rarely achieve quite that. As Bertell Ollman writes, “Fruit kept in the refrigerator too long goes rotten; so do emotions and people; so do whole societies.”² The lack of an organised mass base and an aversion to radical change makes even the unambitious task of defending the welfare state extremely difficult. Unable to provide any real solutions to material problems, centrism values compromise as an end in itself. It slowly retreats from its goals - being satisfied with a more “efficient” welfare state. As a result, centrist optimism turns into toxic positivity and loses popular support. This feedback loop has culminated in the rise of the reactionary mass movements that we see today. Moving towards centrism was not an alternative to despair, it is what got us here.

However, socialism is not just notional action within the bounds of politics, but action on the political framework itself. It is the movement to transform politics from being a duel between top-down bureaucratic parties for electoral office to the management of the polis by direct assemblies of people. By directly involving people in democratic decision-making, socialism increases the possibility of finding creative and sustainable solutions to material problems. Hence, a socialistic optimism can challenge political despair by providing a real alternative to the status quo.

In his response to Herbert Marcuse’s 1964 book *One-Dimensional Man*, the German socialist Erich Fromm wrote, “If one is not concerned with the steps between the present and the future, one does not deal with politics, radical or otherwise.”³ To this effect, socialists today need to grapple with the central problem of social transformation: even if we could, in one stroke, abolish the current forms of domination and institute a radically democratic society, it won’t sustain itself. The social relations required to sustain and reproduce such a society do not exist. The institutions that we currently have in capitalist democracies, promote deference to authority and passivity instead of critical thought and self-emancipation.

One way to approach this problem is what Paul Raekstad and Sofa Gradin call *Prefigurative Politics*, defined as “the deliberate experimental implementation of desired future social relations and practices in the here-and-now.”⁴ Prefigurative politics attempts to resolve the chicken-and-egg problem of social transformation by building the new society within the shell of the old one. While these methods have existed for a long time, they were first described as “prefigurative” by Carl Boggs in

1 Klein, N. (2007). *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism* (1st ed). Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt.

2 Ollman, Bertell. “Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx’s Method.” (2003).

3 Erich Fromm and the revolution of hope. Retrieved October 23, 2021, from <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/08/erich-fromm-frankfurt-school-marxism-weimar-germany>

4 Raekstad, Paul, and Sofa Gradin. *Prefigurative Politics: Building Tomorrow Today*. Polity, 2020.

1977.⁵ Hence, the linguistic similarity with how the term prefiguration is used in Christian theology is purely superficial. Instead of referencing prophecies, prefigurative politics emerged out of critiques of utopian socialism. Specifically, it finds its justification in the theory of praxis — the idea that action is reciprocal. That is, when people act on the world, they don't just change the world but they also change themselves.⁶ By the late 19th century, libertarian socialists had synthesized the anti-utopian theory of praxis with the organizational structures developed by utopian socialists. For example, the Belgian delegation of the First International Workingmen's Association argued that "the International carried within itself the institutions of the society of the future", where trade unions would be responsible for organising production and local sections would establish consumer cooperatives to sell the goods at a fair price.⁷

While the pandemic has forced bursts of mass-mobilisations around the world like the COVID mutual-aid groups, they are limited in scope. Prefiguring social transformation requires broad-based counter-institutions that can reproduce themselves. To do so, socialists must work with the mobilized masses to build a network of these counter-institutions. In the early 20th century, this network consisted of caucuses within labour unions, working-class media, left-wing cultural organizations, and taverns. Alan Sears describes this network of organizations as an Infrastructure of Dissent.⁸ It provided space for various kinds of working-class politics by creating a culture of debate and discussion. This culture blurred the lines between workers and intellectuals. It also formed the basis for anti-war protests, political strikes, and workers' councils. The defeat of the labour movement and subsequent withdrawal of socialists has resulted in the destruction of this infrastructure

of dissent, leaving behind a paralyzed left. A prefigurative socialist movement must rebuild this infrastructure of dissent.

However, a modern infrastructure of dissent does not need to be built from scratch. Many existing organizations already embody some of the required characteristics. For example, the New Trade Union Initiative in India is a confederation of independent labour unions that is committed to democratic values. Another prominent example is Critical Resistance, an organization that opposes the Prison-Industrial complex in the US and seeks to abolish the Police System by actively building alternatives to it. Additionally, despite being beholden to the market, worker cooperatives like the Mondragon Corporation in Spain and the Cooperation Jackson Project in the US provide some experience in collective self-determination to their worker-owners.⁹

Modern prefigurative organizations can also benefit from academic research on democratic management. One example of such research is Elinor Ostrom's theory of governance of Common Pool Resources.¹⁰ It challenges conventional wisdom about the tragedy of the commons. Not only does her work demonstrate that resources can be managed democratically without state ownership or privatisation, but it also provides practical guidelines for building such self-regulating governance structures. Stafford Beer's Viable System Model (VSM) is another example of such research.¹¹ The VSM is an analytical framework to design autonomous organisations capable of reproducing themselves. This framework was the theoretical basis for Project Cybersyn — an ambitious attempt by the Popular Unity government led by President Allende to democratize Chile's economy in 1971. In the 18 months before Pinochet came to power in a bloody coup d'état, Beer had managed to organize over half of Chile's economy using a network of Telex machines and a single mainframe computer*.¹² Not

5 Boggs, C. (n.d.). Marxism, prefigurative communism, and the problem of workers' control. The Anarchist Library. Retrieved September 24, 2021, from <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/carl-boggs-marxism-prefigurative-communism-and-the-problem-of-workers-control/>

6 Raekstad, Paul. "Revolutionary Practice and Prefigurative Politics: A Clarification and Defense." *Constellations*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2018, pp. 359–72. Wiley Online Library, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12319>.

7 Graham, Robert. *We Do Not Fear Anarchy—We Invoke It*. AK Press, 2015.

8 Creating and sustaining communities of struggle Retrieved October 23, 2021, from <https://equitableeducation.ca/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/alan-sears-infrastructure-of-dissent.pdf>.

9 For a detailed argument in support of radical worker cooperatives, see: "What would Rosa do? Co-operatives and radical politics" by Marisol Sandoval (<https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/14860>)

10 Wall, D. (2017). *Elinor Ostrom's rules for radicals: Cooperative alternatives beyond markets and states*. Pluto Press

11 The viable systems model guide 3e. (n.d.). Retrieved October 23, 2021, from https://www.esrad.org.uk/resources/vsmg_3/screen.php?page=home

12 This was at least a decade before the internet was operational

only did Cybersyn decentralise economic planning, it also boosted Chile's economy. The success of the partially implemented Project Cybersyn was reflected in the 7.7% increase in Chile's GDP, the 13.7% increase in national production, and the 30% increase in the real wages of Chilean workers.¹³ Hence, insights from academic research can enable networks of prefigurative organisations to develop effective means of cooperation and democratic decision-making.

At the same time, a modern infrastructure of dissent shouldn't be limited to formal democratic structures. It must be democratic in practice and to do so, address the so-called informal hierarchies. This is vital because the struggle for democracy against neoliberal capitalism is intertwined with the struggles against patriarchy, race, and caste. On a purely material level, the decimation of social services under neoliberalism puts pressure on the traditional family to provide care work, rolling back centuries of progress against patriarchal norms. However, capitalist domination can also take an ideological form. For example, despite having no scientific basis, the idea of individual responsibility for the climate crisis has become part of general common sense. This is the result of a decades-long campaign by fossil fuel companies like British Petroleum to divert attention from their role in the climate crisis.¹⁴ It is exactly this logic of the Individual Carbon Footprint that corporate think tanks and governments use to justify their brutal population control laws.¹⁵ These policies, which are little more than reheated Malthusianism, place the burden of solving the climate crisis on women from the most marginalized communities. Hence, as it goes into crisis, this composite system of capitalism, patriarchy, race, and caste creates a latent collective among its victims. A modern infrastructure of

dissent must bring them together.¹⁶

One of the best contemporary examples of a combination of formally democratic structures with the explicit dismantling of informal hierarchies is that of the Zapatista Municipalities in Chiapas, Mexico. Named after the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, the Zapatista movement consists of around 300,000 people from some of the poorest and most exploited communities in Mexico.¹⁷ On 1st January 1994, the day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect, the Zapatistas rose up, and with the slogan of "*¡Ya basta!*" ("Enough is enough") declared their autonomy. While they have been de facto independent since then, the Mexican state hasn't officially recognised this and continues to wage a 'low intensity' war against them. Despite being influenced by Mayan traditions, libertarian socialism, and liberation theology, the Zapatistas don't identify themselves with a particular ideology. Their approach to social transformation rejects preordained solutions. Instead, they say, "*preguntando caminamos*" ("walking, we ask questions"). The Zapatista government structure is highly-democratic and decision-making is federated, with most decisions being made locally by consensus. Further, to prevent concentration of power, roles are rotated and everyone is expected to serve in each role at some point.¹⁸ However, despite the formally democratic system, when the system of governance was first introduced in 2003, the councils were overwhelmingly dominated by men. This was because of widespread patriarchal gender norms in Chiapas. This included a gendered division of labour with women having very limited freedom. Throughout their struggle, the Zapatistas have consciously tried to overcome gender inequality. For example, just before the initial uprising in 1994, they passed the Womens' Revolutionary Law. The law specified women's fundamental rights including the right to education and freedom from domestic violence. Since then, they have introduced gender

13 Medina, E. (2014). *Cybernetic revolutionaries: Technology and politics in Allende's Chile* (First MIT Press paperback edition). MIT Press.

14 Kaufman, M. (2020, July 13). The devious fossil fuel propaganda we all use. Mashable. <https://mashable.com/feature/carbon-footprint-pr-campaign-sham>

15 Crist, M. (2020, February 23). Is it OK to have a child? London Review of Books, 42(05). <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n05/meehan-crist/is-it-ok-to-have-a-child>

16 The richest 1% (c.63 million people) alone were responsible for 15% of cumulative emissions, and 9% of the carbon budget — twice as much as the poorest half of the world's population. See *Confronting carbon inequality*. (2020, September 23). Oxfam International. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/confronting-carbon-inequality>

17 Graeber, D. (2006). *Fragments of an anarchist anthropology* (2nd print). Prickly Paradigm Press.

18 <https://truthout.org/articles/the-future-is-now-zapatista-memories-of-the-future/>

equality initiatives like gender awareness training, skill-shares, workshops and a fund to support women's collectives. Even if these efforts are limited in scope, there has been an increase in the number of women in the councils since their introduction.

Hence, in the struggle against political despair, our optimism cannot be based merely on normative

statements about the possibility of a better world. The problems of organising a future society cannot be wished away. They need to be solved by the entire mass of the people while struggling against the current order. Only this experience can give a real meaning to political optimism.

Mural on the side of a Zapatista school, labeling it a Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Primary School. The Reading figure holds a book with text in Spanish stating, "Autonomous education constructs different worlds into which many worlds can fit."
(source: wikicommons)





A Socialist Case for Sports

Sports has a poor reputation in left thought. It shouldn't be that way

Madhushree



Baseball game at Coal Branch Sports Day, Alberta, Canada circa 1930
(Wikicommons)

Sports and I have had a love-hate relationship.

As a child, I was disappointingly deemed a tomboy by peers and teachers alike in a gender-obsessed society. Although I wasn't uncomfortable with it, the lack of expected femininity unsettled me. One of the only places I felt at ease with who I was, was the sports ground.

These were the few places where people didn't care whether I was performing my assigned gender well enough as long as I was making efforts to perform on the field. I was a part of a team that valued me on and off-court; an unparalleled thrill. I don't think I was friends with many people in the various teams I was a part of — in fact, some of the best players in my team at times would also be people I could never get along with off-court.

But we learned the hard way that unless we worked together, played our roles, assisted and respected each other despite our differences, we would lose collectively.¹

As I grew older, I outgrew a certain romanticism toward sports. In hindsight some of it was driven by anger at the wastefulness of commercial sports, but much of the reason was learning that time not spent making myself a valuable member of society was time wasted.

But even as I tried to distance myself from it, I could never completely let go of the joy of play. It became a way for me to find shared leisure time in the highly alienated, productivity valuing environment I was a part of.

Sports' reputation has often fared little better in progressive or left circles of thought. Chomsky famously calls them a way for the masses to not engage with what really matters, like politics. He also says that spectator sports exaggerate "anti-social aspects of human psychology" like "irrational loyalty to power systems", "irrational competition" and so on.

But I would like to be more optimistic. I would like to build a case that our hope and vision for a better future must include seemingly pointless but fulfilling leisure time.

Emma Goldman once said: "If I can't dance to it, it's not my revolution." Let us think about what dancing in a socialist future means—it means dancing

just for the sake of dancing. Dancing not because it could be content, a commodity, not because I have earned it by completing my 6 day work week. It is dancing because I can and want to.

Emma Goldman once said: "If I can't dance to it, it's not my revolution."

This is a radical conception of dancing, and leisure more generally, in a world where it is constantly being co-opted by capital. Sports, particularly spectator sports, is perhaps a greater target than most, of such attempts at co-optation. But as accurate as Chomsky's description is, it does a disservice to sports as a culture. It erases the critical fans that are in constant conflict with the commercial elements of sports, as illustrated recently by the collapse of the European Super League. It forgets the unexpectedly humane moments that arise from values of sportsmanship, which are often in contradiction of state and capitalist agendas. Like the time when Luz Long, the European record holder for the long jump observed his competitor Jesse Owens struggling at the 1936 Berlin Olympics in Nazi Germany and advised him on his run-up. Jesse Owens went on to win a gold that year.

But Chomsky's description also hides the fact that our understanding of what 'sport' is, and what it is not, is a very modern one. For instance, according to SportAccord, for an activity to qualify as a sport, it must have an element of competition, not harm a living creature, not rely on equipment by a single supplier, and not rely on any "luck" element specifically designed into the sport.²

I find these definitions reductive and essentialising. While they provide a lens to engage with modern sports, they don't quite capture the culture and history fundamental to the birth of many modern sports.

The word 'sport' comes from the Old French words *desporter* or *deporter*. They loosely translate to "to take pleasure, to amuse oneself," and "carry away (the mind from serious matters)".³ Observing the history of sports tells us that for most part, sports

1 That being said, sports in Indian schools have a lot of problems, including fatphobia, sexism, ableism, casteism, classism. Unfortunately the list goes on and on.

2 SportAccord, 'Definition of Sport', 28 October 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20111028112912/http://www.sportaccord.com/en/members/index.php?idIndex=32&idContent=14881>.

3 Douglas, Harper. 'Sport'. In Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d. <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=sport>.

emerged as a way to pass time (without making a profit).

For instance, competition is a commonly emphasised property of modern sports. But in several Mesoamerican, Japanese and ancient Chinese traditions, the competitive element was disregarded and, in certain cases, actively discouraged. Instead, there was a focus on “grace”, “skill”, or “style”.⁴

That being said, there is also the well-documented history of bloodlust and penchant for gore displayed by the ancient Romans and Greeks through events like gladiatorial matches and *Pankration* (a sport similar to modern mixed martial arts).

In many regions, certain sports like archery were conducted primarily to exhibit the power and nobility of elite classes. The lower classes partook in sporting traditions rooted in military exercises like running, javelin throw, forms of wrestling, combat sport, etc. The purpose of these events included training and selection into the ranks of the army. Nevertheless, they evolved and took on a life of their own. For young children and older women, sports often began as rituals or rites of passage.⁵

As far as pre-industrial revolution times are concerned, several similar sporting traditions coincidentally emerged in different parts of the world. While one cannot pinpoint a singular origin story, a common trend of community-led practices, leisure and spectatorship can be observed throughout.

When the industrial revolution disrupted agrarian lifestyles, it also brought an increase in income and free time in the mid-nineteenth century. People could take a break regularly to either observe or partake in sport and buy equipment. Previously sports was something people engaged in only in periods when there was no planting or harvesting to do.⁶

Vamplew identified three “interrelated but semi-independent” phenomena that aided the change in sporting culture: commercialisation, urbanisation and industrialisation. He points out that while commercialisation was already prevalent in some aspects of sports (“gambling, profit-

seeking promoters”), industrialisation magnified the effect: “it was not until the economic benefits of industrialisation filtered down to the mass of the population that a large and regular paying clientele could be relied upon for sports events.”⁷

Lastly, urbanisation brought out people to industrial centres, concentrating populations. This made accessing venues easy, especially with the development of intra-town and inter-town transportation. Organisers could now rely on a regular, paying mass audience.

Large mass audiences enabled ‘economies of scale’ in the provision of sports facilities. Thus, urban developers and allied businesses find it profitable to provide ‘high quality’ sports facilities, grounds and equipment – often at the cost of ecological damage and disruption to local economies. Mega-events such as the Olympics and FIFA World Cup also have a well-documented history of having similar effects. The influx of money into bodies like sports clubs, means that these bodies formerly rooted in local communities, become completely detached from them, and become part of a global market for sports talent.

Even as sports were commodified, they became ways to find time to not work in a relentless capitalist system. But by the end of the 19th century, factory owners found that adopting sports and promoting worker wellness could keep workers under control.⁸ This form of benevolent despotism has cemented itself in the modern workplace, where ‘perks’ (including sports facilities on campus) are used to mask cultures of overwork or low pay.

But capital is not alone in its manipulation of sports. Given their origin and emotional value, it isn’t too difficult to see why and how easily sports can serve national interests. Not only are they used to incite violent jingoism, but the spectacle that expensive and grand mega-events create are excellent diversions from crises. The typical counter-argument has been that international sports competitions transcend boundaries, promote diplomacy or overcoming national enmities. Still, a handshake between an Indian and Pakistani athlete doesn’t mean much materially if it isn’t a complement

4 Nigel B. Crowther, *Sport in Ancient Times*, Praeger Series on the Ancient World (Westport, Conn: Praeger Publishers, 2007).

5 See Note 4

6 Wray Vamplew, *Industrialization and Sport*, ed. Robert Edelman and Wayne Wilson, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199858910.013.17>.

7 See Note 6

8 Nigel Townson, *The British at Play – a Social History of British Sport from 1600 to Present*, British Cultural Studies (Bucharest: Cavallioti Publishers, 1997).

to strategic policy that addresses the fundamental issues between the two countries..⁹

With neoliberalism and nationalism being significant forces within the current sports industry, it is difficult to imagine an alternative future for sports. But here is where the flexible nature of sports shines through, because despite the odds being against them, communities find creative ways to reclaim sports, carve out spaces within the complex and redefine its rules.

Fan ownership of clubs and supporter activism in football, for instance, has been a popular form of resistance to commercialisation.



Football ultras fans during the match Levski - CSKA Sofia v. "Vasil Levski", March 4, 2017 (source: wikicommons)

Pioneered by Brian Lomax, fan ownership entails democratisation, and supporter stake and involvement in the functioning of the club. There are many criticisms of the current models, but as Dave Braneck puts it: "If the structures of German football alone aren't a model for countering commercialisation, they help highlight just what it is that keeps the sport relatively grounded: an engaged, antagonistic segment of fans that understand themselves as participants and stakeholders, not consumers."¹⁰

Several developmental projects all across the globe have found ways to harness sport as a way to build

communities that protect and support the agency of marginalised groups, particularly women.

In India, Parcham Collective has paved the path for using sports as a tool for empowerment. They work with young women from suburban Mumbra. Many Muslim families that fled Mumbai after the 1992 riots reside in Mumbra. Parcham uses football to facilitate interactions between Muslim and non-Muslim girls, and help them gain confidence in their use of public spaces.¹¹ Their goal is to build a football academy for girls from Dalit, Muslim and Adivasi communities.

The Sunrise project in Maharashtra has used sports to generate employment in the impoverished region of Vidarbha. It has also created a space in which the members of the village value and contribute. This feeling of collective ownership plays a vital role in resistance against mining companies that frequent areas where the Sunrise project operates.¹²

While sporting culture rightfully deserves much critique, it is defined by those that embrace it. Despite numerous, arguably successful attempts at formalising and absorbing sports into an industrial complex, people have found alternative ways to enjoy them—lending them a malleable, community-centric character. It is necessary to understand the importance of this characteristic and its ability to organize communities without overstating its potential.

Sports give us a reason to fight for better working hours and collective ownership of resources that should ideally be free for the public. They give us a taste of what a better future could be, where the joy of play is not a right to be fought for, but a way of ordinary life!

9 Victor Cha, Nationalism, Competition, and Diplomacy: Asia at the 2012 London Olympics, interview by Sheela Lal, Article, 24 July 2012, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/nationalism-competition-and-diplomacy-asia-at-the-2012-london-olympics/>.

10 Dave Braneck, 'Fan-Owned Clubs Can Help Democratize Football', Jacobin Mag, 21 April 2021, <https://jacobinmag.com/2021/04/fan-owned-clubs-democratization-football-bundesliga-commercialization>.

11 Preeti Zachariah, 'Why the Parcham Collective Is Fighting for a Football Ground for Mumbra's Girls', Mintlounge, 10 October 2021, sec. News, <https://lifestyle.livemint.com/news/talking-point/why-the-parcham-collective-is-fighting-for-a-football-ground-for-mumbra-s-girls-111633825942801.html>.

12 Sohini, 'Stamina', Fifty Two (52), 1 October 2021, <https://fiftytwo.in/story/stamina/>.



The joy of play is not a right to be fought for, but a way of ordinary life!
photo by Agrus Hill
<https://unsplash.com/photos/IYtWNzlvPZs>

Can New Unions Hope to Expand?

