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Live encounters

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LOPAMUDRA TALUKDAR Homage to Ladakh

COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY LOPAMUDRA TALUKDAR



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Lotus, Laos. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



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Live Encounters is a not-for-profit free online magazine that was founded in 2009 in Bali, Indonesia. It showcases some of the best writing from around the world. Poets, writers, academics, civil & human/animal rights activists, academics, environmentalists, social workers, photographers and more have contributed their time and knowledge for the benefit of the readers of:

Live Encounters Magazine (2010), *Live Encounters Poetry & Writing* (2016), *Live Encounters Young Poets & Writers* (2019) and now, *Live Encounters Books* (August 2020).

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Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

Mark Ulyseas
Publisher/Editor
markulyseas@liveencounters.net

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CONTRIBUTORS

LOPAMUDRA TALUKDAR
SUZANNE ASHA STONE
DR HOWARD RICHARDS
DR PETER GONSALVES
DR SHANTHIE MARIET D'SOUZA
DR BIBHU PRASAD ROUTRAY
MARK ULYSEAS

Lopamudra Talukdar was fascinated by the world of photography ever since she was a child but never thought of taking it up seriously until she was gifted a camera in 2010. It changed the world around her. She started looking at the world through a different set of eyes and with accolades and exhibition opportunities coming her way from far and near, it also changed how the world looked at her. Lopamudra is still trying out different genres of photography but by her own admission, she is a documentary photographer with a special interest in vanishing cultures of the world. She is well-traveled, her recent documentary projects have taken her from Moscow to New York and beyond. She has worked for the National Geographic Traveler and has recently been awarded the Sahapedia Photography grant. Lopamudra is Mentor with Fujifilm India. <https://www.lopamudra.photography/>

LOPAMUDRA TALUKDAR

CHANGPA: THE PASHMINA PEOPLE OF LADAKH

Text & Photographs

In the cold and inhospitable terrain of Changthang valley in Ladakh, begins the story of the famed Pashmina shawl. Braving the gruelling winter is a sacrifice the Changpa shepherds must endure as this is when the fine undercoat of the 'Changthangi' goat - as much prized as the wool itself, reaches its full glory.

The Changpas originally migrated from the Zhang-Zhung region of the Tibetan plateau and after the Chinese occupation, a part decided to make this arid highland, blessed with snow-capped peaks and azure skies their home. Their arduous trans-Himalaya journey following the silk-route trail was driven by the incentive of better pastures and a market for their pashmina wool. Changpas do not shear the entire wool but use a comb to separate the fine undercoat from the coarse main wool. The goats cannot survive the frigid night temperatures - even in summer months - without their protective coating. The undercoat is very fine and soft, with a thickness of 12-15 microns. The fine undercoat is cleaned to separate it from coarser wool and to remove impurities and odour. They are then carded, hand-teased, and spun into yarn using a spindle. Most of the yarn is then sold to traders from the Kashmir Valley where they are first dyed manually in heat chambers, using a century-old process. This is the stage when expert weavers, who have been practicing the art from one generation to another, take over to create beautiful Pashmina shawls. These shawls, noted for their softness and lightness, became extremely popular amongst the upper-class in colonial India. To this day, the Pashmina is revered the world over as a mark of oriental aristocracy.



