

Domestic Elites - Neoliberal Goondas on a Rampage

By Raja Swamy

(The Revolution) will bring joy and prosperity to the starving millions who are seething today under the terrible yoke of both foreign and Indian exploitation. It will bring the nation into its own. It will give birth to a new state a new social order. Above all, it will establish the dictatorship of the proletariat and will forever banish social parasites from the seat of political power -- Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (1929) ¹

When in December 1929, the HSRA (Hindustan Socialist Republican Association) carried out a failed assassination attempt against the Viceroy Irwin, 'Gandhiji' condemned the action and the revolutionaries involved, in an article titled 'Cult of the Bomb' which appeared in 'The Harijan.' In response, an underground pamphlet was issued by the HSRA titled 'The Philosophy of the Bomb.' What is laid out in the above excerpt is stark in more than one sense -- it clearly indicates recognition of the 'terrible yoke of both foreign and Indian exploitation' of the 'starving millions.' It also points out that the suffering millions are not silently enduring their pain -- they are seething! Today's scenario is vastly different from 1929, but the above passage remains apt at least in the sense that it speaks to the crucial connection between foreign and domestic exploitation. Bhagat Singh and his comrades may well recognize the present situation in terms of this continuity. The lives of the poorer sections of India, the people who labor everyday but are constantly leeches, exploited, abused and manipulated by the 'social parasites' and their imperialist overlords, have changed very little. Food security, health security, job security, human rights, livable wages, freedom from fear of persecution, these are dreams that lay rotting mostly within the ambit of 'directive principles of state policy' for fifty years, and now with neoliberalism, seem to have fossilized under the collective weight of two wings of the same ruling class.

Those entrusted with parliamentary power in the "world's most populous democracy" have despite their professed ideological differences, signed onto furthering the cause of globalizing capital -- an intensified class war that benefits the rich by starving the poor. While the leadership of the UPA cried foul over the U.S. denial of Narendra Modi's visa, which scuttled the mass murderer's plans to be anointed crown prince of Hindutva, business as usual prevailed shortly thereafter with the passing of the Patents Bill. The Bill strengthens the hand of multinational corporations and affects food, chemicals and pharmaceuticals industries, markets and most importantly the health security of millions in the third world. It means that domestic pharmaceutical companies' ability to produce cheap generic drugs will be drastically curtailed, monitored and eventually crushed. The destruction of Indian generic pharmaceutical industries has been on the agenda of the pharma behemoths for a while.

Right to Intellectual Property versus Right to life

The Patents Bill adds misery to the already dire situation of health in India. In terms of expenditure on health per capita, India spends less on its citizens' health than dozens of third world countries including Kenya, Albania, Guatemala and Guyana. Thailand spends \$254 per capita compared to India's \$80! India ranks a dismal 5th from the bottom in terms of public health expenditure. ²Public investment in health has been declining, hitting the economically vulnerable sections of society the hardest. The privatization of health has further resulted in making health care inaccessible to most people. The state's failure in delivering on the post-independence promise of health for all of India's citizens is now used as an excuse to accelerate the processes of dismantling public health. The Patents Bill makes an already difficult situation worse for millions.

The Bill in fact goes beyond the requirements of Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), and also includes provisions to make public opposition to patent based claims difficult. Companies like Ranbaxy and CIPLA produce cheap generic drugs including antiretroviral AIDS drugs (the "three in one" combination) that are used locally and exported to several African countries. Indian generics are exported to more than 200 countries, a lifeline to at least half a million patients in the third world requiring anti-retroviral treatment. The Medical Patent News network reports that Indian generics help at least half of the third world's HIV positive population who require anti-retrovirals. ³ In India at least half a million people live with HIV. In Africa, 2.3 million people lost their lives to AIDS in 2004, while 3.1 million became HIV positive during the same time. Indian anti-retroviral generics which cost each patient around \$30 a month will now be replaced by

patented alternatives costing two to three times as much. Massive price increases have already been reported for some drugs. For instance, the price of the anti-cancer drug 'Gleevec' increased from Rs.10,000 to Rs.120,000 after an 'Exclusive Marketing Right' amendment in 1999.

It is a crime of unimaginable proportions that the elected rulers of India have decided to grievously assault the right to life of ordinary people worldwide in order to do the bidding of imperialist capital. What makes WTO compliance so sacrosanct in the eyes of these rulers that they felt compelled to go beyond the requirements laid out in TRIPS? Big pharmaceutical corporations can now swoop down on these countries and dominate markets with their monopolistically priced drugs while millions must choose between food and medicine if that is even possible given the assault on food security under the neoliberal stranglehold. ⁴

Multiple attacks on the working poor

There are dire statistics that attest to the overall stunting and starving of the Indian population over the past decade, directly attributable to the new economic policies of liberalization. RUPE (Research Unit for Political Economy) for instance notes that per capita cereal consumption drastically dropped from 161.2 kg/year in 1990-91 to 144.9 kg/year in 1998.⁵ The World Bank push to get rid of the PDS (Public Distribution System) has no doubt amply contributed to this situation. If the decade of the 1990s is represented *ad nauseum* by the garish celebration of middle class consumerism and an associated cultural fascism exemplified by neoliberal Hindutva, the reality of rural starvation deaths and suicides among impoverished peasants stands in stark contrast - an indictment of the policies pursued by the rulers of India under the tutelage of the Washington Consensus.