Understanding the Implications of the New Trade Union Recognition Rules

Sreyan Chatterjee

The process of implementing the four new labour codes, which consolidate 44 separate legislations, and passed variously in 2019 and 2020, has been slow.¹ As labour is a state subject, the central labour ministry has the role of coaxing state labour departments to issue detailed rules which are in consonance with the overall structure of the codes. One of the ways this role is performed is by releasing draft rules for comments, which state labour departments can use as a guide to formulate their own context-specific rules. Thus in the context of Indian labour law, draft rules play an important role in informing the public of what the state level rules may look like, opening up a feedback channel for comments and improvements and finally ensuring harmonious application of labour law across state boundaries. In this regard, while policy direction towards a simpler law is adequately clear, the nuts and bolts of operational policy remains murky. This lack of clarity has not been helped by a patchwork legislative effort of publishing draft rules and notifying relevant central provisions.

The central government is yet to notify all the draft rules under the four labour codes, despite deadlines for the labour codes having come into effect in 2021. Their implementation was deferred because most state governments have not finalised

the rules due to a lack of direction and this delay looks set to continue into 2022. No fresh deadline has been announced, and informal reports have indicated that the Codes may not be implemented even by the middle of 2022.

The central government is yet to notify all the draft rules under the four labour codes

After the final codes came into play, systematic resistance has ensured that the central government has expedited publication of the draft bye-laws relating to trade union registration. Rules for trade union recognition have been released as the Industrial Relations (Central) Recognition of Negotiating Union or Negotiating Council and Adjudication of Disputes of Trade Unions Rules, 2021 (Draft TU Rules).

However, these Draft Rules have significant conflicts, contradictions and regulatory dark zones that will affect its usefulness: these potential stress points in the law are explored below.

THRESHOLD FOR RECOGNITION

At the outset the difference between recognition and registration of unions must be understood before a discussion on membership thresholds for effective collective bargaining. Registration is the mere act

¹ The four codes are the Code on Wages, Industrial Relations Code, Code on Social Security and the Occupational Health, Safety and Working Conditions Code.



of acknowledging the existence of an union by a regulator. Registration can provide important rights to unions, particularly fledging unions - for example an exemption from civil liability is critical. At the same time, registration does not provide unions a shot at sustainable growth or a spot at the table - that is the right to collect dues and mandatorily take part in collective bargaining decisions. It is also important to remember that Indian law (at the central level) has never codified the right to recognition. Instead the Trade Unions Act, all the way back in 1926, provided a statutory backing for only registration and this has continued to the present day Industrial Relations Code. It is commonly understood among trade union officials that registration is the start of the journey towards recognition but a significant legal loophole continues in that even unions with a majority of the workforce do not have a right to be recognised and be mandatorily part of collective bargaining negotiations.

Even though the Industrial Relations Code has set a liberal 51% membership criteria for being a sole union, the draft rules cut this down to 31% effectively opening up the scope for capture of the sole negotiating union role.² This threshold is inconsistent with the 51% criteria specified in the Industrial Relations Code in the case of multiple-union establishments³ and too low for a union to legitimately represent the entire workforce. It would be important in the coming months for workers to identify sector specific thresholds which would allow effective bargaining.

NEGOTIATING AGENT IN MULTIPLE- UNION ESTABLISHMENTS

The Industrial Relations Code provides for a negotiating union or negotiating council in the case of both single and multiple unions.⁴ In the Indian legislative space, there have been three methods to determine the negotiating agent in case of multiple unions. Firstly, there is the membership verification process as provided by the Maharashtra Recognition

of Trade Unions and Prevention of Unfair Labour Practices Act, 1971 (MRTU & PULPA). Usually under this process, the focus of the recognising regulator (such as the Registrar of Trade Unions) would be to verify each member to the union that claims their membership by the physically verifying such claim on a prescribed day. The second approach is the so-called dues check-off system (recommended by the Second National Commission on Labour, 2002)⁵. This process uses the records of union dues paid by each worker to map them to the claimant union. The last approach is the secret ballot (provided by the regulations in Kerala⁶ and West Bengal⁷). This is the most democratic (but also most resource-intensive) approach where direct voting of the employee base by the regulator is conducted to decide the recognised union.

The Draft Rules further specify how to use a secret ballot.⁸ The Draft Rules provide two conditions precedent for unions looking to participate: one, it must have a valid registration either under the Trade Unions Act, 1926 or in the Industrial Relations Code and two, membership of the union must be confined to the particular industrial establishment only.⁹ It is unclear, first, whether recognition would be limited by establishment or industry, or region; and secondly, as to whether it preempts multi-employer bargaining.¹⁰ Unless these conditions are significantly clarified, they will prove to be a significant roadblock to industry-wide or regional unions who are active in more than a singular workplace. For example, platform-based

2 This threshold is similar to Maharashtra's law where 30% is the eligibility threshold for applying for recognition, and not the threshold for actual recognition. Maharashtra Recognition of Trade Unions and Prevention of Unfair Labour Practices Act, 1971.

3 Industrial Relations Code, Section 14(3).

4 Industrial Relations Code, Section 14.

5 Report Of The Second National Commission On Labour With Emphasis On Rationalization Of Labour Laws And Unorganised Labour, Thirty-Ninth Session Of The Indian Labour Conference (October 16-18, 2003), https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/39ilcagenda_1.pdf/

6 The Kerala Recognition of Trade Unions Act, 2010 (Act 16 of 2010), Section 5(4).

7 The West Bengal Trade Unions Rules, 1998.

8 Draft Rules, R5(e), R6.

9 Draft Rules, R(5)(3)(a). ("The Trade Unions which satisfy the following conditions shall first submit an application to the employer of the industrial establishment to accord status of negotiating union of the workers, namely:- (i) such Trade Union has a valid registration under the Trade Unions Act, 1926 and continuing as such or has the registration under the Industrial Relations Code, 2020 (35 of 2020), as the case may be; and (ii) the membership of the Trade Union be confined to the particular industrial establishment only")

10 K.R. Shyam Sundar, Trade Union Recognition (Central) Rules, 2021 – A Critical Analysis and Some Recommendations – Part I (The Leaflet, May 8, 2021), <https://www.theleaflet.in/trade-union-recognition-central-rules-2021-a-critical-analysis-and-some-recommendations-part-i/>.

worker unions, such as the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT) would not be eligible as they draw membership from across a range of companies with similar business models. The assumption behind this rule has also remained unchallenged i.e. trade unions which have outside expertise from similar workers in similar companies in their ranks are not legitimate representatives. Needless to say, in the crucible of effort-intense organising work of trade unions, keeping union membership rules flexible would have a positive effect on collective bargaining outcomes.

Unlike the Draft Rules, earlier regulations at the state level have usually clarified whether recognition would be considered at the establishment level or the class of industry in a local area.¹¹ According to the Draft Rules, all workers on the muster roll of the industrial establishment on the date of reckoning shall be eligible to vote. It is unclear whether casual and temporary workers, contract workers, and trainees are included in this definition.

EMPLOYER CONTROL OVER BALLOT

The Draft Rules devolve unilateral power to the employer to initiate and conduct secret ballot procedures, stating that employers shall -

- “(a) appoint the verification officer;
- (b) bear all expenses and make arrangements in connection with the verification;
- (c) receive the application for recognition from the trade union(s); and
- (d) prepare the voter list.”

In the Draft Rules, the employer and the verification officer together perform the functions traditionally performed by various officials, like an assistant returning officer, a polling officer, counting agents, etc.¹² The verification officer eventually submits the verification process results to the employer. On that basis, the employer recognizes a trade union as a negotiating union or a negotiating council, as the case may be, for the prescribed tenure under the Industrial Relations Code.

The Supreme Court has stressed on the impartiality of authorities holding union elections and has held that it is the Chief Labour Commissioner who must appoint the verification officer, who shall be a government official, to conduct the election with the assistance of the company.¹³ Again, many states use procedures which attempt to equalise the bargaining position. Regulations in West Bengal and Kerala appoint the Registrar as the regulatory authority, and Maharashtra has empowered the Industrial Court to deal with trade union recognition matters. This approach is missing in the draft rules and state governments and unions must take note of alternatives to unilateral control over the ballot process.

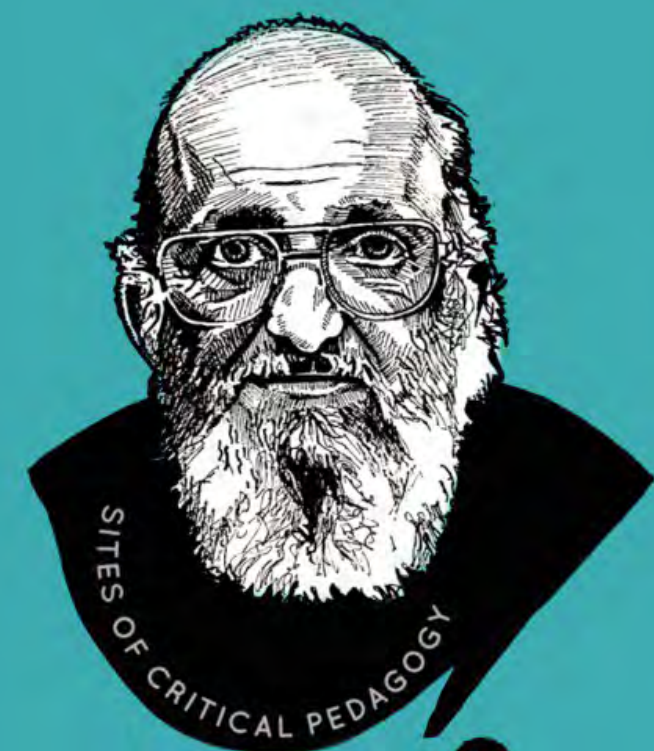
CONCLUSION

The Draft Rules are a sign that the legislative limbo that began with the labour code consolidation process around trade union registrations, have an end in sight. At the same time, significant sticking points remain in the legal design which should be contested at the state level while clarifications and rationale should be sought from the central labour ministry on the gaps in the legislation. For example, the Draft Rules do not mention what type of majority is needed to reach a collective agreement in the negotiating council. The draft rules are also silent on the role of central trade unions and how they interact with the outcomes arising out of the negotiation council. In practice, these blind spots will be not conducive to a streamlined bargaining process and will increase the cost of managing industrial relations to the state.

11 West Bengal and Kerala, for instance, provide voter rights to those employed for at least 120 days in the previous twelve months and aged at least 18 years. They also mention other conditions, such as that the membership must be open to all the workers in an establishment or class of industries as the case may be, and that the registration of the trade union must be at least six months old.

12 Draft Rules, R5(1)(a).

13 Food Corporation of India Staff Union v. Food Corporation of India and Others (1995 (1) SCR 96)



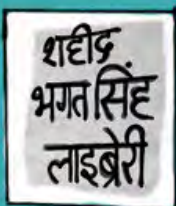
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Nukkad Natak



Farmers' Protest



Tea Shop

Building the Party with Anthony Bourdain

Political Optimism and the Internationalist Project that was Parts Unknown

Abhishek Parija

There is this old notion, Bolshevik and a little chilly for sure: building the Party. I believe that our present war is about building the Party, or rather; it's about giving this deserted fiction a new content. We talk, we lick each other, we make a film, a party, a riot, we meet a friend, we share a meal, a bed, we love, in other words, we build the Party. Fictions are serious things; we need fiction to believe in the reality we're living. — *And the war has only just begun*, by *The Imaginary Party aka Tiqqun*¹

It's been a long day at work, and even Daniel Craig declaring the weekend from Saturday Night Live doesn't excite us as much as it should, for the boundaries of weekdays and weekends have come to be effaced. Formal 'education' has been exhausted, and so has the pocket money to sustain oneself in another city. Some of you have a job alongside a debt, or the lack of debt alongside unemployment. Applications for the future are fast filling out, the deadlines are overwhelming, you have eaten the forbidden fruit of freelance, and realised all fruits have a short shelf life. Those who embrace the high citadel of research are waiting for their stipend, and those without it contemplate quitting. This is one among many conditions of the youth today, a youth that could have been spent in better, more meaningful ways. This is not merely the crisis of a certain kind of individual meandering in the hotbeds of global capital, but of the individual who also happens to be a viewer, a consumer of the entertainment industry. The consumer may not always have money for



Anthony Bourdain at the 73rd Annual Peabody Awards for "Parts Unknown"
Source: wikicommons

rent, but they do have a smartphone, maybe a rare laptop bestowed by the state for securing a good exam grade. If not for a phone, how shall one live through the hell life has become? An earnest scroll is everyone's right. Where else will we watch last night's match, or catch up on the news cycle? Go on, arrange for a friend's password or a humble shared plan subscription of a streaming service.

Anthony Bourdain shares a strange familiarity with the currents which today overwhelm our generation — a generation that shares a specific and unnerving relationship with images, information, and knowledge, one that is sleepless, overworked, and anxious; here he found an audience thoroughly engaged with his work, a swaying populace with an ever-declining attention span. Bourdain understood this critical mass of global viewership, the pangs of history that have brought forth such a dimension of life and experience. He integrated this understanding into his audio-visual form of expression, a form that has reached out to millions and will never be left at the mercy of mere critical recognition. Tony Bourdain's *Parts Unknown* (2013-18, CNN) was for every bummer who could enjoy an entertaining food and travel show with a runtime of 40 minutes.

Looking past the laudatory applause heaped at his status as a popular and progressive celebrity chef with a difficult private life, we see underneath

¹ Tiqqun (the Imaginary Party), "And the War has only just Begun," November 26, 2012, <https://1000littlehammers.wordpress.com/2012/11/26/war-has-only-just-begun/>.

a pattern of cultural practice that espoused and demanded political change. *Parts Unknown* was an anti-capitalist mainstream TV show that reached out to millions, seeking and revealing the material crossroads at which food, culture, and society interact all over the world. The messenger came from the land of the antagonist, and his propaganda was sponsored by one of the antagonist's largest mass media conglomerates, Warner Media Group. And it was not merely charisma or charm that convinced this entity to allow Bourdain so much control over his show.

MORE THAN WHAT MEETS THE EYE

Anthony Bourdain grew up in between Manhattan and Camden, New Jersey during the 60s and 70s, the child of separated parents. His father changed jobs between camera and record stores, and his mother was a copy editor for the New York Times. A good conversation about politics and culture at the dinner table was normal. But Bourdain, as he confesses in many of his memoirs, was the delinquent, vagabond hippie, snorting cocaine, doing bong shots, steering away from formal education, and being mad at everything during his early adulthood years. He was the lost individual who by the virtue of some talent could move from the underground of cooking to chefdom; a wayward writer, who after a few failed attempts at crime fiction writing, landed a memoir that would go on to become an NYT bestseller, and follow it up with *A Cook's Tour* (2005-06) on Food Network, and *No Reservations* (2005-12) on Travel Channel, until *Parts Unknown* happened. Meanwhile, he had the courage to leave behind a serious heroin addiction. Came out clean, and rose to success.

His story from the underground of drugs and hedonism to a sophisticated chef, social commentator, and writer of repute is suited to a specific notion of 'freedom and pursuit of happiness'; the solitary climb of *The Individual*, the promise of the American dream. The legacy of Bourdain now fuels the 'globe-trotting' and 'foodgasm' desires of so many on YouTube and Instagram. The global order of the American culture industry doesn't merely accept its own vilification, but rather sponsors it when it's profitable, and can be ideologically justified to the standards of western liberal democracy. CNN understood Bourdain's immense import as a loud-

mouth cultural asset. They could afford yielding creative control to him because it was, in the larger scheme of things, a small price to pay.

However, for the vast multitude of people across the world he visited, or lived with, and for those of us on the Left, this wasn't the Bourdain we knew. As much as his books revealed his eccentricities, they also exposed the ruthless conditions under which workers in the restaurant industry toil, and how their cut-throat masculinity stems from the madness of the world they inhabit. Bourdain declares his brotherhood in his breakout debut New Yorker essay: "In America, the professional kitchen is the last refuge of the misfit. It's a place for people with bad pasts to find a new family. It's a haven for foreigners—Ecuadorians, Mexicans, Chinese, Senegalese, Egyptians, Poles. In New York, the main linguistic spice is Spanish. *Hey, maricón! chupa mis huevos* means, roughly—how are you, valued comrade?"²

Bourdain accepted all that CNN had to give with open arms because he believed in his own politics and values; he belonged to the great tradition of subversion in storytelling, where even a king can be insulted in his court by a poet and miss the joke. *Parts Unknown* was Bourdain's struggle to overcome the mainstream decoration of his personality, to unlearn the machismo and swagger, to swell up with tears when an old woman sings a song about the longing of home³, to turn the spotlight away from him to the toiling people of the world, to slip one-liners that may seem fillers, and yet say something meaningful about the human condition. He was a delinquent, yes, but in the sense that perhaps Che Guevara once was when he set out on a road trip with a friend to see the continent, booze, and make love. Like Che, Bourdain ended up seeing entirely something else. He was the vagabond discussed earlier, one of those who have accepted distraction as their modus operandi, who in their habits and condition are so anxious and downtrodden that there is nowhere left to go, except as Bourdain would say "to be on the move". He, like so many of us, struggled with

2 Anthony Bourdain, "Don't Eat before Reading this: A New York Spills some Trade Secrets," *The New Yorker*, April 12, 1999, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1999/04/19/dont-eat-before-reading-this>.

3 Anthony Bourdain: *Parts Unknown*, "S07E02: Manila, Philippines," Zero Point Zero Production, Inc. and CNN, April 24, 2016.

depression, and didn't simply emerge victorious from the dungeons of drug addiction, but struggled with its remnants throughout the course of his work, until the day he died by suicide while on an assignment for reasons unknown. Even so he leaves behind a legacy of immense hope.

A WORLD AT WAR, AND THE BURDEN OF THE PAST

The food and travel genre at its heart accepts a certain standpoint to discharge its function as infotainment. The singular units of nation states are pit stops, the globetrotter chef or anchor moves from one to the other, from east to the west, crossing oceans, traversing horizons. The food and travel show is an international project, accepting the whole world as its subject matter. The political optimism of Bourdain lay in completely comprehending the contours of this world he had the chance of engaging with. A world where capital propagated its expanse and hegemony, dominated all social relations, one which saw two world wars, out of which emerged the dream of socialism, it is also the world that

saw this dream defeated; where there was the cold war, the secret wars, wars after wars created and profiteered from by few Imperial heavyweights, most prominently the US of A, Bourdain's home. This world has allowed itself fatal perversions, of the order that takes recourse to the mythical pride of the nation, one that hates the other so the absence of work can be compensated with the abundance of cheap labour. A world that has adapted itself to a consensus called the 'Washington Consensus'.

Bourdain travels to Congo, a nation in the midst of a war, in 2013. There, he visits a librarian, who maintains the property and library of the erstwhile Belgian Agronomic Research Institute in Yangambi. A man consigned to the past, living on a meagre state allowance, and preserving whatever he can of the knowledge and heritage of the people who once worked with him in this massive, now decrepit research institute. The man tells Bourdain: "The days of Belgian colonialism were the best in this country's history." It is shattering to hear, but makes one think about the conditions that were created and have persisted in post-independence Congo to stir such a stagnation of the mind.

Stalin's statue toppled in Hungary during the 1956 uprising
Vilmos Zsigmond and Lazlo Kovacs shot the 1956 Hungarian revolution and fled to the West,
where they made a famous documentary on the uprising 'No Subtitles Necessary: Lazlo and Vilmos'
Source: wikicommons



In an episode on Indian Punjab⁴, we see an inverted variant of this stagnation, stemming from the romantic memory of a colonial past. Bourdain takes a trip via the railways to the erstwhile summer capital of British India, Shimla. He visits 'Chapslee', a mansion adorned with Tudor architecture, bought from an Englishman by the Maharaja of Kapurthala decades ago, whose grandson serves as Tony's host. Accompanied by a professor of History donning an English accent, and a barrister from the Himachal Pradesh High court at the dinner table (close friends of 'his highness'), they devour some classic Anglo-Indian, royal delicacies. The sheer notoriety of the scene lies in the sound design: Indian dishes modulated to accommodate English tastes are prepared to the rhythm of a happy harmonica, intercut with the guests discussing the 'days of the empire' to Chopin.

In Detroit, the past is almost a living ghost. At some point it was the world's automobile hub, but now, with its vast empty factory floors and abandoned houses, it is the site of countless petty arsons that the city's under-funded fire department is tasked with putting out. Bourdain hangs out with a small fire crew who cook great food in their departmental kitchen with bare resources and cheap cuts of pork. They break bread and wash dishes together.

Bourdain was obsessed with the past, attempting to seek out the causes of the current catastrophe in a world where internment camps and coffee bars coexist (he hated both). As he said in a No Reservations episode in Beirut, 2006, "I had begun to believe that the dinner table was the great leveller. Where people from opposite sides of the world could always sit down and talk and eat and drink, and if not solve all the world's problems, at least find, for a time, common ground. Now, I'm not so sure. Maybe the world's not like that at all. Maybe in the real world, the one without cameras and happy food and travel shows, everybody, the good and the bad together, are all crushed under the same terrible wheel. I hope, I really hope, I'm wrong about that." The 'terrible wheel', according to Bourdain, had a universal character. It could be seen and lived through large degrees of differences, but its expanse was worldwide. It is not merely the abstract

celebration of universal fraternity and brotherhood that Bourdain's work focuses on, but the universal condition of social relations that capitalism (the terrible wheel) in its present form has wrought. To understand where Bourdain precisely stood, we must further analyse his obsession with the past in relation with specific geographies; in particular, places that had seen revolutions and instituted new socio-economic orders that overcame the predominance of capital over life, no matter how briefly.

We shall look at the victories that were undone, and how people and nations choose to remember the defeat. In their remnants we may find what Bourdain and his project had to say.

BUDAPEST, HUNGARY; SEASON 5, EPISODE 6 (2015)

Budapest's political present is obsessed with ridding itself of the burdens of a traumatic, recent past — that of 20th century communism and the subsequent liberal democracy — and forming a great, authentic past; an ethnic, essentially Hungarian reality, or as Viktor Orban calls it, an 'illiberal alternative'⁵. But in his visit to the city in 2015, Bourdain barely discusses politics. He instead chooses to spend a large part of the episode in the company of legendary American-Hungarian cinematographer, Vilmos Zsigmond. What Bourdain reveals through this exercise is a 'missing hole', a gaping wound of history that urgently needs to be forgotten, never to be reconciled with, or even mentioned. He asks us to precisely look for what is not shown or spoken about. He drives our attention to absence, and asks us to seek in its silence what lurks in the background of all the grandeur.