Lopamudra Talukdar







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Suzanne Asha Stone has been on the front lines of wolf restoration in the Western USA since 1988. She began in the role of Boise State university intern for the US Fish and Wildlife Service, USDA Forest Service, and Nez Perce Tribe's Central Idaho interagency wolf recovery steering committee. There she coordinated reports of wolf sightings around the state and helped the search to document wolves in the wild places of Idaho. After graduation, Suzanne served on the Central Idaho and Yellowstone wolf reintroduction teams in the mid 1990s, caring for wolves awaiting transport in northern British Columbia and releasing them in central Idaho. In 1999, she was recruited by a national wildlife organization covering wolf conservation across much of the West from the Rockies to the Pacific Northwest and California. Often her work placed her at the heart of the sociopolitical war over the return of the wolf where she recognized that wolves would never escape human persecution until people found a way to live in peace with them. Suzanne completed her masters program in Wildlife Conservation and Conflict Management at Prescott College and then turned her attention to helping scientists, ranchers, and wildlife managers develop and test nonlethal methods that proactively protects livestock from wolves and other native predators. She founded the *Wood River Wolf Project* in 2008 to demonstrate that wolves can coexist with sheep operations on national forests when adequate nonlethal deterrents are consistently applied. She is the lead author on the first landscape level wolf and sheep nonlethal measures study *Adaptive use of nonlethal strategies for minimizing wolf-sheep conflict in Idaho*. She has spoken at conferences and events around the world including the Smithsonian Institute, Oxford University, the United Nations Conference on Biological Diversity, and more. Suzanne is now the Executive Director of the newly launched International Wildlife Coexistence Network where she is now helping to protect wolves and other imperiled wildlife with communities around the world. Visit the website: www.wildlifecoexistence.org
View their 5 minute video: <https://wildlifecoexistence.org/video-introduction/>

SUZANNE ASHA STONE

WE CAN COEXIST WITH WILDLIFE

My first experience with wolves in Idaho's remote mountain wilderness was a lesson that framed my career working to restore them and has led me to all parts of the Earth to share coexistence practices that help other species as well.

It was in 1991, some 60 years after the last wolf was killed in Idaho. Back then, a few wolves would occasionally disperse from Canada down into the Rockies. Some had established small families known as packs outside of Glacier National Park in Montana but there were no known wolf packs in Idaho.

I was a college intern for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in charge of mapping the rare public sightings of wolves in hopes of finding the first wolf family in Idaho since their eradication from the West. Wolves were still considered a menace to livestock by the ranchers and a danger to those who didn't realize that Little Red Riding Hood's archvillain was nothing like the real animal. Wolves are highly intelligent, loyal, dedicated loving parents, and play an essential role in reducing disease and overpopulation in elk and deer herds.

Standing under the twilight sky surrounded by forest and meadows on the wilderness boundary, I howled several times imitating the wolf's distinct song. It is a technique used to search for wolves: they often respond to strange wolves as a means for establishing their territory. I couldn't count how many times I had heard only silence or the occasional elk bugle back in response to my howling surveys. I listened for a while and then returned to my campsite a few hundred yards away.

Suzanne Asha Stone

For 14 years, we have collaborated with ranchers to test nonlethal deterrents to keep wolves from killing livestock. We used portable turbo fladry night corrals (electrified fencing with flags that ward off wolves) when they were near wolves, added more livestock guardian dogs, and used light and sound devices to keep the wolves away from the sheep bands. It worked! In the 14 years since the start of the project, only five sheep of 20,000 sheep per year have been lost to wolves and only one wolf has been killed in response to depredations. Thanks to co-existence, many ranchers have moved from readily killing wolves to admitting that they have to learn to live with them on the landscape. That's a big shift in attitude.

As I collected wood to build a fire, the woods filled with the most beautiful sound. An ancient song that had been missing from these forests for most of the last century. I found my tape recorder and began documenting it. The wolves howled again and again. It was dark now, but I could tell they were howling toward the same spot I had been howling from earlier that evening. By then, tears were streaming down my face as I realized that I had finally found them. The first family after so many decades of silence.

As their last howl descended to silence, I found myself howling again to them in hopes they would respond. As my howl ended, the wolves vigorously howled back. Soon, our howls were overlapping back and forth until I heard a sudden warning bark and the wolves fell silent. Minutes later the headlights from a truck, the source of their concern, came bouncing down the road and passed by completely unaware of the magical exchange that had just been interrupted.

A few weeks later as we searched for the pack, we found a young silver and black female wolf intentionally poisoned in this same area. She survived long enough for us to airlift her to an animal hospital, but she died the next day. We never found the rest of the pack but they likely met with the same end. Ranchers considered them to be a threat and the "Shoot, Shovel and Shut Up" mantra was their response to the return of the wolf. I knew then that the only way that wolves would be safe is by resolving the conflicts with the ranchers who control many of our nation's wild places and local politics.

