

We Demand Changes So We Can Have a Future: The Forty-Eighth Newsletter (2019)



V. Arun Kumar, Student Protest in Delhi, 18 November 2019.

Dear Friends,

Greetings from the desk of the **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**.

On 18 November, students at India's Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) marched to the parliament in New Delhi as part of their broad protest against the hike in student fees. As the students began their procession, the Delhi police declared that the march was illegal. As the students persisted, the police began to arrest and beat them. Others continued, undaunted by the repression. The police charged at the students and began to beat them ferociously. Shashibhushan Pandey removed his dark glasses and said, 'I am blind,' to which a police officer responded, 'Why do you come for the protest if you are blind?'

The JNU Students Union (JNUSU) – which has been leading the campaign against the destruction of public education – showed that enormous amounts of money have been gifted to large corporate houses as tax rebates and as loans which have not been paid back, while the students are being forced to take money from their families, go into debt to banks, or quit their education. The priorities of a government – and of a civilisation – that privileges tax rebates to the capitalist class while it undermines the potential of students are that of a civilisation that has lost its way. In their flyer for the Long March to Parliament, the JNUSU asked two elementary questions: ‘Let’s demand whether the 99% can study or not. Let’s ask why the taxes of the 99% are being spent only on the 1%.’ The answer to them was given by the boots, sticks, and water cannons of the police. JNUSU president Aishe Ghosh, who had been detained that day, took to social media to say that the beatings and the harassment ‘wouldn’t help to suppress our voices’.



Sreekanth Sivadasan, Rohini Dolui confronts the police, 18 November 2019.

The hashtag for this sequence of protests is #FeesMustFall – an echo of the cry from around the planet, from the student protests against fee hikes from South Africa to Chile. Why are governments raising fees and making higher education expensive? First, the assault on higher education is part of the broad policy of austerity, where governments cut from the social side of their budgets – health care, elder care, poverty alleviation, education – in order to avoid raising taxes that corporations have to pay. Second, it has become

clear that public education – and student unions at these institutions – are important venues to challenge the irrationality of neoliberal and neofascist politics. The argument is being made that debt will discipline students to attend more to their own personal careers – so as to be able to pay off the debt – rather than to matters of serious political importance.

The narrowest interpretation of education seems to govern the policy makers; they see education as part of individual career-building, not as part of society-making. The basic tendency of capitalism is to turn education into a commodity, and not allow it to be a common resource. If education becomes commodified, students are reduced to commodities; the sensibility to explore ideas and the insistence on imagining a new world founded on humane values erodes amongst students. The impact on teachers mirrors that of the impact on students, for teachers are pushed to do more teaching and less research, more teaching and less discussion of basic political values (as has been explicitly stated in the Indian government’s Draft National Policy on Education). Prabhat Patnaik, Emeritus Professor at JNU, quite correctly **argues**, ‘An academic community that is browbeaten into pursuing teaching and research *to the exclusion of defending freedom and rights*, will not even succeed in pursuing teaching and research successfully. These require freedom of thought and expression; the denial of these freedoms impairs teaching and research as well. *And yet there is no mention of this requirement in the entire report, even though it is under attack at present, with the threat of prosecution under sedition laws hanging over the academia all the time.*’ Thought dries up; universities and colleges become intellectual deserts.

On 29 November, students in Pakistan will take to the streets; the **issues** before them are much the same as those that press upon the Indian students. Of the student upsurge, historian Ammar Ali Jan **wrote** of the ‘absence of principles’, the absence of a clear programme that ‘haunts our present, with confusion and cynicism blocking the possibility of transformative politics’. At the Faiz Festival organised by the Students Collective in Lahore, Arooj Aurangzeb, Mohsin Abdali, and others chanted revolutionary slogans and for our hopes to break through cynicism and confusion and find the road to transformation. The poem chanted in the video is by Bismil Azimabadi; the lines are powerful,

*Desire for sacrifice is in our hearts.
We’ll see how much strength is in the assassin’s arms.*

Students at the Faiz Festival, November 2019

Singing of sacrifice is not metaphorical. This week was the 25th anniversary of the killing of five student and youth activists in Kerala – KK Rajeevan, KV Roshan, K Shibulal, K Madhu, and C Babu; these activists of the Democratic Youth Federation of India and the Students Federation of India fought to defend and expand public education. They were killed by the right-wing government for their hopes.