Bourdain accompanies Vilmos to the ancient thermal bathhouse spas, and they eat the riverside fish soup reminiscent of Vilmos' childhood. Together they wander the now abandoned Soviet-era secret services headquarters, and a cinema hall named after Vilmos himself. They watch *The Great Dictator* together, and eventually have dinner with Vilmos and his family and friends. Budapest is lived

4 Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown, "S03E02: Punjab, India," Zero Point Zero Production, Inc. and CNN, April 13, 2014.

5 Nicholas Mulder, "The Revolt Against Liberalism: What's driving Poland and Hungary's Nativist Turn," The Guardian, June 24, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/24/revolt-against-liberalism-eastern-europe-poland-hungary-nativist-politics>.

through Vilmos' memory. But what is so compelling about an iconic 84 year-old's memory, one must ask? Vilmos along with his friend Lazlo Kovacs, another well-known cinematographer, shot the 1956 Hungarian revolution with rented equipment from the Academy of Drama and Film amidst flying bullets and a death warrant in their name. This revolution was fought by 'native' Hungarian resources, who took on the might of Soviet military. They almost won — razing the head of a Stalin statue in city square⁶ until the Soviets returned with thousands of tanks and crushed them. Both Vilmos and Lazlo escaped to America in the brief interim before the red army took control of the city. They sold their 30 cans of raw film stock to CBS News upon their arrival in New York⁷, later made into a famous documentary, *No Subtitles Necessary: Lazlo and Vilmos*.

The memory of Hungary from Vilmos' eyes is a memory of the past as seen from the eyes of an old man returning in retirement to talk of the great beginnings and ends. In Hollywood, Vilmos revolutionised film lighting, pushed the frontiers of Hollywood classical realism, and gave flight to the imaginations of Spielberg and his friends — most of whom would go on to tell the American version of history on screen, like so many other great artists, intellectuals, writers, and technicians who fled their countries in the wake of the Second World War and found refuge in the US culture industry. But the foundations of their skill came from a certain socio-cultural milieu in Eastern Europe that preceded the war. As Vilmos admits, "The happiest years of my life were under Communism in film school. We learnt filmmaking at its best".

This institutional excellence in science and art that socialism provided were undone to an extent by Stalin, followed by a unique stint of relative freedom for artists. There were still great films made in the Eastern bloc. Artists managed to call upon the sorrows and anxieties of their time with money from state funds. But those films, regardless of their

artistic merit, were the product of great historical suffering that would eventually give us — in the case of Hungary, at least — the haunting, slow cinema of Bela Tarr.

Vilmos doesn't talk of this period. He wasn't there. He only talks of the past, the Hungarian struggle to preserve "identity" and the present times of enjoying retirement. His disposition implies an illusive reality that perhaps people seek in Orban's illiberal alternative. Vilmos' image of Budapest is rooted in a certain nostalgia for the past; around national sentiment, disconnected with the Hungarian political realities of today.

CUBA; SEASON 6, EPISODE 1 (2015)

In one of the show's most enduring episodes, Bourdain's love for Cuba, its revolution, and the coming "apocalypse" are expressed without restraint. In a 42-minute deliberation on politics with the Cuban people, Anthony times his arrival right after the historic Obama-Raul Castro meet in Panama city, at the Summit of Americas⁸ where Obama declared, "The US will not be bogged down by ideology and the past, we look to the future — on providing more opportunities and resources to the Cuban people".

In Havana, the episode begins with a Cuban origin businessman based in Florida, explaining how diasporic Cubans are now allowed to buy property in the country. The whole island is now suddenly up for rent. Bourdain and the businessman devour sushi at a privately-owned lakeside restaurant, the dish and the real estate unimaginable in the old Cuba.

His meeting with John Lee Anderson, a veteran journalist who has covered wars and humanitarian crises for three decades, is telling. Anderson's family lived in Cuba during the 'special period', after the Berlin wall fell, and the Soviet import system of food resources completely crashed. In an overview of the nation's crisis from those days, what worries him the most is his last visit, "where he saw several homeless people on the street eating out of a garbage

6 Staff, "A Disembodied statue of Joseph Stalin's head on Budapest streets after the Hungarian Revolution, 1956," Rare Historical Photos, <https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/stalin-monument-budapest-1956/>.

7 John Patterson, "Vilmos Zsigmond: the Cinematographer who changed how Films Look," The Guardian, January 6, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jan/06/vilmos-zsigmond-cinematographer-film-hollywood-easy-rider>.

8 Associated Press in Panama City, "Obama and Raul Castro in Historic meet at Summit of Americas," The Guardian, April 11, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/11/raul-castro-barack-obama-summit-americas-cuba>.

can — a near impossible scenario in Fidel’s Cuba, where everyone was fed and given shelter. This time is the lull before the train hits”. They dine in China Town, where the state has put up a “quintessentially Chinese looking gate” and serves what only few would call “schezwan recipes”.

Bourdain encounters Usimi Rodriguez, a working-class freelance journalist living with her mother in a commune, and they dream of a society for all, one where there is freedom of the press. In his travel to agrarian Cuba, the one that’s “poorer and blacker”, where the symbols of revolutions still mean something, he meets the rapper Allen Garcia and his hip-hop gang T&T, La Resistancia in Santiago de Cuba. Garcia, too, speaks of change, of the nights he had to spend in jail for making hip-hop music, but wants change in a society where everyone can participate. He says, “In Santiago de Cuba, we may not have enough money for food and groceries on some nights, but there is enough for a jar of beer, for music, to have the dignity to live and enjoy as a community”.

In all of this, what must not be forgotten is Bourdain’s getaway with the novelist, one of the best-known names in Cuba’s literary world, Leonardo Padura Fuentes. Fuentes walks Bourdain around his neighbourhood, which he describes as a place where everyone lives, “doctors, engineers, workers, or someone like the guy who just greeted us, one day he sells drugs, the other days sells vegetables — does something or the other to live”. They dine in one of the new, booming DIY joints, A La Barbeque, and feast on roasted pork, chips, rice and beans, and caramel custard cooked in a cut-out beer can for dessert. We see crumbling buildings, horse carts, and construction all over the place. Bourdain asks Fuentes, since he must have had the opportunities to move and live a more comfortable life in Barcelona, or more prosperous destinations of erstwhile Spanish America, why he never left. Fuentes responds, “I like it here.” And thus follows Bourdain’s epic monologue: “Yes, the future is here, but the past, too, is everywhere”.

Nowhere in the episode is Bourdain’s approach pessimistic or condescending towards the revolutionary cause in Cuba. The episode grounds the crisis it portrays. That Cuba is in deep trouble is visible, but its cause lies in history, its jeopardy is the same as all countries who adapted socialism



Leonardo Padura Fuentes wrote the famous ‘Havana Quartet’, where his detective protagonist, Mario Conde admits to feelings of “solidarity with writers, crazy people, and drunkards”. source: wikicommons

with a vanguard Marxist-Leninist party structure, or the post-colonial nations that wanted to determine their own socio-economic future. The long-coming horrors of existing under a global production system where capital reigns supreme arrived in Cuba, too. But its resilience lies in its challenge, its persistence under the nose of one of the most brutal imperial powers of the world. In the harrowing aftermath of the Coronavirus pandemic, we see Cuba sending doctors worldwide, making their own vaccine as the sole low-income country, and achieving 78% full vaccination of its citizenry. We see the revolutionary cause bearing fruit⁹. As the episode ends, Bourdain and his crew show us a single, slow motion tracking shot of Cuban people enjoying the evening by the ocean side as a cruise ship passes by; our narrator exclaims: “Everyone knows it is coming — it perhaps smells like freedom, but will it be victory?”

9 Branco Marcetic, “Cuba’s Vaccine could end up saving Millions of Lives,” Jacobin Mag, November 11, 2021, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/11/cuban-covid-vaccine-pandemic-biotech-research>.

LAOS; SEASON 9, EPISODE 3 (2017)

Bourdain's visit to Laos is once again preceded by a US presidential visit to the country, not a coincidence by now, one assumes. Obama in one of the last trips of his presidential stint, had arrived at Vientiane to wash the sins of his forefathers in the land, and without exception, the sins remain unforgivable¹⁰. The burden of history, its immense violence on people and generations is often remembered through museums and memorials, even if the tidings of time wash away the visible relics of war.

But not in Laos. Today's Laotians bear the scars of history on their bodies, as do their parents, and their children will too in future. During the years 1964-1973, the US dropped two million tons of bombs on Laos, twelve times the amount dropped on Japan during WWII, making Laos the most per-capita bombed country on Earth. It began when the French exited Laos, leaving the administration of the country to a right-wing royalist regime and Pathet Lao, the nationalist communist organisation that fought against the French. The US wouldn't have it and rigged the elections. When that didn't

stop Pathet Lao (now backed by North Vietnam), the US began the bombing missions — about 580,000 in number. All was razed: rice fields, livestock, roads, villages, and people, all buried in napalm and white phosphorous. The objective was to decimate Pathet Lao, but the bombings targeted almost anything that moved. Asked about the bombing during Senate testimony, Deputy Chief of Mission Monteagle Stearns said, "Well, we had all those planes sitting around and couldn't just let them stay there with nothing to do."¹¹ The land that remained was won by the Pathet Lao, later restructured as the Laos People's Revolutionary Party. The party established a Marxist-Leninist one party system in the country with democratic centralism as its cornerstone, which maintains power even today.

Bourdain skips none of this history in his depiction of this landlocked Southeast Asian nation. Rather, it is placed right at the beginning. Its consequences remain palpably present throughout the episode, both explicitly and as subtext. While

¹¹ Brett S. Morris, "Laos After the Bombs," *Jacobin Mag*, July 3, 2015, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/07/laos-us-bombing-vietnam-cold-war>.



A bomb disposal team in Laos
Source: wikicommons

dining with the owner of the Ban Lao hotel, the erstwhile control room of USAID (and the de-facto CIA headquarters in the region) in the 60s, Bourdain asks the owner's friend, who is a veteran journalist, to explain the real motive behind Obama's visit to the nation after all these years, Americans are not here for reparations, or to attempt any meaningful reconciliation (the US allocated USD 85 million to help get rid of unexploded ordinances [UXOs] — nowhere near the amount required for the job, and ridiculous compared to per-day expenditure of USD 18 million incurred in bombing Laos¹²), but to counter "China's growing dominance in the region"¹³. The conversation simmers while rare and sumptuous imperial dishes are brought to the table, one of Bourdain's quintessential tactics to unfurl politics over some sticky rice. Later, he himself detonates some UXOs in the countryside along with state officials responsible for clearing up the mess. One official says, "Out of the 80 million [left], we have only destroyed 1.5 million in the past twenty years. Given the money we get, and the age of our technology, when people ask how many more years it's going to take, I don't have an answer." The people who died or were wounded from US bombs used to be farmers who needed arable land to cultivate crops. Now it's mostly children who think of the cluster bombs as playing balls.

What is often forgotten in liberal critiques of socialism is the material reality that preceded its coming; Laos for example, had a wasteland to begin with. In the ensuing decades, the country has come a great distance. But our world is one tied up in contradictions, and all revolutions, despite the hope they foster, leave behind trails that are unbearable to cope with. Bourdain's ability was to be able to put all of this on the table. In northern Laos, among the hills, lie villages of the Hmong tribe, an ethnic minority. The region was occupied by CIA during the 'secret wars'. They trained and militarised Hmong men, including children to fight against the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao. But the Hmong faced the wrath of the bombs too. The shrapnel wounds in their bodies and minds remain

as testament, while their livelihoods and resources was lost as well; but these so called 'traitors' were not to be spared after the revolution. Hunted down and persecuted, they had to hide in the hills or stay in their villages, almost entirely excluded from civilisation, and living in abject poverty¹⁴.

Before the final segment of the episode, Bourdain visits a Hmong man in his village; a man who can only offer some boiled duck meat from his small farm, and bamboo shoot soup. He tells tales of his childhood when he saw bombs falling from the sky, and from adulthood when his community members died or injured themselves trying to scrap metal off 'bombies' to sell at the market. He remembers when he was once severely hurt with a shrapnel, and treated in a temporarily set up American hospital in the region. Bourdain asks, "What do you think of the US, a country that was arrogant enough to push you to death, and puts on a face to come and tend to your wounds?" The man replies, "They hurt us, but they also treated us for free. The doctors directly came from a big organisation called CIA. I have nothing against them". Upon being asked what he thinks must have been the reason for all this destruction, he says he "doesn't know". The few words this working-class man utters sitting in his hut, may be the most damning and appropriate critique of the Laotian Revolution. Despite this, Bourdain chooses to end the episode with the annual Buddhist light festival, where people pour into the streets far away in Vientiane, dressed up and jubilant, they float tiny lighted boats along the river. The river for Tony was endless, a source of infinite hope

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Staff, "Obama in Laos for first US Presidential Visit," *The Hindu*, September 6, 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/Obama-in-Laos-for-first-US-presidential-visit/article14624845.ece>.

¹⁴ Maria Carmen Martin, "The Hmong Crisis: The Secret Tragedy of Laos," *Sigma IOTA RHO: Journal of International Relations*, February 4, 2018, <http://www.sirjournal.org/blogs/2018/2/4/the-hmong-crisis-the-secret-tragedy-of-laos>

BUILDING THE PARTY

Slavoj Žižek writes, “the past itself is not simply ‘what there was’, it contains hidden, non-realized potentials, and the authentic future is the retrieval of this past, not of the past as it was, but of those elements in the past which the past itself, in its reality, betrayed, stifled, failed to realize. It is in this sense that one should today ‘repeat Lenin’: choosing Lenin as one’s hero, not in order to follow him and do the same today, but to retrieve him in the precise sense of bringing out the non-realized potentials of Leninism”¹⁵.

Bourdain was no political theorist, nor did he have much to do with Lenin’s thought, but his disposition places him within such a context of our movement. In the global south, where forces still exist that can work with the working class and peasantry through the old logics of organisation, where there is space to nurture socialist cultural propaganda through art, we must continue to do so with full fervour. Their defeats and victories are ours as well. All collective wisdom of our rich tradition must inform our struggles for a better world.

However, Bourdain comes from a world where these logics have been destroyed, and the fragmentation of the proletariat was complete a long time ago. He speaks to the urban ‘delinquent’ viewer, who experiences leisure at the expense of a good night’s sleep, the new generation of workers who grew up with dreams of prosperity, who are working wages and long hours that only support their survival, the ones who face and express immense anxiety about themselves on the internet, those who have breakdowns and panic attacks at work, the innumerable delivery ‘partners’ and call centre ‘executives’, the students uncertain and scared about their future; Bourdain’s work speaks to all these groups.

It speaks to a networked mass proliferating in urban centres across the world sequentially, a mass which may have something more to lose beyond their chains — their minds. Such a scattered collective of identities dictates its own logic of organisation. Bourdain talked about “being on the move”, not merely for oneself, but for everyone and

everything that is waiting out there; the encounters, friendships and solidarities, the emancipation of a million solitudes spilling outside the screens and onto the streets.

Hence, when the French-Italian philosophical journal, *Tiqqun* (the Imaginary Party), a group of anonymous authors call for ‘Building the Party’, it is in this spirit they speak to us — they assume the apocalypse waiting to swallow our world as reality, and amidst such a disaster, they ask of us to build homes.

15 Slavoj Žižek, “Radical Intellectuals, or, Why Heidegger Took the Right Step (Albeit in the Wrong Direction) in 1933,” in *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2009), 141.

Voice 2 (feminine): Remember, it's in the depths of separation that we found communism. There was nothing left to share but we wanted to share.

Voice 1 (masculine): If you want, I'd really like to build the party with you... well... if you're free¹.

1 Tiquun (the Imaginary Party), "And the War has only just Begun," November 26, 2012, <https://1000littlehammers.wordpress.com/2012/11/26/war-has-only-just-begun/>.

Secularism and Class Struggle

Secularism does not exist independent of class politics

Harshvardhan



The small text below the caricature reads "A païsan (peasant) carrying a Prelate and a Noble. Allusion to the taxes whose weight fell entirely on the people: M.M. the Ecclesiastics and the Nobles not only pay nothing, but also obtain graces, pensions that exhaust the State and the unfortunate farmer can hardly provide for his sustenance."

(Paris, 1789, artist unknown)

Without a doubt, secularism in India is going through a severe crisis today. The rise of the right wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power in 2014 has put to question the future of secularism in India¹. The intense communal propaganda carried out by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's machinery at the micro level through social media platforms coupled with consistent attacks by elected representatives² and senior leadership of the BJP on secular principles as enshrined in the Indian Constitution have led to an unprecedented situation. As a result, phrases like 'secularism is in danger'³, 'secularism is under threat'⁴, and 'secularism is being undermined'⁵ have become common utterances across the spectrum of India's political discourse — from the centre to the left.

It is true that Indian secularism is probably facing its worst challenge since Independence and there is a clear and decisive right-wing shift in Indian politics as opposition parties have succumbed to the pressure created by Hindutva politics. Today, a range of opposition political parties are trying to present themselves as 'pro-Hindu' by either visiting temples or by granting subsidies to Hindu pilgrimages, which, in turn, only strengthens the Hindutva public-political sphere.

In such a grim scenario, where secularism is under attack every day and the centrist-liberal discourse keeps lamenting about the 'death of secularism'⁶, it becomes important to understand the crisis first before devising a solution. This is because any scope of charting out the correct prognosis requires a correct diagnosis of the problem.

In order to understand the crisis of secularism, we will need to take a historical account of the concept and how it emerged in the first place. Before proceeding further, I would like to clarify here that the objective of this essay is neither to propose any comprehensive theory of secularism nor to present a

reductionist or causal approach to the present crisis of secularism by locating it in the crisis of working-class movement. Rather, the aim is to bring to the fore one of the most neglected aspects in the study of secularism, i.e. the near total neglect of the relationship between the working-class movement in India and the rise of Hindutva.

SECULARISM: ORIGINS

The term 'secularism' was coined by British journalist George Holyoake in 1851 to denote a public social order free from the influence of religion. But the process, practice and phenomenon of this concept are intrinsically linked with the multi-dimensional developments that began in Western Europe in the 15th century with the Protestant reformation.

In the early modern European context, secularism essentially meant the transfer of church property to state and civil authority; it referred to the process whereby the sphere of politics and commerce were gaining independence from religious control. These developments were mainly a result of what has been mistakenly called the 'European wars of religion'—a prolonged conflict between different European powers beginning in the 15th century and ending with the treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which also led to the foundation of the concept of Nation-State. These developments strictly took place in the political sphere and were accompanied by scientific developments like the Copernican revolution, and in the cultural sphere through the renaissance and enlightenment. Together, these factors gave birth to the secular culture as we know it today. However, the most important factor that led to the birth and growth of secularism was the rise of capitalism.

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In pre-capitalist Europe, economy and politics were deeply embedded in religion, and the Church was the overarching power in every aspect of life. Capitalism, in order to grow, required the removal of all impediments emanating from feudal morality and

1 <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/04/04/fate-of-secularism-in-india-pub-78689>

2 <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/yogi-adityanath-secularism-biggest-threat-to-india-tradition-on-global-stage-1776752-2021-03-08>

3 https://www.business-standard.com/article/politics/secularism-as-a-principle-and-practice-is-in-danger-in-india-tharoor-120103101044_1.html

4 <https://thediplomat.com/2018/08/in-india-constitutional-secularism-comes-under-threat/>

5 <https://www.hindustantimes.com/editorials/undermining-the-politics-of-secularism-101617546791386.html>

6 <https://www.newsclick.in/Secularism-India-Dead>

relation. Barrington Moore Jr., in his monumental work *Social Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship* (1966), has argued that the primary pushers of modern and secular societies in the early modern England were men of commerce in both urban and rural areas⁷. Similarly, Himanshu Roy⁸ has argued that in the early modern period, “secularism was the necessity of those individuals who, grounded in mobile wealth, were in search of market and profit... [Therefore] it was largely the bourgeoisie and merchant capitalists who championed secularism”.

Fredrich Engels in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1892) has provided a more nuanced understanding of the origin of secularism or secular culture. According to Engels, the emergence of Europe from the middle ages saw the parallel development of a) middle classes or the bourgeoisie whose growth “became incompatible with the maintenance of the feudal system”⁹, and b) the revival of science. These two independent developments came together to defeat their common enemy, the Church, which according to Engels was the greatest centre of feudalism and had long subjugated science. Engels writes:



Friedrich Engels, 1893.
source:marxists.org)

“... the bourgeoisie, for the development of its industrial production, required a science which ascertained the physical properties of natural objects and the modes of action of the forces of Nature. Now up to then science had but been the humble handmaid of the Church, had not been allowed to overstep the limits set by faith, and for that reason had been no science at all. Science rebelled against the Church; the bourgeoisie could not do without science, and, therefore, had to join in the rebellion.”

This conflict between the rising bourgeoisie and Church/feudalism culminated into what Engels called three decisive moments: namely the

Protestant reformation in Germany, the triumph of the Calvinist creed in England and finally, the great French Revolution. While religion had played an important role in the former two, the French Revolution had “entirely cast off the religious cloak”.¹⁰ Its specific character sprang from the spread of the materialist philosophy from England to France where it coalesced with another branch of materialism — Cartesianism. This revolutionary philosophy gave the French Revolution its distinctive character. As Engels writes: “...*The French materialists did not limit their criticism to matters of religious belief; they extended it to whatever scientific tradition or political institution they met with; and to prove the claim of their doctrine to universal application, they took the shortest cut, and boldly applied it to all subjects of knowledge in the giant work after which they were named-the Encyclopedie...*”¹¹

The French Revolution not only established the doctrine of separation of Church and the State but also did away with religious principles governing the public sphere, leading to the secular culture as we know it

However, the birth of secularism was not smooth but marred with violence and extreme brutality as the Church and the feudal classes did everything to stop its spread. Several protestants were branded as heretics and subjected to torture; scientists and philosophers were hounded and their works banned; there were major and minor conflicts between the Catholic Church-backed European states and states supporting protestant reformation, as well as between the feudal aristocracy and the newly emerging bourgeoisie, leading to several civil wars within nations.