That meant that when the United States brought wolves in from Canada to establish a population in the Northern Rockies, we had to be ready. One of the earlier and still ongoing projects is the [Wood River Wolf Project](#). For 14 years, we have collaborated with ranchers to test nonlethal deterrents to keep wolves from killing livestock. We used portable turbo fladry night corrals (electrified fencing with flags that ward off wolves) when they were near wolves, added more livestock guardian dogs, and used light and sound devices to keep the wolves away from the sheep bands. It worked! In the 14 years since the start of the project, only five sheep of 20,000 sheep per year have been lost to wolves and only one wolf has been killed in response to depredations.

Thanks to coexistence, many ranchers have moved from readily killing wolves to admitting that they have to learn to live with them on the landscape. That's a big shift in attitude.



Wolves playing in snow. Credit: Ken Canning.

So in my next step on my coexistence journey, I have joined with others to launch the [International Wildlife Coexistence Network](#). We are a growing network of scientists, educators, communities, government and business leaders, wildlife activists, agricultural managers, ethicists, social science and technology experts, field researchers, and more who share a common commitment to help people coexist with nature.



Suzanne and Luke, a livestock guardian dog working to protect livestock in wolf and grizzly country. Credit: H. Stone

Admittedly, it's an ongoing challenge, even this many years later, to keep traditional ranchers from slipping back into the kill-first mentality but our continued success at maintaining the lowest loss rate in places where wolves and large sheep operations exist on public lands in the Western USA is what keeps us going.

Through these many years, I have worked hard to prove that [nonlethal methods to build coexistence between wolves and ranching operations are effective at protecting livestock and ensuring the wolf's valuable role in the wild](#). My research is being duplicated worldwide and with other species that are threatened by human misunderstanding resulting in persecution.

That's important, because the number of people living in wildlife habitat around the world is increasing. As a result, conflicts with wildlife are also increasing. As we saw with wolves, humans either displace or kill the wildlife that poses a threat to agricultural or other interests. And while wolves have been eradicated from much of their range, other species have been driven to extinction due to conflicts with people. From tigers to turtles, koala to whales, and great apes to butterflies, the earth is losing her wild children and wild places at levels never seen before during human existence.

With these extinctions, we are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health, and quality of life worldwide.

But with careful thought and planning, it is possible for both wildlife and humans to coexist. In many places, locals are protecting wildlife and encouraging peaceful new solutions. The number of projects is growing, but many fail due to lack of resources, expertise and community support.

So in my next step on my coexistence journey, I have joined with others to launch the [International Wildlife Coexistence Network](#). We are a growing network of scientists, educators, communities, government and business leaders, wildlife activists, agricultural managers, ethicists, social science and technology experts, field researchers, and more who share a common commitment to help people coexist with nature.

Similar projects are happening on the ground with elephants, grizzly bears, dingo, lynx and many other species. Coexistence means transformative change. It means a fundamental, system-wide reorganization across technological, economic, and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values at the ground level and up.

The work these experts and local communities have done has been transformative. For instance, our partners at Lion Guardians engage local communities to transform people who once hunted lions into lion protectors. By recruiting young, traditional Maasai and other pastoralist warriors to learn the skills needed to mitigate conflicts, they have helped their own communities live peacefully with lions.

Bungalow Koalas, our partners in Australia, is creating koala wildlife corridors. The organization aims to plant 250,000 eucalyptus trees by 2025 to help koalas disperse out of urban areas and replace habitat that was burned in the 2019-2020 wildfires. They have engaged local communities in this effort through education and volunteer opportunities and have already planted 73,000 trees.

Similar projects are happening on the ground with elephants, grizzly bears, dingo, lynx and many other species. Coexistence means transformative change. It means a fundamental, system-wide reorganization across technological, economic, and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values at the ground level and up.

It is not too late to make a difference, but only if we start now, at every level, from local to global. Through 'transformative change' that works with nature instead of against her, we can conserve, restore, and live sustainably. We can coexist! At the [International Wildlife Coexistence Network](#), we encourage people to [Take the Pledge](#) to embrace a coexistence consciousness as a citizen of the Earth. Join us and envision a future where communities worldwide live sustainably with our local wildlife.