The Patents Bill also affects food production by allowing product patents to agricultural chemical processes and fertilizers while not explicitly excluding new seeds and plants. As such food producers will have to face the prospect of being prevented from saving, experimenting with and exchanging seeds - they will be pressured to use patented seeds with the requirement that they purchase fresh seeds from the multinational owner of the patent. This is an especially dangerous situation given the efforts by some agribusiness behemoths to produce genetically altered seeds that produce sterile plants taking away the right of food producers to their own biological and intellectual resources. Costlier inputs will result in shifting the cost to consumers, hitting the poor even harder. Vulnerable sections of the poor such as Dalits and women who already bear the burden of Brahmanical and masculinist social and cultural oppression will be hardest hit.

As working people struggle to defend themselves against assaults on their food and health security, assaults on organized and unorganized labor continue unabated. If in early 2004 the battle lines were drawn around the assault on the right to strike - with 50 million workers marching in defiance of this crass attack on labor, by early 2005 the battle lines are centered on the intense assault on unorganized labor in Bombay where 300,000 people were made homeless by a Congress state government - mass home demolitions represent a man-made tsunami on behalf of the rich by craven functionaries. As usual, the intensification of assaults on the working poor builds on a history of contempt for the working class - the lands that Bombay's millworkers used to live, work and struggle on has now become prime real estate for building luxury residential housing. The very people who built the wealth of the city with their labor are now a dispensable nuisance in the eyes of Bombay's elites and the middle class.

Among the wreckage of the destroyed homes of thousands of poor families were school books, clothes, personal belongings, family memories - these are the lives destroyed by the ruling classes of India in their eagerness to transform their fantasies into a grotesque imitation of Shanghai. Tyranny can only breed resistance, and resistance is growing against the state government, against middle class complicity and against the duplicity of professional sycophants masquerading as journalists. People's movements have once again led the way in resisting these outrages and demonstrators have courted beatings and arrests in the process. At the very least, such struggles show the world that resistance is fertile. What is needed is a massive long-term strategy for organizing the unorganized proletariat of India into a potent political force - unfortunately so much has been lost due to neglect of this crucial need by left forces throughout the country. Yet not a day passes without struggles continuing, emerging, and consolidating despite setbacks, frustrations and defeats. Resistance is fertile.

Let them eat cake?

Fashionable theories abound in academia and elite circles about the irrelevance of the state in the era of seamless flows of capital. Accordingly the idea of class is considered archaic and either irrelevant or in need of major repairs. Is the state irrelevant in an age where it is being mercilessly mobilized by imperialist capital through its domestic lackeys to enforce destitution and despair on hundreds of millions of people who are the working poor? Is the demolition of the homes, lives, food security, health security of the working poor not enough evidence of intensified class war on the poor -- a class war waged by those swearing by nationalism and patriotism while utilizing the state to these

ends? Two wings of this ruling coterie share the burden -- imperialism can employ both since they are driven by a desire to outdo each other in the game of total compliance with the dictates of capital. Loud protests against U.S. actions in contexts like Modi's visa denial are laughably irrelevant punctuations in a seamless flow of servility, collaboration and betrayal.

India's five year nightmare under the Hindutva led NDA government saw some of the worst outrages, with an outright state-supported pogrom in Gujarat, extremely repressive legislation targeting the poor, minorities and opponents of globalization, organized labor, and the institution of fascistic educational agendas in the guise of nationalism.' All this took place with an intensified neoliberal agenda of sell-out -- the ministry of Disinvestment was set up and operated with the explicit agenda of targeting and dismantling public assets under the guise of promoting a new regime of managerial efficiency. It appears the Congress version of neoliberal prostration involves the dismantling of the disinvestment ministry -- after all, even for junior partners in slash and burn imperialist agendas, what use is a bureaucratic edifice in the age of digitalized plunder?

The sulking opposition party's response to the health crisis deserves some mention. The BJP's headquarters in New Delhi has a storefront for "Goratra Ayurvedic Medicines," an outlet for products made with cow excrement. The vendors of these products claim that their cow-excrement derived concoctions cure everything from dull teeth, skin diseases, constipation, asthma and yes, even cancer. The functionary in charge of this store claims that the best thing about these products is that they are so inexpensive. Indeed! A political movement that has turned everything on its head - selling fascism as patriotism, chauvinistic hatred as pride, Savarkar as nationalist, and servility to empire as 'partnership against terror' -- now has appropriately found its solution to health security in excrement. At least Marie Antoinette offered cake to those who starved for bread.

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Notes & References

For detailed information on the Patents Bill and mobilization efforts in defense of right to health, please check out [The Global Campaign Against the Indian Patents Amendment \(GCAIPA\)](#), [Jan Swasthiya Abhiyan \(People's Health Movement\)](#) and the [Alternative Development Center](#).

For a cogent analysis of the food security crisis in India, please check out [Iowa is Not Far From Telengana](#): Some Arguments for Food Security in India, a study by the Working Group on Food Security (Sripad Motiram, Vamsi Vakulabharanam, Vijay Prashad).

¹ [Philosophy of the Bomb - HSRA pamphlet, 1929](#)

² [UNDP Human Development report, 2004](#)

³ [Availability of cheap HIV-AIDS drugs threatened by Indian patent law](#) - *News-Medical Net March 21, 2005*

⁴ [AHF Decries Passage of India's Patent Bill](#)

⁵ [The UPA Government's Economic Policies](#), Aspects of India's Economy No. 38 (December 2004): Research Unit for Political Economy