Secularism, thus, was born out of a conflict between the dying feudal aristocracy backed by the Catholic Church and the emerging bourgeoisie and merchant capitalists with new visions of organising nation states as per their class interest; secularism — both in its institutional form as well as cultural form — is a product of class struggle.

Within this framework I will attempt to explain the story of secularism as it unfolded in post-independence India.

⁷ Moore. Pp. 13

⁸ <https://www.epw.in/journal/2006/02/special-articles/western-secularism-and-colonial-legacy-india.html>

⁹ Engels, pp.22

¹⁰ Ibid. 27

¹¹ Ibid. 26-27

DECISIVE RISE OF HINDUTVA MOVEMENT

Although the seeds of communalism were planted in the 19th century in India, the Hindutva movement started to gain prominence only in the second decade of the 20th century in the wake of the Khilafat movement's failure and the infamous Moplah rebellion. These events fanned the nascent Hindutva movement, leading to a series of communal riots in the late 1920s across the Indian subcontinent. However, the anti-imperialist struggle under the relatively secular Indian National Congress(INC) and Communist Party of India(CPI) was able to keep the tides of the Hindutva movement at bay.¹² Even though the Indian subcontinent experienced massive communal riots on eve of Independence due to partition, the right-wing forces remained at the margins of Indian political life.

The decisive rise of the Hindutva movement is generally located in the second half of the penultimate decade of the 20th century. The Hindutva forces began to consolidate themselves with the launch of the Ram Temple Movement in the early 1980s. As Christopher Jaffrelot has rightly summed up¹³: *"Between the 1950s and the 1970s, India's secular model seemed to work reasonably well... starting in the 1980s, Indian secularism came under more severe strain. The Congress Party began opportunistically pandering to one religious community after another more overtly, and Indian secularism was deeply damaged as a result."*

This opportunistic pandering is identified with certain specific decisions taken by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her son and successor Rajiv Gandhi; these include granting minority status to AMU, inaugurating Bharat Mata Temple constructed by the VHP, the Shah Bano judgement or opening the locks of Ram Janambhoomi in Ayodhya. This opportunistic pandering, Jaffrelot emphasises, enabled Hindu nationalists to claim that the Congress was indulging in pseudo-secularism, which only helped strengthen the communal consciousness in Indian society.

The Hindutva movement grew strong by the end of 1980s. Riding on the wave of the Ram Temple movement, the BJP was able to win the crucial

Uttar Pradesh Assembly Election in 1991. After the demolition of Babri Mosque in 1992, the BJP suffered a temporary setback in the electoral arena but the Hindutva movement continued to gain momentum. There was a decisive right-wing shift in the Indian political sphere.

The above is a generally accepted reading and understanding of the rise of communalism in India in the last forty years. However, this understanding largely focuses on the changes in the realm of ideas and attributes the rise of communalism to specific decisions, while ignoring or not paying adequate attention to the economic and related factors that had played an important role in the rise of Hindutva communalism.

Why did India's secularism work relatively well from 1950s to 1970s? Why did Hindutva politics that had remained at margins following Independence slowly begin raising its ugly head in the 1980s? What were the developments, apart from the 'opportunistic pandering of religious communities' that facilitated the growth of communal consciousness and strengthened political Hindutva?

One part of the answer lies in the following: a) the legacy of relatively secular nature of the Indian freedom struggle, b) the society-wide delegitimisation of Hindutva forces in the wake of assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 by a Hindutva fanatic, and c) the socialist tilt of economic policy pursued after Independence under PM Jawaharlal Nehru. Another part lies in the class-labour relations and politics that dominated the Indian political economy from 1950s till 1970s and then from the 1980s onwards.

If we take a bird-eye view of the relationship between communal forces and class politics, we find that the 'golden period of Indian secularism' coincided with the golden period of working-class movements. Meanwhile, the period of the rise and success of Hindutva communalism coincides with the decline of working-class movements as a political force.

¹² <https://www.newsclick.in/Communists-During-India-Free-dom-Struggle>

¹³ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/04/04/fate-of-secularism-in-india-pub-78689>

RISE AND DECLINE OF THE INDIAN WORKING CLASS

After the British departure in 1947 and adoption of the Constitution in 1950, India embarked on state-driven industrialisation, which led to the establishment of many public sector enterprises leading to significant numerical growth in the Indian working class. This growth was reflected in the membership of trade unions which saw significant expansion. The number of trade unions and their membership continued to grow and reach its peak between the mid-1970s to mid-1980s. This growth was not just quantitative but also qualitative, as the Indian working class grew more militant and labour disputes multiplied.

The strength and militancy of Indian working-class movement from 1950's to the 1970's can be gleaned from certain facts. During this period, labour disputes and unrests across India increased from an average of 1,000 labour disputes per year, to an average of 3,000 labour disputes per year, that is, a growth of almost 300%. In 1973 alone, 3,370 labour disputes were registered. In 1979, almost 2.9 million workers took part in various labour disputes. The number of lost (wo)man-days peaked in 1982 with the onset of Bombay Textile workers' strike and reached 74.6 million (wo)man-days from around 1 million in 1977. These developments took place in the backdrop of a series of economic crises that had occurred at three moments: 1965-66, 1972-73, and 1979-80.

Two moments that stand out in the struggle of the Indian working class between 1950s and mid-1980s are the Indian Railways strike of 1974, which saw the participation of almost 1.7 million workers, and the Great Bombay Textile strike, wherein over 250,000 workers participated, starting in 1982 and technically continuing even today. Both strikes garnered massive support from across the country. Apart from these two, there were several minor but equally militant strikes that took place in different parts of India¹⁴. Also, this period was rife with political crises of unprecedented scale with the emergence and spread of the Naxalite movement, the declaration of Emergency (1975-77), and the rise of the Khalistan and Assam movements. These political turmoils across the length and breadth of India created

a situation which political scientists Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph termed the 'crisis of governability'.

The period of mid-1970s to mid-1980s, Snehal Shingavi¹⁵ has pointed out, was "*probably the height of the combativity of the Indian working class, but this period also saw the first decisive victory for the capitalist class, a victory that it has held on to ever since*". The Indian State not only used extreme official violence to suppress these movements, but the ruling state-capital combine also propped up several fascist Hindutva organisations like the Shiv Sena in Bombay to attack and crush the working class, often with the direct or indirect support of Industrialists and the State¹⁶. Moreover, the trade union of the RSS, the Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), founded in 1955, was a very marginal player in trade union politics until the late 1970s¹⁷ when it emerged as the second largest trade union in India by membership, and by 1989, the largest. Several cadres and leader of the BMS actively participated in the Ayodhya movement and the BMS officially supported the Babri demolition.

The global restructuring of capital which began in the 1970s with the adoption of neo-liberalism in the United States and United Kingdom had its impact upon the Indian economy too as the Indian state slowly but steadily began to restructure labour laws and open the economy to global capital. This process finally culminated in the full blown adoption of neoliberalism in 1991, initiating the rollback of long and hard-fought battles by the working class.

That the Indian working class suffered a comprehensive defeat in the 1980s is a well-accepted fact not only among academicians but also within the working-class movement. Some have described this defeat of Indian labour by the capital-Indian state nexus as 'sudden death'.¹⁸

The story of the rise of the Indian working class, the attack on it by the state-capital combine, and its subsequent defeat and decline are part and parcel of the international trajectory of working-class movements. The same can also be said about the

14 <https://libcom.org/history/cycle-struggle-1973-1979-india>

15 <https://isreview.org/issue/103/austerity-neoliberalism-and-indian-working-class-0/>

16 Shaikh, Junaid. 2005. "Worker Politics, Trade Unions and the Shiv Sena's Rise in Central Bombay". *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 40, No. 18. pp. 1893-1900

17 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2645356>

18 <https://kafila.online/2020/07/02/working-class-movement-and-sudden-death-of-the-1980s-challenges-for-rebuilding-the-left-ii/>



Calcutta tram workers strike 1945 (Photograph by Clyde Waddell)

story of the rise of the Hindutva movement in India and the rise of right-wing politics across the globe. Though the reasons for the relative marginalisation of right-wing movements in different countries are different, their rise can be located in the global economic crisis of the 1970s. Dave Renton, in *Fascism: Theory and Practice* (2007), showed through membership and vote data of fascist or right-wing parties in Europe and United States that their popularity started to grow in the 1970s and with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, they started to push towards the centre stage of politics in their respective countries. While Europe and America saw the sharpening of racial and immigration fault lines, India saw the sharpening of communal fault lines.

WORKING CLASS AND SECULARISM: POST LIBERALISATION

In July 1991, former Prime Minister and the then Finance Minister of India Dr. Manmohan Singh presented his 'epochal budget'¹⁹ announcing

the advent of neo-liberalism in India which came to be known as LPG (Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation) reforms in popular usage. These reforms broke down the protective walls of Indian economy and opened it for global capital. In December 1992, several thousands of Hindutva activists brought down the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, announcing their entry into the mainstream of Indian politics. Ever since, the Hindutva movement and neoliberalism have operated like twins; with one supporting and facilitating the rise of the other.

The last decade of the previous century saw the parliamentary rise of the Hindutva movement as the Bhartiya Janta Party came to power thrice; first for 16 days, then for 13 months and then finally for a full five-year term in 1999. The rise of Hindutva also saw the rise of neoliberal restructuring of the Indian economy as labour laws were dismantled, Public sector units were sold and welfare schemes crunched. The surprise defeat of the BJP in the 2004 General Election brought a progressive coalition of the Congress and the left parties, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) , into power which provided a momentary relief for the Indian working classes, as well as for the ethos of secularism. However, the social-democratic agenda of the

¹⁹ <https://www.freepressjournal.in/webspecial/everything-about-manmohan-singhs-epochal-budget-that-marked-the-beginning-of-economic-liberalisation>

UPA was replaced with a neoliberal development model under the UPA-II Government which came to power after the 2009 General elections in which the Congress emerged as the dominant party in the coalition.

This shift from a social-democratic development model to neoliberalism marked the decisive right turn of Indian political economy as there was no difference left between the neoliberal experiments being carried out in BJP ruled Gujarat under the leadership of the then chief Minister and current prime minister Narendra Modi and those being pushed by the UPA-II at the centre. A series of political, economic and social crises from 2012 leading to the anti-corruption movement and the Nirbhaya movement pushed the UPA-II out of power in 2014 and brought the right-wing BJP to power.

Ever since 2014, India has been witnessing the rise of communal politics and consciousness on one hand and an attack on the working class on the other. The latest manifestation of these attacks are the labour codes and the three farm acts, later repealed. Further, to keep the masses distracted, the BJP Government passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and abrogated Article 370 stripping away the statehood of Jammu and Kashmir, the only Muslim majority State in India, in 2019.

CONCLUSION

The brief story narrated above shows us that a) the rise of communal forces in India began with the decline of the working class from the centre of Indian Politics, b) the rise of the Hindutva movement is linked with turn towards neoliberal economic policies, and consequently, c) the crisis of secularism began with the decline of the working-class movement and ascendancy of neoliberalism.

Therefore, secularism is not an independently existing value or ethics that exists sans socio-economic relations and broader material conditions, as believed by many liberal scholars; rather, secularism is both an outcome of class struggle and dependent upon class struggle (along with developments in other spheres of society). In simplistic terms, secularism (particularly in the

Indian context) is related to the balance of power between classes. If the working class is strong, the values and principles of secularism will be strengthened. In contrast, a strong capitalist class will mean a consistent attack on values, ethics, and the principles of secularism.

This directly proportional relationship is not difficult to understand because communalism is used as a tool to a) fracture the unity of the working class, b) to impede the formation of a working-class consciousness, and, thereby solidarity, and c) to divert attention, using communal tension, from consistently growing economic misery.

The above is not to say that all the struggles fought by the Indian working class were conscious of furthering and upholding the values of secularism. Rather, the point is when the Indian working class waged a militant battle against the capital-state combine, one of the latent outcomes was that it also kept the communal forces at bay.

If secularism has to be saved, it must be understood that no amount of appeal directed towards people's 'good sense' will help. The crisis of secularism is not merely the result of a few opportunistic decisions taken by politicians or to the sudden explosion of communal consciousness among citizens. Under what conditions those 'opportunistic decisions' were taken and how communal consciousness came to dominate the everyday thinking of Indian masses must also be explained in terms of the changing economic sphere and social relations. No doubt, the present crisis of secularism is a result of complex factors interacting with each other. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that the growth of right-wing politics across the globe, be it on the basis of race or over the question of immigration etc., is an outcome of the crisis of capitalist accumulation and attempts to solve the crisis through the logic of free market.

Therefore, the only answer to the crisis of secularism in the Indian context is a strong working-class movement. Communal consciousness can only be defeated by developing a revolutionary working-class consciousness.



Women workers in a booming Bombay textile mill during World War II
Source: wikicommons

World of Work

Round-up of labour news

Sreyan Chatterjee

- Rule making under the labour codes continues to beset by a lack of coordination with state legislative departments. Deadlines of the 4 codes to be effective by the end of 2021 seem unrealistic as large gaps in bye-laws remain unnotified by states, [writes](#) Professor Shyam Sunder in the Leaflet.
- Gamification of digital work and [increasing work pressure](#) through consumer demands such as shorter delivery times continued to affect India's gig economy workers. An increasing number of such workers are finding mainstream media space to document their grievances with management — best exemplified by an [anonymous worker interview](#) published by the Scroll.
- Registration of the massive unorganised sector workforce has gotten underway under the E-Shram or the National Database for Unorganised Workers rolled out by the Ministry of Labour. Of a target of 38 crore workers set by the ministry, the database (as of January 30, 2022) has [registered](#) 24.54 crore workers. Bottlenecks such as no alternative to Aadhaar as an identification document and having no offline module to register, continue to [shed doubt](#) on the inclusiveness of the database.
- India's first National Employment Policy was expected to be published by December 2021 but has not emerged yet. [Observers](#) had noted that this will provide more information about the implementation of various schemes to increase employment under the Labour ministry. The ministry had announced the formation of a panel for this purpose but no further details have been made available since.
- Urban Company has [filed](#) a criminal suit against workers in its beauty segment for agitating for better conditions. Workers first went on strike in October 2021 over algorithmic mismanagement and rate cuts. The strike achieved some early significant concessions from company management—a revamped application interface had been rolled out as well a claim of reduction of Urban Company's commission rate from 30% to 25%. But workers went on strike again in December 2021 over the introduction of a 'minimum guarantee scheme' which the workers claimed would reverse the gains from the earlier strike.
- In recent months, proposed strike action by defence employees to oppose the breaking up of the Ordnance Factory Board faced significant reverses. An unlikely joint front of three umbrella unions—All India Defence Employees' Federation (AIDEF), a federation of Left unions; the Indian National Defence Workers' Federation (INDWF), affiliated to the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) of the Congress; and the Bharatiya Pratiraksha Mazdoor Sangh (BPMS) of the RSS — emerged but failed to remain together after initial talks. The [break-up](#) of the Board was pushed through in the lack of organised opposition in October 2021.
- The unprecedented Maharashtra State Transport Corporation strike has entered a critical phase after 85 days - in face of a near-total boycott of work over job security by around 95,000 workers - the public sector entity's management has chosen to suspend over 11000 workers and [terminate](#) around 4000 workers for union activity thus far. Some wage increases have been offered but this has not convinced most workers to resume work while the officially recognised union - the ST Kamgar Sanghatana - continues to refuse any support to the strike action or the affected workers.

International

- The Nobel Prize in Economics has been awarded to David Card, Joshua Angrist and Guido Imbens for empirical research that [lays to rest](#) the conservative criticism that raising minimum wages leads to job losses. These researchers have demonstrated that raising minimum wages has no effect on jobs in their award winning work in labour economics.
- Alex Press [discusses](#) the revival of the labour beat in mainstream newspapers in the USA and how good labour beat-journalistic practice often starts from reporters being exposed to proactive union activity in their own work-place.
- An all party parliamentary group in the UK has [recommended](#) an algorithmic management law to counter the negative mental health effects of algorithmic control.
- The process for Uber to pay out pensions to its drivers has [begun](#) in the UK following a landmark Supreme Court decision earlier this year to classify Uber's drivers as employees rather than independent contractors.
- The ruling Socialist Party in Portugal has passed the first remote-work [legislation](#) that gives home-based workers significant scope to have effective work-life balance, including mandating employees to pick up the tab for home-based work expenses such as a broadband connection.
- In the US state of California, gig-economy workers have [won](#) the latest round of employee classification battle in court in September 2021. After the Uber/Lyft sponsored Prop 22 modification to the worker friendly AB 5 has been declared unconstitutional, hopes have been [raised](#) that the Prop 22 style of legislative exemptions can be stopped.

IN A SOUP:
Gig workers such as those working food delivery are facing increasing pressures such as the demand for shorter delivery times from consumers
Illustration by Megha Sud



We are not willing to die, damn it!

It is the refusal to give in and give up that pushes any revolution forward.

Rini Joseph

Vayalar Ramavarma's protest song

“Marikkaan Njangalku Manasilla”

“We Are Not Willing To Die” (1948)

— is a passionate ode to the resilience and perseverance behind fighting the good fight. The song is split in two parts – the first part calls Capitalism out on its villainy. It is straight forward – calling capitalists exploitative perverts and cannibals. The second part — perhaps the more profound part — honours and celebrates the communist movement in Kerala's context. Ramavarma reminisces about the Karivellur Struggle of December 20, 1946: considered the first uprising in the Malabar region by farmers. It is because of this uprising that peasants got land in the villages, which otherwise belonged to a few landlords. Ramavarma also talks about the uprising which resulted in “The Punnappa-Vayalar killings”. It was, according to historian Robin Jeffrey, apparently “the only moment in history when an organized working class led an armed revolt against a British-backed kingdom”. It was a movement organised in response to the Travancore kingdom's proposal to create an independent country according to an ‘American model’. The blatant rejection of this proposal and the joining of peasants into the Communist party in a famine stricken kingdom suffering the after-effects of the Second World War - a kingdom barely taken care of by its rulers. Ramavarma specifically talks about the martyrs who died in these revolts - a reminder that despite despair and struggle, the fight moves forward. The fight perseveres against the blood lust of the capitalists.

Vayalar Ramavarma's song is that of resilience. Of the stubbornness to not die or give in. Even the death and pain that came before serves to motivate. When I reflect on the damage that something as toxic as capitalism has caused, I take away inspiration from Ramavarma's words - that of collective resilience. From the homeless man that carries on, to the lone indigenous man that lunges forward with just a stick against a man with a gun, to nature's incredible ability to rise from the ashes. I don't think the world is going to end. The world has ended thousands of times in earth's existence, but it has always been reborn. The question is, does humanity have what it takes to be resilient? To save itself from the muck of capitalism? Is humanity stubborn enough to refuse to die?





മുതലാളിത്തമേ നിൻ മുന്നിൽ ഇനി

Like nipping sprouts and tender buds,
നളിരും തിരിയും പോലെ ഞങ്ങൾ



You who nip our
heads and fruits (of labour),

അലരും കരിയും നുച്ചുരുമ്പര



Keep your swords in your sheath
Keep your swords in, you cannibals
Keep your swords in.

വാളുറപ്പിപ്പിടൂ...

വാളുറപ്പിപ്പിടൂ കാപാലികരേ

വാളുറപ്പിപ്പിടൂ



മുട്ടു മടക്കാൻ മനസ്സില്ലാ.

Oh capitalists,
we refuse to bend our knees in
front of you



കന്യകമാരുടെ കണ്ണീർമാറിൽ

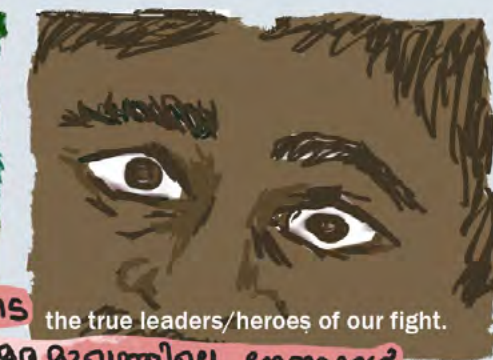
കാമ നഖങ്ങൾ മുറുത്തുനവരേ

you who pierce the tear soaked breasts
of virgins
with your perverted claws



where our comrades were slaughtered -

പൊരുതി മരിച്ച സഖാക്കൾ ഞങ്ങൾ



the true leaders/heroes of our fight.

സമര മുഖനീലപ നേതാക്കൾ



ഞങ്ങൾ വരുന്നു.

We are coming,

ഞങ്ങൾ വരുന്നു നിങ്ങൾക്കെതിരെ

We are coming against you.



we are coming...

ഞങ്ങൾ വരുന്നു...

We are not willing to die!

മരിക്കാൻ ഞങ്ങൾക്ക് മനസ്സില്ലാ

Fascism Then, Fascism Now

Politics in a world of dispossessed and surplus populations

Avinash C



Italian workers guarding a factory during the Biennio Rosso or the two red years
source: workerscontrol.net

A hundred years ago, Antonio Gramsci concluded an editorial in the socialist newspaper L'Ordine Nuovo with the slogan 'Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will!'¹

This unsigned editorial appeared on March 4, 1921, at the tail end of what would become known as the 'Biennio Rosso' or the Two Red Years when millions of workers across Italy's northern industrial belt went on strike. In events that would become socialist legend, workers didn't just take to the streets, they went beyond and took control of factories in cities like Turin and Milan, forming workers' councils that would run the factories democratically. The workers of the famous 'Turin factory council movement' didn't see these occupations as just a way to bargain with employers for better working conditions, but as the beginning of a new egalitarian social and economic order.