On the trail of Dingo and Koala in the Blue Mountains, Australia.
Credit: Suzanne Asha Stone

Dr Howard Richards (born June 10, 1938) is a philosopher of Social Science who has worked with the concepts of basic cultural structures and constitutive rules. He holds the title of Research Professor of Philosophy at Earlham College, a liberal arts college in Richmond, Indiana, USA, the Quaker School where he taught for thirty years. He officially retired from Earlham College, together with his wife Caroline Higgins in 2007, but retained the title of Research Professor of Philosophy. A member of the Yale class of 1960, he holds a PhD in Philosophy from the University of California, Santa Barbara, a Juris Doctor (J.D.) from the Stanford Law School, an Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) from Oxford University (UK) and a PhD in Educational Planning, with a specialization in applied psychology and moral education from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto, Canada. Dr Richards is a Catholic, a member of Holy Trinity (Santisima Trinidad) parish in Limache, Chile, and a member of the third order of St. Francis, S.F.O. www.wikipedia.org

DR HOWARD RICHARDS

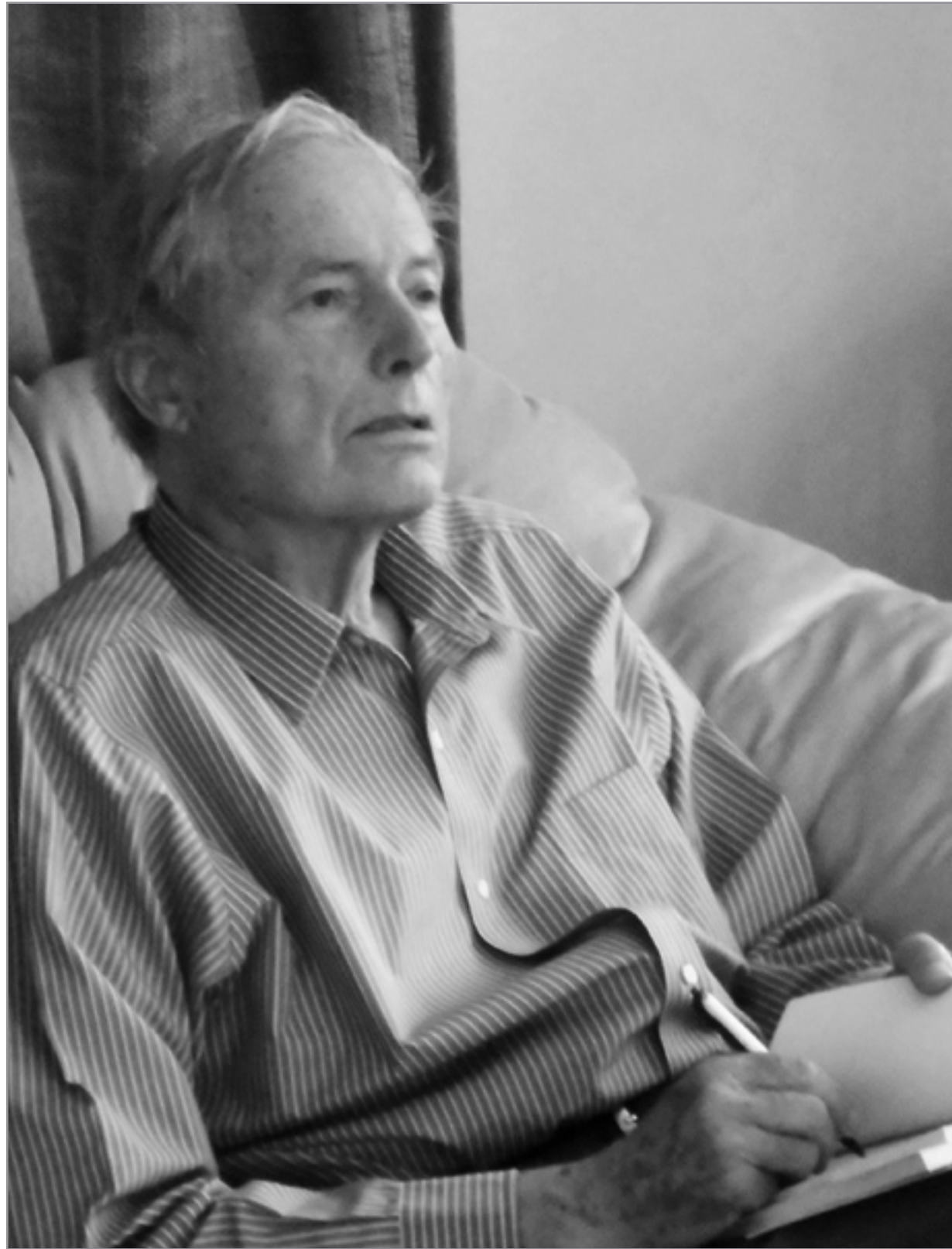
A NON-RACIAL SOCIETY (A SOCIETY WITHOUT RACISM) MUST NECESSARILY BE AN UNBOUNDED SOCIETY.