TBT - Koothuparamba martyrs

A week before the Indian students marched to parliament, delegates from 60 organisations, unions, and political parties, gathered in Brasília (Brazil) for a **Peoples' BRICS summit**. The closing statement of the gathering captures the heart of what the students were saying in Delhi – *we demand changes, so we can have a future*. The idea of a 'future' is a fundamental one in our time. Neoliberal thought tends to make the argument that we live in an endless present; the 'future', such a utopian concept, is no longer possible. In another recent **article**, Prabhat Patnaik develops Marx's famous statement, 'The philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.' Marx, he writes, was not pointing to two separate activities: interpretation and action. Rather, Marx argued that one kind of intellectual interprets the world by

being ‘trapped within the vision of the world as it exists’; the other kind of intellectual interprets the world ‘from a point of view that entails the construction of the image of an alternative world different from it’.

Programmes of action that go beyond the contours of the present – which are framed by capitalism’s contradictions – would necessarily confront the limits of the system; adequate funding for the social sector – including higher education – is not available from this system not because its managers are not informed of the low levels of funding, but because they are resolute not to provide them. To fight for the future – revolution – requires constant fights for the present – reforms; ‘revolution,’ Prabhat Patnaik writes, ‘is the outcome of an uncompromising commitment to reform, though the outcome necessarily has to go beyond the specific reform itself.’ The outcome is, as the Peoples’ BRICS summit **put it**, *the future*.

Lowkey (featuring Mai Khalil), *Iraq2Chile (Martyrs of Hope)*, 2019

When reforms edge towards the calcified boundaries of what is permissible – such as nationalisation of resources – then the shutters of civility go down. In the closing statement from the Peoples’ BRICS summit, the phrase ‘hybrid wars’ makes its appearance. In our **dossier no. 17** (June 2019), we developed that term to refer to ‘a combination of unconventional and conventional means using a range of state and non-state actors that run across the spectrum of social and political life’. The coup against the government in Bolivia on 11 November was precisely conducted through the strategy of hybrid war. There was a long-term fight, almost over thirteen years, to undermine the government’s resource nationalism policy, some of this directly conducted by the US Embassy. (In 2007, when some US mining magnates wanted to meet with Bolivia’s Vice President, the US Ambassador Philip Goldberg **said**, ‘Sadly, without dynamite in the streets, it is uncertain whether the Embassy or the international mining companies will be able to attain even this minimal goal.’) *Without dynamite in the streets*: everything was weaponised in the past year, including the Organisation of American States (60% of whose budget is paid by the US government), the Bolivian generals (many of whom are trained in the United States), and even intellectuals and NGO leaders.

A sharp edge of the hybrid war is the battle over information. One casualty in this hybrid war is recognition of the immense advances made by the government of the Movement to Socialism (MAS), led by Evo Morales Ayma, in Bolivia. It was as if Morales and his government brought this coup upon themselves, and not that this was a coup against resource nationalism and by a neofascist clique inside Bolivia (now guilty of a **massacre** in Senkata). Against this casual – and consequential – dismissal of the work of the MAS government, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Ana Maldonado, Pilar Troya Fernández, and I wrote ‘**A Letter to Intellectuals Who Deride Revolutions in the Name of Purity**’. Our letter is on the pace of revolutions and on the centrality of indigenous feminist socialism to these revolutionary processes in Bolivia and Venezuela. Here is a short excerpt from the essay:

These revolutionary processes not only have had to work within the rules of liberal democracy, but they at the same time built a new institutional framework through the *comunas* and other forms. It was by winning elections and taking charge of state institutions that the Bolivarian revolution was able to turn resources towards increased social expenditure (on health, education,

housing) and towards a direct attack on patriarchy and racism. State power, in the hands of the left, was used to build these new institutional frameworks that extend the state and go beyond it. The existence of these two forms—liberal democratic institutions and the socialist-feminist institutions—has led to the bursting of the prejudice of fictitious ‘liberal equality’. Democracy if reduced to the act of voting forces individuals to believe that they are citizens with the same power as other citizens, regardless of their socio-economic, political, and cultural positions. The revolutionary process challenges this liberal myth, but it has not yet succeeded in overcoming it—as can be seen in both Bolivia and Venezuela. It is a struggle to create a new cultural consensus around socialist democracy, a democracy that is rooted not in an ‘equal vote’, but in a tangible experience of building a new society.

Warmly, Vijay.