But this movement ended as quickly as it began as the Italian industrialists fought back, with the full support of the Italian state and fascist thugs. It also had the rug pulled from under its feet by the Italian Socialist Party and the labour unions who refused to support the council movement. Bargaining with capital over better wages was one thing, actually taking over the factories was a step too far.

It was in this context that Gramsci wrote his editorial - a bitter denunciation of the trade union's congress at Livorno in March 1921 (the editorial is simply titled 'Officialdom'), when the occupations had been defeated, government and industry had taken back control of the factories, and the socialists and the unions had let it happen. He didn't know it at the time, but the defeat of the workers' movement in those months was to prove decisive. The fascist party of Italy would be formed in the December of 1921 and, led by Mussolini, it would take power barely a year later in October 1922.

The transition to a fascist movement in Italy was to find its echo in India a century later, albeit under

very different circumstances. A few years ago, Aijaz Ahmad said that 'every country gets the fascism it deserves', in line with its history, society and politics:

*"...what we have to grasp about every successful movement of the fascist type is not its replication of something else in the past, but its originality in response to the conditions in which it arises. There is no getting away from the materiality of the "here and now."*²

Much has been written about how Indian politics and society got here, on the Sangh Parivar's 'long march through the institutions', its arrival in power through the process of electoral democracy (rather than violent overthrow), and on the deeper structures of Indian society which enabled this.³

Yet, few have written about the economic conditions which have enabled the rise of fascism in this country. This is perhaps to be expected. The Sangh Parivar was always more focused on the 'superstructure' – the domain of culture, ideology, and politics. To the extent that economics has featured at all in accounts of the rise of the Right in Indian politics, the blame has usually been ascribed, either directly or implicitly, to 'neoliberalism'. Achin Vanaik, for instance, in an article on the successive hegemony of the Congress and the BJP, ascribes part of the reason for the shift to the right to the Congress' inability to manage the contradictions and tensions of the neoliberal shift in the 1991 reforms.⁴ "Between the two eras [from Congress to BJP] lies a major shift in the political-economic epoch, from the statist developmentalism of the post-war decades to a globalised neoliberalism since the 1990s, reflected in the programmes of both parties; and with it, a dramatic though uneven advance of different caste and class fractions."⁵

The neoliberal reforms of 1991 were a watershed, of course, but it is a partial explanation. As an analogy (and without denying its importance), we

1 Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from Political Writings 1921-1926*, New edition. Baltimore, Maryland: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd, 1978. p. 19. It was the second time he used this slogan, though it would not be the last. For an extended analysis of the differing contexts in which Gramsci used it, and what he really meant by it, see Haider, Asad. 'Pessimism of the Will'. *Viewpoint Magazine*, 28 May 2020. <https://viewpointmag.com/2020/05/28/pessimism-of-the-will/>.

2 Ahmad, Aijaz. 'India: Liberal Democracy and the Extreme Right'. *Versobooks.com*, 24 March 2017. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3144-india-liberal-democracy-and-the-extreme-right>.

3 The quote is from the Ahmad article cited above. On the resemblances of Indian and Italian social structures and its relevance for the rise of Hindutva, see Ahmad, Aijaz. 'Fascism and National Culture: Reading Gramsci in the Days of Hindutva'. *Social Scientist* 21, no. 3/4 (1993): 32–68. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3517630>.

4 Vanaik, Achin. 'India's Two Hegemonies'. *New Left Review*, no. 112 (1 August 2018), p. 54. Ahmad's article is in a similar vein.

5 Vanaik, *ibid*, p.29-30

would not ascribe the rise of the Hindutva Right solely to the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. In the sphere of the economy, similarly, deeper structures, including the nature of 'postcolonial' capitalism in the modern era, have created a society primed to the appeal of fascism in important and critical ways.

FROM PRE-CAPITALISM TO CAPITALISM

For all their foundational differences, economics in both its liberal and classical Marxist versions had a common vision of how societies evolve from a feudal past to a modern capitalist present. The transition was one from 'tradition to modernity, from unreason to reason, from pre-capitalism to capitalism.'⁶

While liberal economics saw the transition in terms of a set of structural changes in cultural, social, and economic institutions which enabled and supported capitalism, Marxists saw those same changes in terms of a transition from pre-capitalist (often feudal) modes of production to a capitalist mode of production.

For the early generation of Marxist theorists, these transitions were expected to be complete. Primitive accumulation would result in dispossessing the

larger part of the population of the control of the means of production, and thus forcing them to sell their labour power to meet their subsistence needs. Thus, whereas earlier a peasant might be able to subsist by growing their own food on land they tilled, the process of primitive accumulation would force them off the land and on to a 'labour market'. Everyone would be drawn into the orbit of capital. Importantly, there was no way to live 'outside' of capitalism.

The liberal economics version of this was the famous model of William Arthur Lewis, where a 'modern' capitalist sector develops by drawing cheap 'unlimited' supplies of labour from a 'backward' subsistence sector (usually agriculture), to the point where all excess labour is absorbed.

LABOUR MARKETS, PRE-CAPITALISM AND THE PERIPHERY

It was left to Rosa Luxemburg, and later the 'dependency' school to qualify this picture of a complete takeover of a 'backward' economy by capital. Luxemburg argued that a capitalist sector comprising workers and capitalists could not absorb all the production of that sector, thus leaving a part of surplus value unrealised.⁷ The function of 'pre-

6 Sanyal, Kalyan. *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality & Post-Colonial Capitalism*. Routledge, 2018. p 40.

7 Luxemburg, Rosa. *The Accumulation of Capital*. 1st edition. London ; New York: Routledge, 2003.



A huge proportion of the population moving from rural areas to the city, end up in slums, and are likely to remain here throughout their lives source: wikicommons.

capitalist' sectors, both in the domestic economy and, importantly, in the wider international economy, was to provide a ready market to absorb those excess goods. Thus capitalism 'needed' a pre-capitalist sector to fully absorb its surplus. The attractiveness of this approach was that it provided a clear theoretical reason for the mad scramble for colonies among the European powers that was happening in Rosa Luxemburg's time.

For the 'dependency' theorists of the 1960s, the development of capitalism in the 'core' countries (broadly western Europe and the United States) had its dark side in the 'underdevelopment' of the periphery (the societies of the global south). While capitalism developed in the core in a way broadly described by classical Marxism, it was blocked from doing so in the periphery due to competition with the advanced economies whose industries had far superior levels of productivity. So, pre-capitalist modes of production continued to persist in the periphery, which performed the function of effectively transferring capitalist surplus to the core.⁸

Both these approaches were heavily critiqued by subsequent generations of Marxists. But most still accepted the notion of 'transition'. If there were sectors of society which remained 'pre-capitalist', that was because capitalism had not been 'allowed' to develop due to imperialism, dependency, or something else (e.g., lack of a 'bourgeois' revolution). The presence of vast numbers of unemployed, or underemployed, men and women living in slums and on the margins of society in the so-called informal sector in the third world were accounted for by precisely this fact, even in the liberal tradition. A liberal economist would argue that it was because of a lack of economic 'reform' or the need for the unfettering of controls on capital, which would lead to a surge in investment and employment. Thus, the standard discourse has been that the vast size of the informal sector in India's labour economy exists because of incomplete and inadequate economic reform or 'labour market rigidities'.

Orthodox Marxist theory would consider such a marginalised population as part of the 'reserve army' of labour — a pool of labour which is unemployed or underemployed and which is produced as part

of the process of capital accumulation. The process of accumulation is such that it constantly seeks to increase the productivity of labour — the flipside to this is that less labour is needed to produce each future unit of output because of innovation and mechanisation. Thus, over the course of capitalist history, the demand for labour will tend to lag the rate of accumulation of capital, adding to this reserve army, with the added benefit that this keeps wages low. But even in this conception, the reserve army is very much part of the labour force and a reservoir of labour power to be drawn on, whenever required.

THE DISPOSSESSED

But what if a substantial proportion of the marginalised population will never be employed by capital and was never meant to be?

As unsettling as this idea sounds, this conception has loomed in the background of both Marxist and non-Marxist scholarship in fields from development studies, to sociology, to urban geography. The idea appears half formed, for instance in Mike Davis' *Planet of Slums*. The sociologist Jan Breman, reviewing the book in 2006, and writing about the migration of labour from rural to urban areas, wrote: "*Up to thirty years ago, the assumption was that this transformation from an agrarian-rural to an industrial-urban mode of production would be duplicated in the 'backward' parts of the world. But the notion of industrialisation as the handmaiden of urbanisation is no longer tenable. This goes a long way to explain why huge numbers of the new arrivals to the city are slum-dwellers and are likely to remain so throughout their lives.*"⁹ As of 2017-18, for instance, 82% of the total workforce in India was employed in the 'informal' sector (even accounting for claims that it 'shrank' in output terms).¹⁰

But the most radical conceptualisation of this idea is to be found in the work of economist Kalyan Sanyal. He started out as a 'mainstream' theorist in the field of international trade, but started to branch out into Marxist political economy in the 1980s. His

8 Brewer, Anthony. *Marxist Theories of Imperialism: A Critical Survey*. Routledge, 2020. p. 198-199. For a critique of dependency theory see pp 196-198

9 Breman, Jan. 'Slumlands'. *New Left Review*, no. 40 (1 August 2006): p.142

10 Nagaraj, R, and Radhicka Kapoor. 'Understanding Why the Informal Sector Really Shrank during the Pandemic', *The Indian Express* (blog), November 18, 2021. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/informal-sector-covid-pandemic-sbi-study-7628201/>

2007 book, 'Rethinking Capitalist Development', is a strange book for an economist to write, with references ranging from Foucault on the one side to Gramsci and Marx on the other. It sits at an odd junction between postcolonial theory and Marxist political economy.

Sanyal's departure from conventional theory begins right at the birth of capitalism, with the process of primitive accumulation. In conventional Marxist theory, the aim of primitive accumulation is to convert money into capital and create a population without any control over the means of production — a population which is then forced to sell its labour power to capital to eke out a living. But at this point, Sanyal argues, many of these 'dispossessed' will never actually find work in the capitalist economy: *"Bereft of any direct access to means of labour, the dispossessed are left only with labour power, but their exclusion from the space of capitalist production does not allow them to turn their labour power into a commodity. They are condemned to the world of the excluded, the redundant, the dispensable, having nothing to lose, not even the chains of wage-slavery."*¹¹

In conceptual terms, this population is produced through the process of primitive accumulation, and thus not in the same way as a reserve army of labour, which is created in the process of capital accumulation. *"Primitive accumulation of capital thus produces a vast wasteland inhabited by people whose lives as producers have been subverted and destroyed by the thrust of the process of expansion of capital, but for whom the doors of the world of capital remain forever closed."*¹²

Crucially for Sanyal, this population is outside of the world that capitalism has created. Capitalism doesn't need these people at all, not even as a source of cheap labour (a function which the reserve army fulfills). The most they can do is to act as a potential market for a product — but a relatively small one since they live on the margins of subsistence. The dispossessed population does not exist because capitalism has somehow been 'blocked', or imperfectly formed in some way due to inconvenient labour laws. There is no 'failed' or 'delayed' transition to capitalism. This is what capitalism is.

¹¹ Sanyal (ibid) p.53

¹² ibid

THE NEED ECONOMY

But the story does not end there. Capital can ignore such a population in economic terms, but to secure legitimacy, it cannot ignore them in ideological or political terms. It has to 'care' for them in some way, and has to be seen to be 'caring' for them.¹³ This is done by transferring a part of capital's surplus back to the dispossessed who live in this so-called 'need economy' so they can acquire back some of the means of production to sustain themselves — a thela (pushcart) from which to peddle wares, or capital to rent a shop, for example.

And to facilitate this reverse transfer through a range of institutions (e.g., microcredit), has been the aim, Sanyal argues, of all discourses on development in the late 20th century. As he points out, *"The goal of development is to engage the dispossessed and excluded in production activities by uniting them with the means of labour."*¹⁴ The production activities in the 'need' economy are non-capitalist in nature, aimed entirely at subsistence rather than capital accumulation.¹⁵

Unlike primitive accumulation, however, which in classical Marxism was a one-off at the birth of capitalism, this casting of people into the 'need' economy, their rehabilitation through 'development', and perhaps re-dispossessing them (through slum clearances or land acquisition) is a constant process.

The idea of development itself, and the approach of how to 'manage' the 'need' economy has undergone massive shifts in the last fifty years. In the early decades after the second world war, and coinciding with the era of decolonisation, development was a way to help backward economies 'transition' to full capitalism — through capital accumulation, infrastructure development, and investment by the public sector. By the 1970s, this had shifted to a much more modest approach that limited itself to meeting the basic needs of the poor — education, shelter, and

¹³ Ibid. p. 59

¹⁴ Ibid p 65

¹⁵ Ibid. 59 Thus, in Marxist theory the capital accumulation cycle is represented by M-C-M' (capital is turned into commodities, and exchanged for more capital). In the need economy however, the cycle is represented by C-M-C'. Sanyal also makes a distinction between the term 'subsistence economy' and the 'need economy' — the latter is sustained by market exchange. See p. 71. Similarly, for the distinction between the need economy and the core-periphery concept in dependency theory, see p. 72.

health.¹⁶ Joanna Meyerowitz, in her analysis of US support to global anti-poverty programmes, sums it up: *“Over the course of two decades, development experts, policy makers, and international officials shifted their vision of economic assistance from the modernisation projects funded in the 1960s to the microcredit programs that won acclaim in the 1980s. They moved away from large-scale industrial and infrastructure projects aimed at national economic growth and toward small-scale antipoverty projects aimed at individual enterprise.”*¹⁷

FASCISM AND THE WORKING CLASS

If, nevertheless, capitalism must seek legitimacy, even among such a dispossessed population, how can it do so? It cannot be in economic terms (the dream of a better job, entry into middle-class ‘respectability’ etc.) as it did in the countries of Western Europe. Even aspirations towards that sort of economic mobility, as promised by the politics of developmentalism or economic nationalism, as well as the characteristic of the early years of the Indian republic, are dead. The ‘garibi hatao’ (remove poverty) rhetoric of the Indira Gandhi era is long gone as well, though it remains in a kind of ‘undead’ form to be resurrected every now and then.

What’s left then is a very particular kind of politics. It cannot be a politics of optimism, or of looking towards a better economic future, because such a promise fools no one anymore. It is a politics, instead, that either promises a different kind of golden age rooted in a kind of imagined past glory and its revival, or a politics of fear, based on appeals to religion or ethnicity, and threats to those identities from an imagined ‘other’.

The powerlessness of the left and working-class movements makes such a politics even more possible. The sociologist Jan Breman, in the context of the destruction of Ahmadabad’s mills and its working class, wrote of how the disappearance of a way of mobilisation based on class or occupational identity meant that a newly informalised population could be politicised based on other ‘primordial loyalties’ such as caste or religion.

We should be careful not to overstate the argument. Historically, there have been entire working-class communities who have been won over to fascism, just as there are millions of people in the ‘need’ economy in India and around the world who have not. But while today’s fascism has its own history and political dynamic, it can hardly be read, studied, understood, or, most importantly, acted against, independent of the capitalism it exists in. In a context where a vast part of the population is atomised, fragmented, and forced to eke out a living on the margins, such a population will take a politics of hope, if they can get it, from the Left. They will equally be susceptible to a politics of anger from the Right, if that is what is available.

There are two dangers for the Left in this scenario. The first is that the Left itself adopts a politics of anger and victimisation based on appeals to religion or ethnicity. This has happened in States like Assam where the ‘official’ left has supported projects like the National Register of Citizens. The second danger is what happened with the left in Western Europe, where ‘intellectuals’ lost faith in the working class as an agent of change and, in fact, came to see them as almost a hindrance. This danger is less real in India (at least today).

In fact, the kind of capitalism that we live in today highlights even more the fact that the current economic system is not sustainable as a way to provide for even a basic livelihood for the vast mass of people (as an earlier form of capitalism could credibly, at least for some time, promise to do in parts of the developed West). As this article was being written, the Indian government announced the repeal of the farm laws against which thousands of farmers had agitated for months, with hundreds losing their lives. More generally, the mobilisation of peasant movements, tribal movements, and workers movements by the Left and other progressive forces, even in an environment where it remains politically defeated, is an extraordinary testament to the fact that a politics of optimism, despite everything that has happened, remained possible. In fact, it remains imperative.

¹⁶ Ibid. 88

¹⁷ Meyerowitz, Joanne. *A War on Global Poverty: The Lost Promise of Redistribution and the Rise of Microcredit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. p 2

So Long, My Son (2019) Review

Yamini Negi

A condensed overview of the lives of a group of friends, set during and in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution in China, has at its centre the Liu family overcoming the loss of their only child. Yaojun (Wang Jingchun) and Liyun (Yong Mei) lose their only child, Xingxing, after he drowns in a reservoir near their home, while playing with his friends. Wang Xiaoshuai, through a series of non-chronological sequences, presents the grief and hollowness that engulfs the Liu family, even if the world around them carries on as usual.

The impact of the Cultural Revolution and subsequent policies on interpersonal relationships within Chinese society forms the undercurrent of the film. The Liu family's closest friends, Shen Yingming (Qi Xi) and Li Haiyan (Ai Liya), and their son Haohao (Du Jiang), do not remain unaffected by the tragic death. As they discover, it is at the insistence of Haohao that Xingxing enters the reservoir. While the child could not have known the consequence of his action, it nonetheless becomes a nagging guilt that bothers the Shen family, even after the two families go their separate ways.

Moreover, Haiyan is burdened with the knowledge that she forced Liyun to abort her second child, even though the latter was ready to pay the fine for violating the One Child Policy (OCP). Haiyan, a local cadre in the Party by then, warns them that they might end up losing their jobs at the factory for the violation. She carries the guilt to her deathbed where, in a delusional state, she tells Liyun, "We [Yingming and Haiyan] are rich now. We can help you pay the fine for a new baby." The implied meaning here is that class position can possibly allow one to treat 'rules' as mere guidelines.

The OCP, implemented in September of 1980, stipulated that each family unit would limit the number of births to one, with exceptions allowed in certain cases.¹ While the objectives of the OCP

included slowing down a rapidly burgeoning population and alleviating poverty, its wider implications have altered the conception of families and friendships in modern Chinese society.

Yaojun and Liyun ultimately end up relocating to Fujian province, far away from their native place, where they adopt a boy and name him 'Xingxing' (Roy Wang). In their adopted son they find a placebo. However, with the adopted son unwilling to play his part in the charade, the façade of a family unit becomes flimsy. The teenager wishes to leave the "god-forsaken" place, not unlike the numerous youths in rural areas who moved to urban centres, in the hope of finding better employment opportunities. The parent-child relationship is evidently fragile under the OCP, as most parents, especially in rural areas, become dependent on the traditional family systems to support them in their old age. The 'four-two-one' formula, on the other hand, burdens the children born under the OCP, wherein they find themselves having to dedicate not only financial resources but time and care towards their family, leaving them exhausted.²

When Yaojun questions Liyun, asking whether she truly believes the 'new' Xingxing (the adopted child) will care for her when she is old, not only is Xiaoshuai highlighting the impending crisis that the aging population of China faces³, but also, the disproportionate burden that has been placed on the sandwich generation⁴. Despite laws (Protection of Rights and Interests of the Aged, 1996), geriatric care is becoming a complicated issue, with social norms dictating filial piety and responsibility towards one's

1 Some exceptional cases included ethnic minority groups, couples with a severely disabled child, rural families with first-born daughters, etc. Hu, Huiting. "Family Planning Law and China's Birth Control Situation". China.org.cn. October 18, 2002. <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2002/Oct/46138.htm>. Last accessed November 15, 2021.

2 A single grandchild ends up being responsible for the care of two parents and four grandparents, since they have no sibling to rely on. Krishnan, Ananth. "China battles the '421' problem". The Hindu. October 7, 2012. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/China-battles-the-%E2%80%98421-problem%E2%80%99/article12547794.ece>. Last accessed November 15, 2021.

3 ibid

4 Sandwich generation refers to the middle generation, who oftentimes find themselves responsible for the care of both the younger and older generations. Zhang, Yuanting and Goza, Franklin W. "Who will care for the elderly in China? A review of the problems caused by China's one child policy and their potential solutions". *Journal of Aging Studies* 20: 151-164. 2006. Last accessed 15 November 2021.

parents. Yet, material conditions such as the widening economic gaps between rural and urban areas and concentration of employment and educational opportunities in urban areas has stretched the single child thin. A possible solution, dubbed the New Wenzhou Phenomenon, proposes that nursing homes be built for senior citizens to retire to. The obvious obstacle encountered here is the stratification wherein while some nursing homes provide adequate facilities, others only fulfil the bare minimum conditions of shelter, food, and clothing. However, these measures address the physical conditions of the elderly population. There is still no definite answer to questions of mental and emotional well-being of this section of the population, which finds itself in a rapidly unrecognisable world (the Liu family finds their native town has completely transformed – “almost no trace of our past”). The pandemic has sharply thrown into focus the negative effects of prolonged interpersonal relationships to support them, the elderly face a lonely, uphill battle.

Families are a microcosm of society at large, with each social system reproduced in the family unit. *So Long, My Son* displays the breakdown of the “family as the “cell” of the state and of society”, with the death of the progeny⁵. Xiaoshuai also shows the gradual corrosion of intimate relations, influenced by factors out of one’s control. While the film ends on an optimistic note, with Yaojun and Liyun reconciling with their estranged adopted son and former friends, it still manages to deliver a strong

message that, attached to statistics and numbers, are the rich lives of an intricate network of people.