The South African historian Crain Soudien recently observed:

*The dominant narrative of contemporary South Africa, almost a quarter of a century after the end of apartheid, enshrouds the country in a pall of pessimism. South Africa, in this narrative, is a failed experiment. Its phoenix-like ascent out of its long nightmare of apartheid is a lie. Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu's fabled rainbowism is shown to be, if anything, utterly chimerical. All there is, goes the explanation, is a heap of hate.*¹

Something similar might be said of many nations today. In principle, a modern nation should be what Aristotle said an ancient *polis* was, a people who come together to live a good life under a common conception of justice. In practice, the nation is divided, polarized, if not by race then by something else equally poisonous. Heaps of hate.

In the book cited (*The Cape Radicals: Intellectual and Political Thought of the New Era Fellowship 1930s-1960s. Johannesburg: Wits University Press 2019*) "Rainbowism" is contrasted with "Non-racialism" or "A Non-racial Society." The author favours the latter. The difference is that in "a Rainbow Society" people of different races live together in peace and harmony, while in a "Non-racial Society" race does not exist; the truth is acknowledged. The truth is that there is no such thing as race. Humanity is one.



Dr Howard Richards

While I suspect that many blacks and many whites may have fallen into the illusion that only prejudice kept blacks out of the paradise where the whites lived, it is clear that the members of the New Era Fellowship did not. Worldwide, most leaders of the struggle did not. In the early days, for the better educated, the end of racism had to be the beginning of socialism.

It is a moderately optimistic book. It is an edifying book, telling the story of contributions to the common good made by committed activists of the past. It documents some previously undocumented history. The members of the New Era Fellowship (NEF) were early anti-racist activists who took the wiser view: race does not exist. It is a lie made up for reasons that are ethically indefensible. The book suggests that the whole of South African history is better understood when the lenses of rainbowism are put aside, and it is realized that the true causes of events are better understood when race is regarded as non-existent. Race cannot be a cause explaining events because it does not exist. The causes lie elsewhere.

Why the fiction of race is made up is a result to be explained by analysing social forces that do exist. Contemporary South Africans would do well to take to heart this important point.

Thus, the author writes on another page, summarizing the analysis made by the thinkers of yesteryear he celebrates:

Racism is the process that invokes the [false] idea of biologically and socially distinct groups of people for the purpose of assigning them positions of inferiority or superiority.²

Here is my comment:

My comment is that a non-racial society, or any non-polarized society, necessarily must be an unbounded society. One could say the same of a rainbow society where different races happily coexist, if one were to speak of race at all, but –hearing the book’s message-- I will not speak of race at all.

First, I will explain why a non-racial society must be an unbounded society in practical terms as simply as I can. I apologize to any specialists who may be annoyed by the absence of discussions of important issues that for the sake of brevity and simplicity I do not mention.³

Then I will explain the significance of choosing to use the unusual word “unbounded.”

Simply stated: There are not enough jobs. There are not enough good jobs. There are not enough jobs that enable a person to live with dignity and security as a respected member of a community and of a family.

In several centuries of anti-racist struggles, it apparently often appears to many people that the reason why blacks (and other victims of discrimination) do not have good jobs is that there is prejudice against them. Worse, their social position, speciously justified by racism, has often been so low that they were slaves, or (even now) little better than slaves. It would appear to have been assumed by many that if it were not for racism, an average black would have a house and a car and the same privileged lives the whites have. The white world may be envisioned as a closed privileged heaven, where the blacks would be living too if it were not for laws and customs that keep them locked out of it.