Increasing alienation and atomised social circles, due to a gruelling lifestyle under capitalism that hinders formation of meaningful relations, has only led to an increase in deterioration of mental health. There is an urgent need to rethink familial ties — both blood and chosen — which can enrich an individual’s life.



5 Meusel, Alfred. “National Socialism and the Family.” *The Sociological Review* a28, no. 2 (April 1, 1936): 166–86. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954x.1936.tb01326.x>.

12 V T O P I A E I N S V L A E T A B V L A .



Woodcut by Ambrosius Holbein from 'Utopia' by Thomas More, 1518.)

On Science, Stars, & Socialist Hope

A Review of the Culture Series by Iain M. Banks

Anupam Guha

On 9th June 2013, Iain M. Banks died of inoperable cancer at the age of 59. He left behind him a legacy of fiction writing that attracted critical acclaim from all quarters, several literary and science fiction awards, and an asteroid named after him. A lifetime of libertarian socialist, anti-imperialist, and secular politics shone through his literary work. Banks' influence goes beyond his science fiction writings, but it is that genre where he shone the brightest—the Culture series, the most known and admired of his science fiction writing which this article explores.

The Culture series is a string of ten books Banks wrote between 1987 and 2012, about the 'Culture', a galaxy-wide post-scarcity, libertarian, moneyless, classless, and propertyless society, where want and physical death are easily avoided if not non-existent. It is inhabited by a humanoid species as well as Artificial Intelligences of various levels of sentience. The minimal 'state' or rulemaking in this lawless society is administered by a collection of godlike advanced AIs called 'Minds,' who are sapient and superintelligent. Despite being vastly superior in intellect and power to humanoids or smaller AIs, the Minds coexist peacefully with them as advisors and managers of ships and space habitats. Coercion does not, in a practical sense, exist within the bounds of this society. The trillions of inhabitants of the Culture, whether humanoid, AI, or Mind, seem to have a seemingly idyllic existence.

There are a few difficulties with writing good science fiction. One of them is generating meaningful strife, contradiction, and conflict that make stories interesting; another is creating alien worlds that are still somewhat familiar to the reader. Hence, compared to writing about wildly hopeful worlds, it is simply easier to write about despondency and hopelessness given the world we live in. This is the reason many authors take the path of writing predictable, one-dimensional dystopias by the dozen, and why many contemporary dystopias seem not well-thought-out, if not outright copies of settled frameworks.

Conversely, to write an unironic "utopia" is rare; rarer yet is to make such stories relatable, immersive, and appealing to a wide audience. When combined with a post-60s pervasive scepticism of technology in a broad range of speculative authors, writing utopia can be downright impossible.

Banks manages to craft a bluntly hopeful and zealous society of the future in the Culture series. There is no "gotcha", there is no fooling the audience with a sudden revelation that the Culture was "grimdark" or twisted all along with some singular dark secret. The Culture is hope in all its complexity, and Banks manages to make its ridiculous scale of freedom and power look interesting and admirable.

An argument might be made that the Culture is not a utopia at all, implying that the author is not presenting an ideal paradise of virtuous beings devoid of moral complexity. Rather, the author poses some questions: what does a liberated society with no classes or exploitation, where a seeming end of history has been achieved, look like? What will humans or humanlike creatures do when they are truly free and have godlike powers? Is it boring to live in paradise? What of human will and agency when machines neither require human effort nor guidance and have in all respects left humans behind, not just in intelligence but in wisdom? What happens when this spacefaring civilisation of superbeings encounters unjust, unequal, and poor societies? Banks attempts to provide answers in the universe he crafts.

It is tempting to immediately call the world-building of this series "unrealistic", or a cop-out, drawing comparisons with other works of leftist science fiction like those by Kim Stanley Robinson or Ursula K. Le Guin, which engage with significant societal conflict in the futuristic worlds they build, class, or otherwise. To do so would be to miss the point of the Culture series, which is not an inward-looking and contemplative look at socialist ideas and their feasibility, but rather an outward-looking vision of what a victorious socialist society will act

like when it has achieved much more than post-scarcity, sincerely considers itself “good”, is filled with a zeal to “do good”, and has the technology, resources, material and moral energy to spread its way of living. The Culture is not a heterotopia. Rather it is a utopia that lives in a complex reality. In moments throughout the series, there are attempts to answer “how it all works” but they are not the focus. These usually come down to the ridiculously involved lives of Culture inhabitants who constantly educate themselves and take political decisions in their socialistic non-state. In *A Few Notes on The Culture*¹, Banks described this as “socialism within, anarchy without”. It is also interesting that a lot of authorial intent gets lost here, and people manage to ignore the overwhelming politics of this work, because “space!”, as can be seen by the strange fascination a few billionaires with rockets have for Culture spaceship names.

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The Culture does meet contradictions when its members encounter societies they consider unjust and cruel, and attempt to intervene, at times violently, to impose their own brand of “goodness”. Due to a complete lack of a state or laws of any kind, Minds routinely gallivant around the galaxy playing God and manipulating “lesser” people for mostly noble purposes. Some Culture humanoids and AIs are similarly drawn towards pioneerism and a sort of stateless imperialism. They are in turn censured by their fellow Culture members who do not wish to get into conflict. The secret police of this society, called ‘Special Circumstances’, operates as a volunteer club, with no legitimacy aside from what it gives itself and no state to oversee it. The Culture, being a society with no concept of legitimate authority

or defined frontiers, sees continuous defections and immigrations of people who like or dislike its way of life. Every serious decision is a referendum of trillions of beings with dissidents often choosing to just leave en masse. It is also not that the Culture is without history, follies, weaknesses, or a capacity for extreme amounts of violence and war, even if in self-defense. One interesting aspect of the Culture series is that despite the protagonist being a civilisation, it is but one of many in the galaxy. Over the course of the series, it is made clear that neither is the Culture considered the normative ideal in this galactic community and nor is it peerless.

Culture members, despite their godlike powers, repeatedly face various kinds and degrees of physical, mental, and moral perils when they try to shape the wider galaxy to their will. The Culture as a leaderless society faces national challenges from other better-defined and better-armed states. At times, Culture members encounter horrors much more powerful than themselves which they have no choice but to tolerate.

One thing the series and the society has, is confident inner rationality, articulated in a clear voice by its godlike Minds. The universe can be analysed by reason, morals are simply what societies choose as their central prescriptions, and a rational and materialist civilization is desirable. The average Culture inhabitant, human or AI, is deeply committed to this mechanistic view of reality. Banks in many interviews has stated that his creation reflects his own political views, which is a mix of libertarian and socialist, rational and secular.

And yet, the series is not about the witty power trip and easy hedonism of self-satisfied scientific socialists in space. Neither is it a screed. The focus remains on developing and exploring society.

It is tempting to classify the Culture series as space opera, but the stories defy narrow classification. In a manner, they set out to destroy all the sacred mores that space operas have. A civilisation of lawless socialists guided by godlike machine intelligence going around interfering in everyone’s business has to be villainous in any opera worth its salt. That opera would have plucky humans discovering their innate superiority in the setup. Such banal tropes die a rather brutal death in the first novel of the series, which is the only one I will spoil a little bit in this review.

¹ Iain M. Banks. “A Few Notes on The Culture” <http://www.vavatch.co.uk/books/banks/cultnote.htm>

The first book in the series, *Consider Phlebas*, written in 1987, plunges the reader into a galaxy-wide deadly war the Culture finds itself in —mostly due to its own meddlesome politics and ideals—where it faces an actual nation-state with almost diametrically opposite and equally sincere politics. This antagonist civilisation called the Idrians, a militarist theocracy with an equivalent technological and material base, is in many ways much more relatable and familiar to the science fiction reader. Once hostilities begin, the Idrians are committed to the eradication of the Culture's greatest abominations, that is, machines with agency and liberty in positions of power and responsibility. After all, "idolatry is worse than carnage". Not only does the Culture tolerate AIs, but it is also seemingly ruled by godlike AI, with humanoids as an afterthought; the humanoids, for some reason, are enthusiastic about this state of affairs! This conflict leads to a story that is essentially an inversion of the space opera.

Interestingly, the protagonist of the story is not an Idrian, but one solitary heroic agent who is an implacable enemy of The Culture, a sort of dogged

tragic hero trying to preserve what is holy about life, who has chosen the decent side in this war against the worst kinds of heathens. Other Idrian characters and their allies also seem like the standard tropes of military science fiction, with their conservatism and their bravado. And Banks, ruthless materialist that he is, seems to possess a very socialist hatred of destined heroes, chosen ones, driven destinies, Lisan al Gaibs, and all manners of god-emperors, real and fake². The Culture, battered and beaten at first due to this holy war it has blundered into, coldly adapts itself to learn the art of violence and warfare and uses its awesome science and technology without compunctions. Its fanatical faith in its machines and in its own goodness remains unshaken, and it wins a bloody war that sees over 800 billion corpses without even having an official nation-state.

² Lisan al Gaibs is the name of the Messiah in the *Dune* series of novels by Frank Herbert

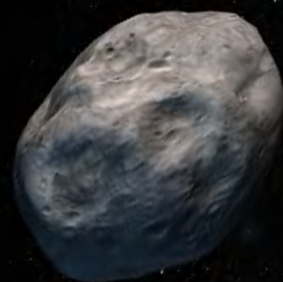
A New Planet by Konstantin Yuon



intelligence without associating that power with authority, and how, without any prodding or manipulation by their AI comrades, enthusiastically prosecute the war against enemy biologicals. This utter absence of biological essentialism went against every writing convention I had seen on fictional portrayals of AI, even friendly, powerful AI. The Culture is utterly victorious in its war, and with a similar finality, the author annihilates any scope of operatic sentimentalism.

Many readers of the Culture series are divided on the first book, which in my opinion is the truest reflection of the author's intentions, though I think he went a tad too far. The book, in its attempt to drop anvils, damages its attractiveness and its lucidity for the person who is just entering this world. This is why I would ask readers to read *The Player of Games*, the second book in the series, before they chew on the first one.

I will not go into the rest of the nine books, but with each, the issues the author explores become more interesting and alive. There is a lot that is attractive in this series, from the study of complex societal problems, thrillingly-described wars between godlike intelligences, breathtaking flights of fantasy, a genuinely refreshing imagination of technology, ships 200 kilometres in length with horrible tempers and terrible jokes as names that are each capable of replicating the entire civilisation all by themselves if need be, to many unforgettable recurring characters, both biological and AI. The Culture series offers much to the reader, but what remains most attractive and constant is the shining light of hope for a just and free society, for a world guided by reason and justice.





Artist's impression of an Orbital from
the "Culture" setting of Iain M. Banks.
Image by Hill-Giuseppe Gerbino.
(wikicommons)

THE INTERNATIONAL LEFT

Shreya Menon

AFRICA

- The [civil war in Ethiopia](#) between the Abiy Ahmed government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front continues, with 2.5 million displaced and 9 million in dire need of food assistance in North Ethiopia; read Safia Aidid on the [role of colonialism](#) in shaping Ethiopia's state institutions
- Read Naipano Lepapa on how the European Union is [dumping massive amounts of e-waste](#) in Kenya, contributing to the climate crisis and endangering Kenyan lives
- Frontline health workers in Nigeria [organised strikes in September](#) demanding hazard pay; this is one of several instances of health worker strikes in the country, and must be addressed through [long-term fiscal commitments](#) to the sector, argues Sylvester C. Chima
- Paul Rusesabagina, critic of the Paul Kagame government and recognized for his efforts in housing refugees during the Rwandan genocide, was [arrested and sentenced to 25 years in prison](#) for abetting alleged terrorist activity carried out by the opposition Rwandan Movement for Democratic Change

AMERICAS

- In Chile, Gabriel Boric, former lead organizer of the [2011 student protests](#) calling for accessible higher education, [won the presidential election](#) and defeated far-right candidate Jose Antonio Kast; Boric leads the leftist coalition Apruebo Dignidad, which brings together parties of Marxist-Leninist, democratic socialist, and libertarian socialist persuasions, and will assume office as the [youngest](#) president in Chile's history, as well as the president elected with the highest number of votes
- Camilo Enciso, a whistleblower, published [confidential vaccine supply contracts](#) between the Government of Colombia, AstraZeneca and Pfizer, suffering government rebuke and online abuse; these contracts reveal unequal power-sharing between the Global South and pharmaceuticals
- Xiomara Castro, member of LIBRE, the democratic socialist party of Honduras, won the general election by ~20 points over her right-wing rival and [will be the first woman President of Honduras](#); LIBRE's program is pro-abortion, pro-LGBTQ+ rights, and otherwise [socially progressive](#) in a region where parties that centre working-class priorities can be socially conservative
- After the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse by mercenaries, major United States media outlets have [called for an invasion into Haiti](#), even as the U.S. ambassador to Haiti [resigned over the U.S. government's inhumane deportation policy](#) towards those fleeing the recent political instability and the aftermath of an earthquake; listen to William Shokl and Pooja Bhatia [discuss the decay of Haiti's institutions](#) as a result of foreign interference, and how citizens are mobilising for the future
- The U.S. continues to witness a surge in labour strikes and union organising within the [entertainment](#) and [auto industries](#), as well as major corporations such as [Amazon](#) & [Starbucks](#). For a deeper understanding of 'Striketober', listen to [this interview](#) with labour journalists Alex Press and Jonah Furman and IATSE member Victor P. Bouzi

AUSTRALASIA

- Pacific Island nations warned of the [war-like threat](#) of climate change at COP26, to little avail; read Sam Knights on the [scape-goating of the world's poorest nations](#) by Europe and North America at COP26, various climate scientists on the [dangerous illusion of 'net zero'](#), and Jess Shankleman and Akshat Rathi on why carbon offsets are [Wall Street's favourite climate solution](#)
- The U.S. and U.K. are [seeking to arm Australia](#) with nuclear-powered submarines, which critics say may indirectly spur the creation of nuclear weapons, even as [nuclear-related sanctions against Iran](#) continue; read the socialist cases [for](#) and [against](#) nuclear energy
- The Australian military is yet to provide redress to families of ~40 Afghanistani [victims of war crimes](#); listen to David McBride, former military lawyer and whistleblower, [discuss the reality of Australia's involvement in the war](#) and the government prosecution he faces for revealing it, with Kevin Gosztola

ASIA

- Islamist mobs [targeted the house and temples](#) of Hindu minorities in Bangladesh over the Durga Puja weekend, resulting in [reprisal riots against Muslim minorities](#) in the Indian state of Tripura where state police were allegedly complicit in not obstructing rioters
- In India, [800 families were evicted](#) in the Assam government's latest drive against illegal settlements; read Bidyut Sagar Boruah, Anshuman Gogoi, Gaurav Rajkhowa & Ankur Tamuli Phukan [explain the flawed land policies](#) behind the evictions
- Also in India, the government repealed a set of agriculture reforms or 'farm laws' that would've shifted power away from farmers towards big agribusinesses; these laws were the subject of '[the world's largest protests](#)' from September 2020 until their repeal, where 200,000 to 500,000 members of farmers' unions formed blockades outside Delhi, drove tractors into the capital, and demonstrated in states such as Haryana, Karnataka, Kerala, Odisha, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh; 600 died in clashes with police. The protests will [continue until demands](#) on minimum support prices and compensation to families of dead protestors are not met. Read P. Sainath on how Indian farmers succeeded [despite media efforts](#) to vilify and downplay the protests
- Recently released documents from Britain's National Archives show how [spies from the United Kingdom incited anti-communist massacres](#) against nearly 500,000 Indonesians in the 1960s; read Vincent Bevins on how these massacres led to the ouster of democratically-elected anticolonial revolutionary Sukarno, and the institution of a brutal, corrupt, and 30-year-long dictatorship led by Indonesian army officer Suharto, whose regime was [enthusiastically supported](#) by the U.S. and U.K.
- With the Abraham Accords, [U.A.E. has normalised trade with Israel](#); this normalisation is gaining traction as other Middle Eastern countries begin to [trade energy](#) and [conduct military exercises](#) with Israel; read Ali Abunimah and Tamara Nassar on how [Jordanian citizens are protesting](#) their government's betrayal of the Palestinian cause

EUROPE

- Various nurses' unions across the world, with a combined membership of over 2 million nurses, [filed a formal U.N. complaint](#) against the European Union, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Norway, and Singapore for blocking patent waivers
- In Denmark, the [Red-Green Alliance beat out the incumbent](#) centre-left Social Democrats for the highest vote share for the first time; read Nathan Akehurst on how the Red-Green Alliance [mobilised voters](#) to demand bold action on rent and the climate crisis

Technosolutionism and its discontents

The decision-making of who will design tech, who will fund it, and what it will be used for, is a contestable terrain, and anything contestable has hope

By Asmita B., Namgyal Khonoma, and Aarushi M.

“It is not acceptable to us that the officials will be able to keep track of daily movement and whereabouts of women, and they will have remote access to their phones,” says Surekha, general secretary of Asha Workers Union, Haryana. Being subject to surveillance software is not an isolated instance for government workers.¹ The Indian state increasingly meets demands for social justice and equity with ‘tech solutions.’ How did we get here? And what does ‘here’ look like?

ASHA workers do the last mile work of delivering public healthcare in rural India. These women facilitate immunisation, encourage birth at hospitals, raise awareness about sanitation, and have become frontline workers in combating COVID-19 in their communities. Workers have demanded better access to sanitation equipment and just remuneration. The state response has been to push surveillance for ‘productivity’ as workers’ organising capabilities weakened under the pandemic. ASHA workers have gone on strike, as they are being required to use invasive apps that monitor their phone usage and register their location², making many vulnerable to targeted violence from male bosses.

The Indian state increasingly meets demands for social justice and equity with ‘tech solutions.’ How did we get here? And what does ‘here’ look like?

SOLUTIONISM AS THE FUTURE

More than 1600 teachers died within weeks of being forced to monitor and perform election polling duties in Uttar Pradesh. Close to a thousand doctors and nurses have died due to inadequate healthcare facilities during Covid within hospitals. Hundreds of ASHA workers got infected and died because of no appropriate protective equipment. The underfunding of healthcare or educational infrastructure while using workers in these sectors as “heroes”, but who are disposable on the frontlines are conditions that existed before the pandemic and have only been exacerbated.

In 1968, the National Education Policy recommended that expenditure on education be at least 6% of GDP. The actual GDP expenditure has hovered around 3% for the last decade. In the most recent budget plan, the total education budget was further slashed to the lowest in three years.³ Healthcare fares similarly. A quick look at global figures for healthcare spending as a proportion of GDP tells us that the average ranges from 8-16%. Our neighbouring countries, Pakistan and Bangladesh, spend 3%. India currently spends 1.29% of its GDP on healthcare, against the recommended 8%. This share was further slashed by 34% in the recent budget.⁴ It is little surprise that Budget 2021 was met with disdain by educationists and healthcare workers.

Meanwhile, the budget was welcomed by tech industry professionals. The outlay for the Digital

1 ‘How Healthcare Workers in India Fought a Surveillance Regime and Won’, Coda Story (blog), 12 August 2021, <https://www.codastory.com/authoritarian-tech/indian-health-workers/>.

2 ‘Mobile App Rule a Violation of Right to Privacy: Asha Workers | Gurgaon News - Times of India’, accessed 13 December 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/gurgaon/mobile-app-rule-a-violation-of-right-to-privacy-asha-workers/articleshow/83859215.cms>.

3 ‘School Education Takes Biggest Hit: Govt Cuts Proposed Education Spending by Rs 6,000 Cr’, The Indian Express (blog), 2 February 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/school-education-govt-cuts-proposed-education-spending-budget7170773/>.

4 Samrat Sharma New Delhi February 2, 2021. UPDATED: February 3, and 2021 01:07 Ist, ‘Budget 2021 Cuts Spending in Health Research, but Extends Lion’s Share to ICMR’, India Today, accessed 13 December 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/diu/story/budget-2021-cuts-spending-in-health-research-but-extends-lion-s-share-to-icmr-1765269-2021-02-02>.

India Programme has increased by 23% in 2020 as the pandemic began. The government's IT spending is expected to grow by 9.4% year on year according to the latest forecasts.⁵ Startups in the technology sector raised more venture capital funding in the first half of 2021 than the entirety of 2020 — around USD 12.1 billion. A substantial part of research and development funding, INR 70 billion, has been reserved for NITI Aayog's Artificial Intelligence program. All this is only a snapshot of the massive market of technology-based goods and services funded by state and venture capital alike.

Technology is increasingly sold as customised, individualised consumer products — think Alexa — but more importantly, as human-error-free solutions for workplaces and businesses. A teacher could make wrong and biased assessments, but an AI-enabled technology is perceived as inherently carrying a mechanical certainty. The belief is that the absence of human involvement in decision making and the social and political baggage of inequity that comes along with such involvement, makes these technologies liberatory and value-neutral.

In its letter last year to its shareholders, Amazon claimed that technology was central to “saving time in a busy 21st century”. McKinsey claimed that Artificial Intelligence (AI) has the “potential to help tackle several societal moonshot challenges” provided we “de-bias our machine-human interface” towards equitable solutions.^{6,7} Aadhar architect Nilekani suggests that India needs to “apply AI across the board to India's most challenging issues across areas like healthcare and education.”⁸ Both the premise of certainty and the implied solution to societal problems needs critical examination.

The premise of certainty is an assumption that

technology such as AI is fully automated, which is false. The reality is that machine learning required for AI is dependent on multiple datasets that are marked, tagged, and coded by millions of human workers. For instance, recognising images for an “AI-powered” teaching module requires this data to be organised amongst a vast pool of images and sorted for relevant data, rejecting irrelevant data including derogatory, violent images. These ‘ghost workers’ get paid as low as INR 15 per task under precarious and exploitative conditions, many times leading to grave mental health problems and sometimes, even death.⁹ But the expansion of a tool like AI in a space like education has persisted. India's Ed-tech sector has seen an investment of USD 2.1 billion in 2020 compared to USD 1.7 billion in the previous decade. According to a recent report, more than 4,500 startups are operating in the EdTech space in India currently, an industry that is projected to grow to USD 30 billion in the next 10 years from the current market size of around USD 800 million.¹⁰

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In the times of a decaying welfare state and public funding for essential services, venture capital benefits from portraying technology not just as a tool but as an inevitable solution. The question, then, is not how useful Virtual Reality devices will be to a teacher in a high school in urban Delhi, or how to make effective systems for ASHA workers distributing masks in Bihar. Rather, it is to create markets for products to be sold for profit and create

5 Abhijit Ahaskar, ‘Govt's IT Spend Likely to Grow 9.4% in 2021: Gartner’, *mint*, 23 February 2021, <https://www.livemint.com/industry/infotech/indian-government-s-it-spending-to-grow-9-4-in-2021-says-report-11614078301115.html>.

6 ‘AI, Automation, and the Future of Work: Ten Things to Solve for (Tech4Good) | McKinsey’, accessed 13 December 2021, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/ai-automation-and-the-future-of-work-ten-things-to-solve-for>.

7 ‘A Conversation on Artificial Intelligence and Gender Bias | McKinsey’, accessed 13 December 2021, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/asia-pacific/a-conversation-on-artificial-intelligence-and-gender-bias>.

8 ‘India Well-Placed to Apply AI to Solve Challenges, Tap into Opportunities: Nilekani’, *The Hindu*, 28 May 2021, sec. Technology, <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/technology/india-well-placed-to-apply-ai-to-solve-challenges-tap-into-opportunities-nilekani/article34667619.ece>.

9 Angela Chen, ‘How Silicon Valley's Successes Are Fueled by an Underclass of “Ghost Workers”’, *The Verge*, 13 May 2019, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/5/13/18563284/mary-gray-ghost-work-microwork-labor-silicon-valley-automation-employment-interview>.

10 ‘Education Industry: How Investing in Edtech Startups Can Combine Profit with Purpose - The Economic Times’, accessed 13 December 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/markets/stocks/news/how-investing-in-edtech-startups-can-combine-profit-with-purpose/articleshow/83892700.cms>.

a narrative of the inevitability of these solutions, especially amongst sectors that are in crisis due to underfunding by public spending.

In his book “To Save Everything, Click Here,” Evgeny Morozov, a technology writer critiques what he calls “solutionism” – the idea that given the right code, algorithms, robots, and technology can solve all of humankind’s problems, effectively making life “frictionless” and trouble-free.¹¹ Morozov argues that this drive to eradicate imperfection and make everything “efficient” shuts down other avenues of progress and leads ultimately to an algorithm-driven world where Silicon Valley, rather than elected governments, determines the shape of the future. The case of the ASHA workers illustrates this. The tracking app did not solve their problems. They protested against it because the government had not consulted them despite their highly contextual and specialised work, but their protests went unheard. Instead, decisions were made by private companies, and technology became a way of surveilling women’s bodies.

The premise of certainty is an assumption that technology such as AI is fully automated, which is false. The reality is that machine learning required for AI is dependent on multiple datasets that are marked, tagged, and coded by millions of human workers.

A lot of the invasive uses of tech we see today result from broadening the use cases of what was originally created for the military and other niche areas. Among the first applications of Facial Recognition Technology (FRT) was the United States government hunting illicit activities in Panama and identifying dead bodies in military operations, including Osama Bin Laden’s. The usage of these

technologies for cases and error tolerances they were not designed for, i.e., function creep, extended to the public sectors to provide administrative solutions. In Oct 2020, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) admitted using FRT to provide Grade 10 and Grade 12 students access to digital documents like mark sheets, pass certificates, etc. Responding to criticism, they claimed that they were using a “facial matching system” instead, and hence no legal barriers applied to them. This claim is technically correct. No law exists that can prevent data gathering for potentially harmful AI use cases. As expected, there is no clarity of who will keep the data, who will get to use it, how and for how long. The policy to address these questions doesn’t exist. The growth of these technologies is outpacing our awareness of their impacts.

The computer software and hardware sector in India attracted cumulative foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows worth USD 69.29 billion between April 2000 and September 2020, which includes manufacturing and services for export as well as for local consumption.¹² Large amounts of this investment were directed to creating AI technologies in health such as telemedicine, insurance, dynamic pricing, robotic surgeries; in education, such as Audio Reality/Virtual Reality (AR/VR), automated teaching, automatic assessments, FRT for documentation; and in planning and governance, such as surveillance drones and CCTVs, and public access digital platforms.

There is a lack of empirical proof of validity for most of these products. The masses are made into guinea pigs. This reflects the desire to turn India into an AI garage of sorts. A digital document that a password can simply secure (as in the case of CBSE above), as is commonly done for multiple other digital services, used FRT instead. Besides being inaccurate, such technologies are non-deterministic. While CBSE expenditure on this initiative is not public, one can look to a similar experiment in the United States. The Lockport School District in Western New York spent almost USD 4 million to acquire a facial recognition system, using state money allocated for schools to upgrade or improve

11 ‘Evgeny Morozov: “We Are Abandoning All the Checks and Balances” | Technology | The Guardian’, accessed 13 December 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/mar/09/evgeny-morozov-technology-solutionism-interview>.

12 ‘IT & BPM Industry in India: Market Size, Opportunities, Growth, Report | IBEF’, accessed 13 December 2021, <https://www.ibef.org/industry/information-technology-india.aspx>.

their infrastructure and technology.¹³ In India, a comparative amount funded an entire year (2018-19) of local and international teacher training programs in Delhi government schools for more than 100,000 teachers.¹⁴

Concerns and critiques about such practices have been sounded repeatedly from practitioners in education and technology setups. Under a capitalist framework, technological investments are rapid, seek profit for a few, and usually come before policies are framed, and context can be understood. Technology-based solutions claim to provide “customised” solutions. But these speculative investments come at the cost of vital state-based structural support.

HEALTH

One of Google’s lesser-known new frontiers is healthcare. As online advertising (its chief revenue model) starts to peak, it has secured a contract to provide AI services to the UK’s state-run National Health Service. These services include Covid-19 handling. In fact, all the Big Four global technology firms (Microsoft, Amazon, and Apple being the other three) have significant plans in healthcare technology (HealthTech). In India, Reliance Industries is looking to onboard 100,000 doctors for video consultation, for its foray into telemedicine.¹⁵ The allure for Big Capital is obvious: 10% of the world’s GDP is spent on health — it’s one of the most recession-proof industries, and billions now have the Internet infrastructure good enough to support telemedicine.

The pandemic has proven that some health tech can indeed be useful, at least for those with means. Teleconsultations have grown 38 times since before the pandemic.¹⁶ Presumably, enough of them achieve

decent outcomes.

As a nation, we seemed to have concluded that these modest gains in telemedicine imply that the answer to everything is HealthTech — especially AI. Intel Corporation, firmly aware of which side its bread is buttered, has declared that “AI will lead to faster delivery of health services, cut costs and produce an accurate patient diagnosis.”¹⁷ VC-funded start-ups are hyping AI as “a necessity, not a luxury”.¹⁸ The Prime Minister, true to form, breathlessly called for more healthcare AI to be developed.¹⁹

As a nation, we seemed to have concluded that these modest gains in telemedicine imply that the answer to everything is HealthTech — especially AI.

But is AI really ready, or is it a convenient time for private Capital to talk it up? Experts are somewhat pessimistic. As the Harvard Gazette pointed out: “Poorly designed systems can misdiagnose. AI designed to both heal and make a buck might increase — rather than cut — costs, and programs that learn as they go can produce a raft of unintended consequences once they start interacting with unpredictable humans.”²⁰ There is also the issue of algorithmic bias — training sets are almost guaranteed to not include data about most Indians because their medical records aren’t available digitally.

Even in the few cases where AI might be ready, privacy is being played with fast and loose. Indian corporations are certain to follow the lead of Google,

13 ‘Facial Recognition Cameras Do Not Belong in Schools’, New York Civil Liberties Union, 18 June 2018, <https://www.nyclu.org/en/news/facial-recognition-cameras-do-not-belong-schools>.

14 <https://ddc.delhi.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Data-Compendium-January-2020.pdf>

15 www.ETHealthworld.com, ‘RIL’s Nowfloats Forays into Tele-Medicine, Looks to on-Board 1 Lakh Doctors - ET HealthWorld’, ETHealthworld.com, accessed 13 December 2021, <https://health.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/health-it/rils-nowfloats-forays-into-tele-medicine-looks-to-on-board-1-lakh-doctors/75856638>.

16 ‘Telehealth: A Post-COVID-19 Reality? | McKinsey’, accessed 13 December 2021, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/healthcare-systems-and-services/our-insights/telehealth-a-quarter-trillion-dollar-post-covid-19-reality>.

17 Neetu Chandra Sharma, “AI Will Lead to Faster Delivery of Health Services, Cut Costs”, mint, 8 February 2021, <https://www.livemint.com/science/health/ai-to-help-with-accurate-diagnosis-in-healthcare-intel-india-s-nivvuti-rai-11612776919909.html>.

18 www.ETHealthworld.com, ‘Is AI – a Magic Bullet to Combat COVID-19? - ET HealthWorld’, ETHealthworld.com, accessed 13 December 2021, <https://health.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/health-it/is-ai-a-magic-bullet-to-combat-covid-19/83626648>.

19 ‘PM Modi Calls for Use of AI in Health, Farm Sectors’, Hindustan Times, 6 October 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/pm-modi-calls-for-use-of-ai-in-health-farm-sectors/story-ITU6WcmQCWo7MX7y3XFCZN.html>.

20 Alvin Powell, ‘Risks and Benefits of an AI Revolution in Medicine’, Harvard Gazette (blog), 11 November 2020, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/11/risks-and-benefits-of-an-ai-revolution-in-medicine/>.

which, away from the public gaze, has secured bulk access to UK patient data.²¹ This might explain the unseemly haste to give everyone a National Health ID through CoWin.

Are HealthTech and AI the lowest-hanging fruits here? Or, are they being prematurely deployed at the behest of corporations, in what is already among the most corporate-driven of healthcare systems?

Anyway, all this talk of HealthTech could lead an unaware observer to think that India has solved all its basic problems, and is well on its way to achieving universal healthcare. Yet, ours is a nation in which thousands of children die every day for lack of proven malaria and typhoid interventions, which cost as little as INR 100. What use might AI be there? Most rural parts of the country do not have even functioning Public Health Centres. Even assuming teleconsultation is viable, what's the point if no medicines or testing infrastructure or nursing staff are locally available?

SCHOOL EDUCATION

The poster child for EdTech in India is Byju's. Founded just ten years ago to help older students prepare for competitive exams, it has now expanded to serving children as young as 6. Valued at an astonishing USD 16.5 billion, it has all the trappings of a major consumer brand: sponsorship of cricket teams, ads featuring Shah Rukh Khan, and a content tie-up with Disney. The world's biggest tech firms may be less visible in EdTech, but they have big ambitions. Amazon Academy was launched earlier in the year, Facebook and Google have each partnered with CBSE, and the inevitable Reliance Industries' EdTech arm is already valued at USD 3.5 billion, although we don't yet know the full extent of

its scope. EdTech is also one of the hottest areas for global venture capital — USD 16 billion was invested in 2020, a sizable chunk of it in Indian companies.²²

EdTech has proven useful to some extent for keeping the connection between (mostly) private schools and students alive during the pandemic. Those with access to decent Internet infrastructure and parental attention, have been able to continue learning. Class management applications like Google Classroom have also made routine administration easier. On the other hand, children from rural and urban poor households have been “locked out” as only one in four children in India has access to digital devices and the internet.²³ In remote areas, children take dangerous treks through forests and mountains to simply access the internet or their teachers. Obviously, the situation is worse for girls, whose enrolment rates were already low pre-pandemic. The digital divide harshly impacts these students with many of them suffering not just low academic achievement but mental and emotional stress and some even taking their own lives due to this stressful situation.

The other, more long-term danger is that these modest, localised benefits will be extrapolated as the cure of India's many education issues. Why have skilled, motivated educators, when AI can offer “game-based assessments” and “personalised learning” to everyone? Already a Bangalore school has tried replacing teachers with robots.²⁴

The issue with all these grand ideas and initiatives is that there is little conclusive evidence they work. A 2019 MIT Technology Review that studied millions of high schoolers in the 36 OECD countries found, rather inconveniently, that those who used computers heavily at school do “worse in most learning outcomes, even after accounting for social

21 'Google Has Used Contract Swaps to Get Bulk Access Terms to NHS Patient Data | TechCrunch', accessed 13 December 2021, <https://techcrunch.com/2019/10/22/google-has-used-contract-swaps-to-get-bulk-access-terms-to-nhs-patient-data/>.

22 Prachi Verma, 'Indian Edtech Players Attract \$2.22 Billion Investments in 2020', The Economic Times, 17 December 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/startups/indian-edtech-players-attract-2-22-billion-investments-in-2020/articleshow/79779106.cms>.

23 “‘Lost Generation’ Fears as COVID Locks out India's Poor Students”, accessed 13 December 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/5/children-covid-india-poor-students-digital-divide>.

24 'Robots Turn Teachers in Bengaluru School, Thanks to AI', mint, 1 September 2019, <https://www.livemint.com/technology/tech-news/robots-turn-teachers-in-bengaluru-school-thanks-to-ai-1567336339210.html>.

background.”²⁵ Perhaps this explains why Byju’s has had to employ hyper-aggressive sales tactics on parents.²⁶

More fundamental is the fact that learning is meant to be integrated and organic. However, EdTech leads to the fragmentation and commodification of the educational process — alienating both children and teachers. Explaining why 80% of teachers have found it hard to make an emotional connection with children during the pandemic, Anurag Behar, Vice-Chancellor at Azim Premji University said, “Online education is ineffective because of the basic character of education, and not merely because of lack of access to online resources, especially for school-age children.”²⁷

A 2019 MIT Technology Review that studied millions of high schoolers in the 36 OECD countries found, rather inconveniently, that those who used computers heavily at school do “worse in most learning outcomes, even after accounting for social background.”

EdTech could also create structural issues. As companies have amped up salaries, many capable teachers are likely to leave the traditional school system, leaving it even poorer than before, potentially kickstarting a vicious cycle. And the teachers that do end up in EdTech may become effective users of VC-built products, not educators in the full sense. More importantly, the way EdTech is invading schools, teacher training, and schooling

infrastructure is undemocratic. Teachers, students, and even school administration do not have a say. It also takes attention away from the public funding that is urgently needed in schooling systems and the money for which exists or at least can be better managed. For instance, National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reduces the emphasis on in-person teacher training and instead rolls out digital platforms like DIKSHA and SWAYAM. One can foresee, further lack of teacher collectivity as they train “from home” and deterioration of both, the state and school stakeholders from actual outcomes of training and simply focusing on a checkmark for a training module as the only goal of training. Overall, technosolutionism in education is taking precedence to solving problems that require democratic engagement and state spending.

IN GOVERNANCE

Justice is denied to millions of Indians, predominantly those from Dalit, Adivasi, and marginalised communities. Resource and infrastructural constraints are primarily why 70% of our jailed population are undertrials and 30% of cases remain pending over a year.²⁸ Now, there is a push to turn to AI to help justices prioritise which cases to listen to, choose which judges to assign, and eventually, offer advice on verdicts; like the COMPAS risk assessment tool for offenders deployed in the U.S. India launched the AI-driven SUPACE research portal developed by ManCorp innovation labs to aid judges that will read case files, extract relevant information, draft case documents and manage apportioning. Early 2020 saw USD 1.4 billion raised by startups in the justice sector.²⁹ Major players include IBM, which offers both consumer and business-facing tools for legal advice.

These AI systems perpetuate bias. Research shows that decision-makers regularly rate automated recommendations more positively than neutral

25 ‘How Classroom Technology Is Holding Students Back | MIT Technology Review’, accessed 13 December 2021, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2019/12/19/131155/classroom-technology-holding-students-back-edtech-kids-education/>.

26 drmalpani, ‘Why LinkedIn Kicked Me out Because of My Byju’s Posts’, Musings of an Indian Angel Investor (blog), 24 July 2020, <http://indianangel.in/why-linkedin-kicked-me-out-because-of-my-byjus-posts/12977/>.

27 ‘Not Going Digital: Teachers, Parents Find Online Education Inadequate & Ineffective’, The Economic Times, 17 November 2020, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/not-going-digital-teachers-parents-find-online-education-inadequate-ineffective/articleshow/79254641.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.

28 Vignesh Radhakrishnan and Sumant Sen, ‘Data | 70% Prisoners in India Are Undertrials’, The Hindu, 11 September 2020, sec. Data, <https://www.thehindu.com/data/data-70-prisoners-in-india-are-undertrials/article32569643.ece>.

29 Yoonji Han, ‘These Are the 10 Hottest Legal Tech Startups That Have Raised a Combined \$1.4 Billion in VC Funding from Investors like Bessemer Venture Partners and Andreessen Horowitz’, Business Insider, accessed 13 December 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/top-10-legal-tech-startups-that-raised-most-vc-funding-2020-8>.

despite being aware that such recommendations may be inaccurate, incomplete, or even wrong.³⁰ While tools that help with transcription and translation are certainly capable of being deployed positively, AI reasoning tools have been found to perpetuate the biases of the datasets and designers that made them. COMPAS noted above, was found to inaccurately mark black offenders as riskier for recidivism twice as often than white ones. The nature of autonomous systems is to be mechanistic, and this often can perpetuate harm simply by removing human agency from the process. Algorithms look for outliers, and the state chooses then to criminalise marginalised groups. Delhi Police deployed facial recognition tools to identify habitual protestors — a system it had originally acquired to track missing children from startup Innefu Labs.³¹

These AI systems are also developed with little public input — and are often used against the public. During Coronavirus, the Aarogya Setu system had become a behemoth. It surveilled citizens for contact tracing and despite the lack of smartphone penetration it functions both as a “passport” by institutions to access public infrastructure and is currently the way to get vaccinated. Such apps are contracted out by states to the private sector with little transparency and expensive costs; the scandal in the UK on the failure of its contact tracing app is no different from the case in India. We have little explanation for who and what will be done with our data; the open sourcing of Aarogya Setu’s code is a myth and we are unsure of its effectiveness in protecting people.³² US Startup Skylark Labs tested the use of drones to identify the gathering of crowds to enforce social distancing rules in Punjab and Bangalore, a tool easily repurposed for preventing public protest.

We cannot expect ethics from entities with a vested interest in further concentration of power and wealth, the nexus of state and capital. Take Singapore, which has expanded the use of data

from its contact tracing infrastructure in criminal investigations, despite early reassurances to the contrary.³³ It is vital thus that the running of the state and the crafting of its policy not be surrendered to the undemocratic forces of market and technology companies.

We have little explanation for who and what will be done with our data; the open sourcing of Aarogya Setu’s code is a myth and we are unsure of its effectiveness in protecting people

CONCLUSION

Amidst the recent carnage of the pandemic, as bodies piled up and people relied on mutual aid to pay bills, we saw a proliferation in venture capital towards technology-based companies. The societal problems which their solutions are made to address are often not caused by the lack of technology, but rather deeply structural factors one cannot band-aid over. An unthinking attempt at “solutions”, technological, legal, or otherwise without addressing the political-economic root cause can often cause more harm than good.

Civil society discourse is often saturated with the uncritical push to add technology to every sector like it is fairy dust at the cost of solutions that we know work. This is often because in the name of technology, there is a blind trust in existing social priors, and hence the solution must be more of the same but faster with the use of tech. Funds are cut and the state withdraws from its responsibilities due to the illusion that a technological arc, shaped by profit-making, can somehow solve social problems. There has to be a recognition that this is a framework pushed by many who benefit monetarily from the expansion of a particular kind of technology — which has never been devoid of politics in how it is designed or deployed. These technologies claim to provide us a “no-touch future”,

30 Aleš Završnik, ‘Criminal Justice, Artificial Intelligence Systems, and Human Rights’, ERA Forum 20, no. 4 (1 March 2020): 567–83, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12027-020-00602-0>.

31 ‘Delhi Police Is Now Using Facial Recognition Software to Screen “Habitual Protestors”’, The Wire, accessed 13 December 2021, <https://thewire.in/government/delhi-police-is-now-using-facial-recognition-software-to-screen-habitual-protestors>.

32 ‘Aarogya Setu Needs to Become Truly Open-Source at the Earliest.’, Internet Freedom Foundation, 19 August 2020, <https://internetfreedom.in/aarogya-setu-should-be-open-source-now/>.

33 ‘Singapore Reveals Covid Privacy Data Available to Police’, BBC News, 5 January 2021, sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55541001>.

simplify managerial tasks, save manpower and make spatial distance irrelevant. These advances were framed as increasingly relevant narratives during Covid-19 times, where distance and disconnect had heightened. But as demonstrated through extensive case studies of the health, education, and governance spaces, it is clear that these claims are utopian at best, under the market imperatives of designing and selling these technologies for a profit.

This does not mean that there is no use or space for technology to solve societal problems, quite the contrary. But it cannot be policy and politics blind. As we saw in the pandemic, the global lack of vaccines was not due to a technological or capacity gap but bad policymaking on the part of vaccine-producing countries attempting to hoard vaccines. Similarly, there is a liberatory scope for AI as a family of technologies if the design and the productive output is governed by democratic input. Instead of surveilling citizens and modifying the behaviour of workers and teachers, AI can be used to create more convenient workplaces. Telemedicine and AI in education could be democratised and used to expand capacity but should not be used as excuses to slash funding in the health and education sector.