Assuming that if it were not for racial prejudice, blacks could live like whites, it is forgotten that (1) Augmenting (in many occupations doubling) the number of people eligible to apply for jobs does not increase the number of jobs. (2) Indeed, when more candidates can apply for the same jobs, wages are likely to be lower. (3) Unemployment rates may be the same as before, even when unemployment and bad (irregular, poorly paid, degrading) employment is more fairly distributed so that they humiliate the same percentage of whites as of blacks. (4) Continued unemployment, and bad employment, occur even when measures are taken to provide access to investment funds to create a class of black capitalists approximately equal (or proportionately equal) in numbers and in wealth to the class of white capitalists.

While I suspect that many blacks and many whites may have fallen into the illusion that only prejudice kept blacks out of the paradise where the whites lived, it is clear that the members of the New Era Fellowship did not. Worldwide, most leaders of the struggle did not. In the early days, for the better educated, the end of racism had to be the beginning of socialism.

Why? Capitalism depended on the hegemony of the mental models of the ruling class ideology. That hegemony imposed a confused mixture of laissez faire economics, the jurisprudence of the sanctity of contracts and of private property, and racism. Calling it a hegemony means that its victims themselves believed it. (Even today, some of the most passionate and violent advocates of the ideology of capitalism are among its most degraded victims. Consider the mob that recently stormed the U.S. capitol, and consider the poorest of the poor who overwhelmingly *voted* against taxing wealth in a recent referendum in Ecuador,) But capitalism could only function with such a hegemony. It could only function with a docile, uneducated, and intimidated working class, mentally accepting their own subordination and exploitation.



Cape Town. <https://pixabay.com/photos/city-cape-town-south-africa-morning-2096093/>

As more and more of the victims of the system became educated, acquired qualifications, and organized unions and other pressure groups, they demanded to be treated as first class citizens and sometimes succeeded. *But as far as I know, no intellectual believed that private sector capitalism was capable of generating an unlimited supply of dignified livelihoods to employ both the newcomers demanding their rights and the traditional privileged whites who expected to maintain the economic status they already had --or at least not lower it much, plus hopefully also creating employment opportunities for those who enjoyed the social status of being white but economically had little or nothing to show for it, plus also liberating from exploitation and providing dignified livelihoods to the members of South Africa's many other ethnicities who were neither white nor black.* Capitalism was not up to the task of providing so much good employment –even assuming that it was a task that South Africa's capitalist leaders wanted to attempt to accomplish. Anti-Stalinist socialism was the preferred option for making a non-racial society not only an ethical and legal imperative but also an economic possibility.

But 2021 is not 1937 when the NEF began or 1960 when it ended.

In 2021 it is still true that to achieve a non-racial society a post-pure capitalist labour market must deliver livelihoods with dignity to all and humiliation to none. The alternative is, in Soudien's memorable phrase, "heaps of hate." The USA is Exhibit One. South Africa is Exhibit Two. Exhibit Three is the UK where wavering on Brexit cost Jeremy Corbyn the votes of the anti-immigrant workers in the industrial midlands, the election, and his career. But unlike 1937, in 2021 non-Stalinist socialism, heavily influenced by Leon Trotsky, is no longer a live option.

In 1975-6, in his lectures at the *Collège de France*, Michel Foucault made the point that modern republican institutions claim to be founded on the rule of law, which in turn claims to be founded on a social contract that forbids the government to violate the rights of private property and commands the government to protect them. The drafting, agreeing, and signing of this contract never happened. The reason why it became the juridical basis of the European World System and later, due to the conquest of the rest of the world by European arms, the juridical basis of the Modern World System, is that it was the ideology of the winners of the civil wars in Europe of the 17th and 18th centuries.⁴