The decision-making of who will design tech, who will fund it, and what it will be used for, is a contestable terrain, and anything contestable has hope. We have seen not just the common masses but technological workers all over the world rally against oppressive uses of technology, whether it be Google engineers successfully blocking the MAVEN project or Uber drivers and other platform workers unionising by using the tools they are alienated by.

This contestation must not be diluted in the name of a pandemic or any other emergency which are periods when bad policy is bulldozed through. If the arc of technology is concentrated amongst a few companies and the state, it is a recipe for disaster. If on the other hand this policymaking is directed via a democratic, transparent, and participatory process which does not surrender public welfare to the companies, technological development could be accountable and make meaningful change.

Hope As Inheritance

Passing down defeated existences, from Eden to the present.

Madhubrata

What does it mean to perpetuate human existence in a brutal world — one where humanity both creates and is intimately affected by this brutality? Our contemporary moment sees a significant amount of debate about the ethicality of reproduction. While such debates often centre on ecological questions, its subject is really about the possibility of human life itself. Can human existence engage with its own environment in a way that does not end up annihilating the very condition of its existence?

Ecological questions are intimately connected to political ones. But to contemplate the political situation (particularly in a country so deeply steeped in fascism as today's India) brings in a fresh set of questions. Does a (possibly) irreversibly broken world deserve to be passed down? Since the manner in which these questions interrogate the human condition is tied to both its genesis and its telos, I will start with genesis.

“All that I eat or drink, or shall beget,
Is propagated curse.”

(Paradise Lost, Book 10)

Adam and Eve seated on hillside in Garden of Eden, with Satan in darkness behind a tree watching them.

Artist: John Martin, 1825.

Image credit: Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts



In John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Eve confronts the absurdity of perpetuating the human race after the incurring of original sin. An awareness of the accursed nature of humanity must have weighed heavily upon John Milton's mind, writing as he was after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, which is also known as the Restoration period. In the years of the Interregnum, Milton had served Richard Cromwell's regime. Among other things, he had written pamphlets in the service of liberty till he lost his eyesight. As expressed in Sonnet 16, Cromwell signified for Milton the hope of liberty — specifically, the liberty of conscience. Milton scholars are still divided about what his attitudes towards Cromwell were by the time the Interregnum fell. What we do know for sure is that the Restoration put Milton in danger. He was imprisoned and only spared being executed through the intercession of his friend and fellow poet, Andrew Marvell.

Setting out to narrate human history at such a time, he would relate the story of a universal, inherited human loss. It is the perpetuation of human life that allows human loss itself to continue — passed down from one generation to the other as the legacy of the species. The relationship between life and loss, however, is a potentially antagonistic one.

To see this life as inherently, irrevocably good is to vest it with the power to triumph over loss.

To see this life as inherently, irrevocably good is to vest it with the power to triumph over loss. Conversely, the crushing nature of the loss threatens to paint life itself as undesirable. Eve's anti-natalism is received by Adam as an expression of her desire for death. The Edenic curse that was put on mankind after the Fall of man is the condition for reproduction. It is also one that entails disproportionate pain on the part of the woman. Eve's primary anxiety, however, is what the state of defeat — the Fall — means for the very ontological status of the human being.

Adam counters Eve's rationale with an appeal to divine will, but also one to hope. By this account, human existence owes itself to the hope that allows



Artist not known, Illustration to Book 10 of *'Paradise Lost'*, John Milton (1688), engraving by Michael Burghers, 1695 edition, dimensions not known, The British Library, London. Wikimedia Commons.

Adam and Eve to bring forth new life, just as human corruption owes itself to their transgression.

While debates about the ethicality of natalism often hinge upon our status as potential agents of reproduction, an inquiry into the human condition also necessitates us to locate ourselves as progeny. Questions about hope and despair thus lie at the root of our own existence. The seeming absurdity of this existence is by no means a recent concern.

In Samaresh Majumdar's *Kaalbela*, Animesh is a defeated revolutionary much like Milton himself. He is imprisoned for his activities as a Naxalite rebel, and also crippled for life. Torture leaves a permanent

mark upon him, transforming him forever. Like the blind Milton, he incurs disability at the service of a higher ideal. Defeat makes him retreat — from the public to the private. It is ultimately his despair, rather than physical impairment alone, that consolidates his experience of defeat.

Finding himself before the son who was born while he was in prison, he sees in this child a glimpse of his past self. Yet by virtue of being his son, this child is also the future. Conceived and birthed outside of the marital bond, the child signals an alternate possibility. The terrible price that living out this possibility exerts is a “fallen” state-social ostracism and economic hardship. The next novel, *Kalpurush*, ends with this son behind bars. The inherited familial tradition of struggle brings him there. Operating outside the legally and socially sanctioned model of what a family entails, the struggle that is passed down from father to son is an inheritance passed down from one human being to another. What seems to be defeat here, however, might be read as a perverse vindication of hope — momentary or individual defeat is necessarily encountered in the pursuit of a better world. Hope is not born through the triumph of the individual, but through the ability to work towards a better future. Defeat is, in a way, part of the work of hope.

The archetype of the defeated revolutionary in Milton’s epic is Satan. Satan’s defeat shows us how despair is transmittable. Yet, despair can be moulded into hope — it has a future beyond itself. The teleological end is a concern for the revolutionary, just as it is to religion. In *Reason, Faith and Revolution*, Terry Eagleton writes that both the Marxist and the theistic consciousness arise from a common dissatisfaction at the present state of things. Both involve looking at what things could be. To contemplate this disparity is a necessary but not a sufficient step to working towards its abolition. As both secular and theological liberationists know, such work is difficult. It exacts a heavy price.

Lapsarian existence, the kind which the progeny of Adam and Eve find themselves inhabiting, is also inseparable from work. The need to live by the sweat of one’s brow is part of the lapsarian curse itself. For John Milton, in his revolutionary years, this labour was both intellectual and political. Periods of defeat, such as the time of Milton’s writing his epic, risk making this labour look redundant. Hope,

in such a context, does not correspond easily to rationality. In the theological milieu within which Milton writes, reason is important but the human faculty of reasoning is constrained and corrupted. What reason grasps as irredeemable and absurd is thus not necessarily so. Hope stems out of a field of knowledge that has not yet been grasped by the human mind. Yet, it is this hope that is inseparable, and absolutely necessary, for redemption. When hope seems a space where reason and faith are brought at odds with each other, it is because of what the human mind does not yet know.

In the liberation theological tradition, hope is tied up not only with knowledge but with action. Hope demands work in the service of the oppressed, and against the forces of oppression. In *A Theology of Liberation*, Gustavo Gutierrez sees hope as dynamic. Its dynamicity extends to its role as a propelling force within history. When hope is generated out of historicity, it informs our perspective of our present moment, of our lived past. This view of hope is also potentially transformative to how we locate our individual existence. The work of hope is paradoxical work. In hope, the present and the future are always in dialogue with each other. It involves confronting within our present all that makes hope seem impossible. The work of hope is not one that can be achieved in an individual capacity alone. Rather, the communitarian effort demanded by hope forces us to think of achievement itself in different terms. Hope is a collaboratively authored work that is always in progress.

While we often encounter this difficulty in an individual capacity, but the work to overcome it takes us beyond ourselves. The quest for hope begins with our need to imagine a beyond, a world of alternate possibility. To conceive of this beyond is to get started with the work of hope.

A still from Mrinal Sen's film 'Calcutta 71' that captures life in the city during the time of the Naxal uprising.





Under the Apple Tree
Edvard Munch (1919)
oil on canvas
Munch Museum , wikicommons

Grove

Nishkala Sekhar

I sat on the porch sipping my tea, feeling dark and dreary. Not even the lake could distract me.

Maleda Lake, with tiny waves texturing its surface, sparkled in the morning light. It formed the centre of our commune. It was my favourite thing to gaze at from the porch. Or had been, until four days ago. Until I received the envelope with the phoenix stamp.

It had been a typical morning. I woke up and walked the 6 kilometres of the lake perimeter. Then I made some tea. Attended school. Reported for my shift at the community kitchen and returned home with our dinner. A dinner that went to waste.

After the envelope's arrival, the days had been a blur. Mariarka had received the news as well, and he had been assured that his tasks would be reassigned. Darichi had been leaving food on his porch.

How did a decade feel like a second?

We first met when we were assigned to cattle maintenance for a month.

"Badri. Health Section," he said, flashing a smile.

"Jacob. Education. Never seen you around here."

"I transferred here from Lepo. Got here last week. I start at school the day after tomorrow. Art."

"Art, eh? I teach Medieval History." My syllabus covered the period starting from colonialism in the 18th century to the climate-led collapse of the 23rd century.

We started to spend a lot of time together. We were frequently assigned the same maintenance shifts. We checked the wiring of all buildings in our sector every 3 months. We fed the cattle for a month every 6 months. We tended to the apple grove.

The grove was where our friendship became companionship. He sketched me often after our shift, in a pocketbook he always carried. My jaw, my bushy eyebrows, my beard that was really just a stubble. To no one's surprise, a lot of the sketches were of me sleeping with my mouth open. He found it hilarious, how often I slept with no thought to where I was.

He was all over the commune. In the graffiti that lined the school walls, in the boat where we first kissed, in the school corridor of our first fight, in the poultry where his clumsy foot had destroyed many eggs.

I came to. My tea was cold. I felt the averted gazes of people crossing my porch. I felt my body contract. The feeling was unfamiliar, ugly. There on the porch, I gripped my sides tightly until I couldn't breathe. Then I stomped back inside and ripped the letter open. Read it again and again, even though the words were long seared in my brain.

I heard a sharp rap on the door. I flung the letter aside and opened it.

Mariarka stood outside, a bottle of cold milk in her hand.

"Take it."

I took the milk.

"All the arrangements are done. Be there by 4."

"I don't want to go."

"You are better than this."

"I hate him."

"It's at the apple grove."

I felt dizzy.

She grasped my arm and sat me on the sofa.

"Be there," she said softly and left.

I got ready. They had prepared us for this all our lives.

We knew that everyone had the freedom to live or to die as they saw fit.

But no one had prepared me to grieve the part of me that had died with him.



Gulabpur

Notes and Translations from a Small and Unremarkable Town in the North with Three Cars

Anupam Guha

Illustrations by Kizhakoot Devika Babu and Kizhakoot Gopika Babu

EXTRACTS FROM THE GULABPUR COUNCIL HANDBOOK: 4TH EDITION

Chapter 5.2: On Transportation

[...] “Transport is the lifeblood of any community,” or so say the old books. We agree. This we have not just learned from books but also measured and reasoned in the last four decades of our town’s history. Since the communications from the Corporatocratic City Delhi (CCD) stopped in the year 42 of the Second Republic, and through the intervening dark decade till the establishment of the Gulabpur Council, a major challenge the Council faced was to reach other human settlements. This task could have been started only after navigating the first decade of survival and rebuilding stability.

Currently, transportation within Gulabpur is by bicycle and, more recently, the electric tracked-long-car grid system. Transportation outside is harder, if not impossible. Gulabpur is surrounded by forests and fields, and is more than 500 km away from a Corporatocracy metropole, though we are unaware if they exist now as they once did. Past attempts at reaching one failed with entire expeditions vanishing. This led to protracted expeditions with couriers going to and from to maintain lines of communication, and even these have not discovered any old metropole. The old roads and paths are overgrown and Gulabpur’s fleet of fuel-driven vehicles diminishes with every passing year. While our technological base has grown, we are still quite far from building the sort of vehicles and fuel reserves needed to traverse the forests with ease. Though we have discovered towns aside from our own, we do not yet have reliable means of transportation to reach many of them; besides, we have never had any energetic transactions with these towns. One of the primary responsibilities of the Council is to conserve and if possible, expand our transportation ability. For one day, the town of Gulabpur to re-join with the vast body of civilised humanity. [...]

EXCERPT FROM THE FIELD NOTES OF A STUDENT/COUNCILLOR/DRIVER/ELECTRICIAN/ POET/COOK [NAME UNKNOWN, REFERRED TO BY X]

Timeline

- 2070 CE – Year One of Second Republic, according to the reissued and unpopular calendar
- 2112 CE – All communications and transportation to Gulabpur ends
- 2122 CE – Gulabpur Emergency Council forms, later named Gulabpur Council
- 2163 CE – Current year

Introduction

Children laughed at M’s stories. M was a very old person. It was not so much that their stories were funny, for there were only so many, and all had been told enough times to be familiar and slightly boring. It was that they were incredible (in the old sense of the word, lacking credibility). The stories were about the life of M when they were young. They talked of gleaming sky “scraping” towers in distant cities and actual aeroplanes with hundreds of people in them and many obvious fantasies that the children found

amusing. Of course, these things could have existed in the past. The children had learned in the council educational meetings that at some point in the past people flew aeroplanes for some reason. The physics for such large flying machines works. But should people fly? What for? Why not make larger and longer cars? Surely that is safer? Should a tower be made taller than the already strange town library with its six floors, let alone “scrape” the sky? Climbing the stairs took the wind out of anyone anyway. Everyone had these questions but the children insisted on asking. For instance, M told anyone who would listen that they were over ninety. This might have been true, but as the oldest records in the Gulabpur archives were just under six decades old, you had to take the old person at their word. Which the children never did. Children these days can be bluntly cruel—a strong indication that the council educational meetings are not quite up to scratch. Perhaps those assigned to the teaching council this year need to reflect.

M’s claimed age would make them a member of the First Republic, for which practically no data exists in our archives. They have proven to be quite a valuable source of information for the work I’ve been trying to do. While the towers and the giant aeroplanes might be a tad exaggerated, I think it is important for our people to be aware of exactly what this life in the past was like. Things are the way they are in Gulabpur and everywhere else in the region because of the complex interplay of things that happened in the past, or so goes my thesis, which you are reading, and which I hope you like so far, since you are still reading. There must be a reason we were cut off from the larger body of humanity. We are aware that communications and transport in the past were extensive. We are aware that people in the past produced and distributed resources in a manner utterly alien to us, and if the old statements are to go by, in a manner “highly efficient”. I want to know what happened in the past and the only correct way to do it was by way of a thorough investigation. I do not understand why the Council has never decided to do a systematic study yet, but the first few decades of the Council have been after all preoccupied with the exigencies of the survival of our town and since then there has been no lack of work for all of us.

My own interest in M is because of my thesis topic, of course, trying to investigate the life of and in the Second Republic, which lasted at least four decades. The thing is, it might still exist, but its interest in us, the people who lived outside the Corporatocracy metropolises, had started to wane quite early. With the communications stopping in 2112, we do not know what happened to them as there was no way for people in this area to reach the metropolises and find out what happened. Most people outside the metropolises were not what are called *employees* of the Corporatocracy.¹ This is the only data I can find from the archives. From what I reckon, we never had enough fuel for our then fleet of twenty-odd vehicles of various sizes to venture beyond a hundred kilometres, and once *state* transport stopped (a pandemic heightened the Republic’s countryside anxieties around fuel), conservation began.²

The vehicles broke down. It became hard to repair them. Now, over 50 years have passed, and only three cars have survived by taking parts from the others. My archival research affirms that the Second Republic and the Corporatocracy are the same entity though I only have a vague idea of what a corporatocracy is. There were a few back in the day and of course, in the recent decades, there have been some rare attempts to reach a Corporatocratic City via car, bicycle, and walking. But these expeditions have never returned, which made the Council stop sending them. By a complicated method of regular couriers, we have a good idea of how the general countryside looks all around Gulabpur within a radius of 200 kilometres, and currently, the Gulabpur Council has electric communications with fifteen towns in this area. Physical

1 **Employee:** a complicated concept I will investigate in detail in my future monograph on “money”, one of the ways in which resource production and distribution were organised in the Second Republic. In short, unlike our contemporary and dare I say primitive system where we do not do much work most of the time and have several changing roles that we take on according to what is needed and what we like; in the olden days there was a “highly efficient” system of work allocation which produced a lot of resources. While we don’t understand what “money” is completely, “money” and “employee” are related.

2 **State:** As explained in the archives, before the Second Republic, the “state” was an entity separate from the commerce council. We do not know what this “state” was, but it was apparently something slightly similar to our council, on a scale much larger, though from what we understand it was very different in how it worked. It was pretty much subordinated to the “leaders of commerce” thanks to the resources of that era being distributed under mechanisms we don’t completely understand. The Second Republic was formed when this First Republic proved defunct.

vestiges of the Second Republic in this larger area, like the Zaveri Local Branch Office, which closed down in the 2100s, are useless in trying to figure out what happened. Interestingly, the archives talk about older vestiges of the First Republic, an office of someone called the “District Magistrate”. This office existed in a neighbouring town until late 2090 CE. The transition or the relationship between the First and the Second Republic is not very clear. There is also a theory that it was not that the First and the Second Republic were different entities, but two polities with overlapping timelines. We have no way to verify this currently.

**EXCERPTS FROM THE DIARY OF X,
A STUDENT/COUNCILLOR/DRIVER/ELECTRICIAN/POET/COOK**

20/11/2162

The general council meeting in the afternoon went bad. First of all, barely a third of the thousand delegates arrived, and then for two hours, the standard tussle on resource allocation between the Production Group and the Forward Group took place. It escalated to name-calling and worse, sarcasm.

I’ve been talking about the general conservative slide of the council for the last three years, and these are the small moments where it becomes obvious. There is a need to more quickly replace delegates. There is a serious need to allocate resources on endeavours a little more future-looking. I advocated for increasing the resource allocations for electricity generation, which miraculously passed by a slim majority after repeated rejections. Perhaps the delegates were tired of hearing me say the same thing for the last ten meetings.

This has been a hard-fought victory. I’ve had to lobby at least four separate groups over the last month to even get my voice heard on why this is vital for our town to accommodate more people and reduce work per person. One councillor from the Culture Group had the effrontery to ask why we need to reduce work. As if without reducing work the culturalist parasites could be let out of the potato fields to make their horrible poetry. (Gulabpur perhaps has the distinction of producing the worst poets in human history, though admittedly, we don’t know much of human history) Anyway, with dwindling ethanol reserves, we will have to rely on powering our alternators using wind (almost impossible with what we have) or water (more likely) from the nearby streams and this is a non-trivial task. To expand the electricity production is harder yet because we cannot find any sources of magnetic material to make new alternators. The Energy Group has its work cut out. There are mutterings to use more grain for ethanol. It seems after a lot of effort my reputation within the group has recovered from the initial days of being considered young, idealistic, foolish, and yet somehow simultaneously, a bookworm. The votes have started to shift. I am also pushing for another expedition and might get the fuel allocation needed for a short car trip. We need better maps.

I cooked chicken in keema today and exercised for one hour.

02/03/2163

While cooking for one of the town kitchens today I met one of my partners, Q. Q was curious about the upcoming expedition to the south of Gulabpur, hopefully to Lakkhanpur and a bit beyond. I wanted Q to join us, so I appealed to their interest in architecture. From the last trip to Lakkhanpur ten years back, the place does have the potential for study. Q has been desperately looking for inspiration, might just come along. After lunch in the kitchen, I went to the fields to help with the winnowing, which took a while, and I was quite tired by the time it ended. I visited the amphitheater in the evening, which had some atrocious production by the Culture Group going on. It was an exhausting yet non-eventful day. I cooked biryani for dinner and did some writing.



19/07/2163

The expedition went well! There are four of us in the car. We experimented with the refurbished solar panels but most of the journey is ethanol-driven. After many adventures along the way (we spotted, caught, and cooked some animals), we have managed to reach the town of Lakkhanpur. A distance of almost 80 kilometers, traversed in four hours! The geography has not altered much in the last few years since we explored to the south, although there are now more trees, which makes finding drivable paths harder. Lakkhanpur looks pretty much as it did a decade ago, with its wide flat buildings and wheat and sugarcane fields.

They seem to be doing badly. Their crop production in the fields outside the town is visibly lower than ours. After exchanging pleasantries, the town representatives took us to a large building and asked us a lot of questions about how Gulabpur is doing. They seemed curious, as they have been in past meetings, about the workings of our council system. We exchanged our town histories of the last decade. They seemed very reluctant to swap such harmless information. We also exchanged maps, though we learned nothing new from theirs. They repeated their past incredulity that all the work in Gulabpur is done by voting and that everything has a group assigned to it which anyone can join. They think our system of work and resource allocation is “inefficient and primitive”, though their system of people doing jobs assigned by a group of experts doesn’t seem to be very attractive to me. What if I am not considered an expert? Will I have to work according to what other people tell me all the time? In conversations on how towns should be run, they are convinced that “in bad times one needs strong leadership”. The concept of leadership is a bit hazy to me, though I have read this idea to be one of the defining traits of the Second Republic.

Lakkhanpur does not use electricity and does not try to have expeditions outside of their town walls, from what I could gather from their representatives. The stench tells me their sanitation works could do with some improvements. We didn’t see much of the people, as the town representatives took us from a

hall to a dining room, from there to our sleeping quarters, and then back outside their town the next day. We thus spent little time exploring the town as we wanted to, and left somewhat unceremoniously. Having said that, it was good to see people who are not from Gulabpur even though they are very different from us. We spent some of our fuel quota exploring a bit further south of Lakkhanpur but did not find any human settlement or anything surprising. Then we started to drive back home and hunted a few animals to bring back for our friends. One of our expedition members Y belongs to the Biology Group. Y spent quite a bit of time sketching plants, animals, collecting samples, and staring at trees (when they were not muttering about the impending health crisis in Lakkhanpur). As for me, while driving, I had this idea in my head: would it not be easier to explore if we could fly around? Just how feasible is it to build an aeroplane, anyway?

**END OF THE FIRST TRANCHE OF NOTES AND TRANSLATIONS.
MORE TO FOLLOW.**

(**Translator's note:** Names of events and entities have been translated while place names are phonetic. However names of people when not available, as in X's field notes and diary entries, are replaced with placeholders)



COVER

A group of young bolsheviks enact a tableau around the time of the Russian Revolution. (1917)

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Thanks to all those who contributed financial support for this issue





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