This is no small matter. It repeals Ubuntu. It repeals the traditional seven capital sins of Christianity. It repeals the seven pillars of Islam. It cancels dharma. It condemns the social rights guaranteed by the Mandela constitution of 1996 to mainly remaining on paper because it is the government that is supposed to make those rights real, but the government is impoverished and deeply in debt. The government is forced to finance itself with taxes paid by the poor like VAT while the principal wealth of South Africa belongs to private entities that are free to move it out of South Africa. The social contract sets in stone the doctrine that private property exists prior to community and prior to government. It belongs to private entities who can move it and/or themselves to another community or to the territory of another government. By a mobility constituted by ethics and defended by law, they choose which norms they will acknowledge and which laws they will obey. Due to the contributions of Foucault and many other recent scholars,⁵ knowledge of the historical origins, functions (facilitating commerce and protecting freedoms) and absence of functions (meeting human needs in harmony with nature) of liberal ethics and jurisprudence is much more complete in 2021 than it was in 1937 or 1960.

In the early 20th century the leading philosophical opponent of the bogus universal and eternal moral certainties of liberalism was the American pragmatist John Dewey. For Dewey, as for Emile Durkheim, no human group can survive without morals and spiritual practices. The reasons why a group has the norms it has are a mixed bag, an outcome of history that is never completely understood by anybody. They include class interest, religious beliefs, the teachings of a charismatic leader, enchanting legends, psychological tendencies, historical accidents, and the fact that in many cases the norms really do function to meet human needs and to enable the group to cope with the challenges posed by nature and by enemies. Institutions should be treated as hypotheses, to be confirmed or amended according to their consequences in practice.⁶ In *The Cape Radicals* Soudien mentions a visit by John Dewey to South Africa in 1937.

The occasion was a conference held under the auspices of the New Education Fellowship, which had as its objective the challenge of coming 'face-to-face with the general problem of the function of education in modern society.'⁷ It took up the whole month of July 1937, dividing its sessions between Cape Town and Johannesburg. The central issue was posed as two tasks for education: "reproducing the 'type' (the people and their culture) and of 'providing for growth beyond the type'."⁸ Phrased in these terms, the emphasis in 2021 must clearly be on the second, and on those intellectual traditions that welcome contributions from diverse cultures and from indigenous knowledge systems.

Any number of laws against racism, and any number of constitutions declaring the existence of a non-racial society, will not get us there. As long as there is one person humiliated to the core¹⁰, and as long as there is one person who has lost out in today’s fierce competition to win a legal dignified livelihood, who sees others of other ethnicities winning the economic game, we are in danger.

In 2021 we face the real possibility, perhaps the probability, of the extinction of the human species due to the destruction of the delicate balances of the biosphere that make life possible. This was not an issue in 1937 and was only beginning to be an issue in 1960.

I would affirm two more statements that I believe to be true in 2021 and to have been probably not true, or less true, in the times of the New Era Fellowship.

The advance of technology, and greater awareness of the advantages of using relatively simple traditional green technologies, are making it possible to supply the material requirements of dignified livelihoods for every human being, and to reverse the destruction of the biosphere. From a technical point of view, the necessary material resources can be produced. Perhaps Gandhi was right in the past to assert over and over that the world has enough for everyone’s needs, but not enough for everyone’s greed. He will certainly be right in the future.⁹

In 2021, whatever may have been the case in the past, there is nothing that would be more to the interest of the rich and powerful than an end to poverty. I believe this is an objective fact, and that increasing numbers of the rich and powerful know it. However, to my knowledge (which is of course incomplete) those among them who know that an end to poverty would be to their interest, as well as to everyone else’s interest, do not know how to achieve that objective.

On the use of the unusual word “unbounded”

My initial comment was that a non-racial society is necessarily an unbounded society.

A short answer to why a non-racial society is necessarily an unbounded society is that bounded thinking and bounded practices will not get us there.

Any number of laws against racism, and any number of constitutions declaring the existence of a non-racial society, will not get us there. As long as there is one person humiliated to the core¹⁰, and as long as there is one person who has lost out in today’s fierce competition to win a legal dignified livelihood, who sees others of other ethnicities winning the economic game, we are in danger.

As John Dewey observed in 1908, and as recent psychological research has confirmed,¹¹ the concept of the equality of human beings, like the concept that everyone should enjoy dignity and security, share in the general prosperity, and contribute to the common good, is not natural. It is not an instinct. It must be taught and learned. Thinking within the narrow bounds of local common sense must be unlearned.

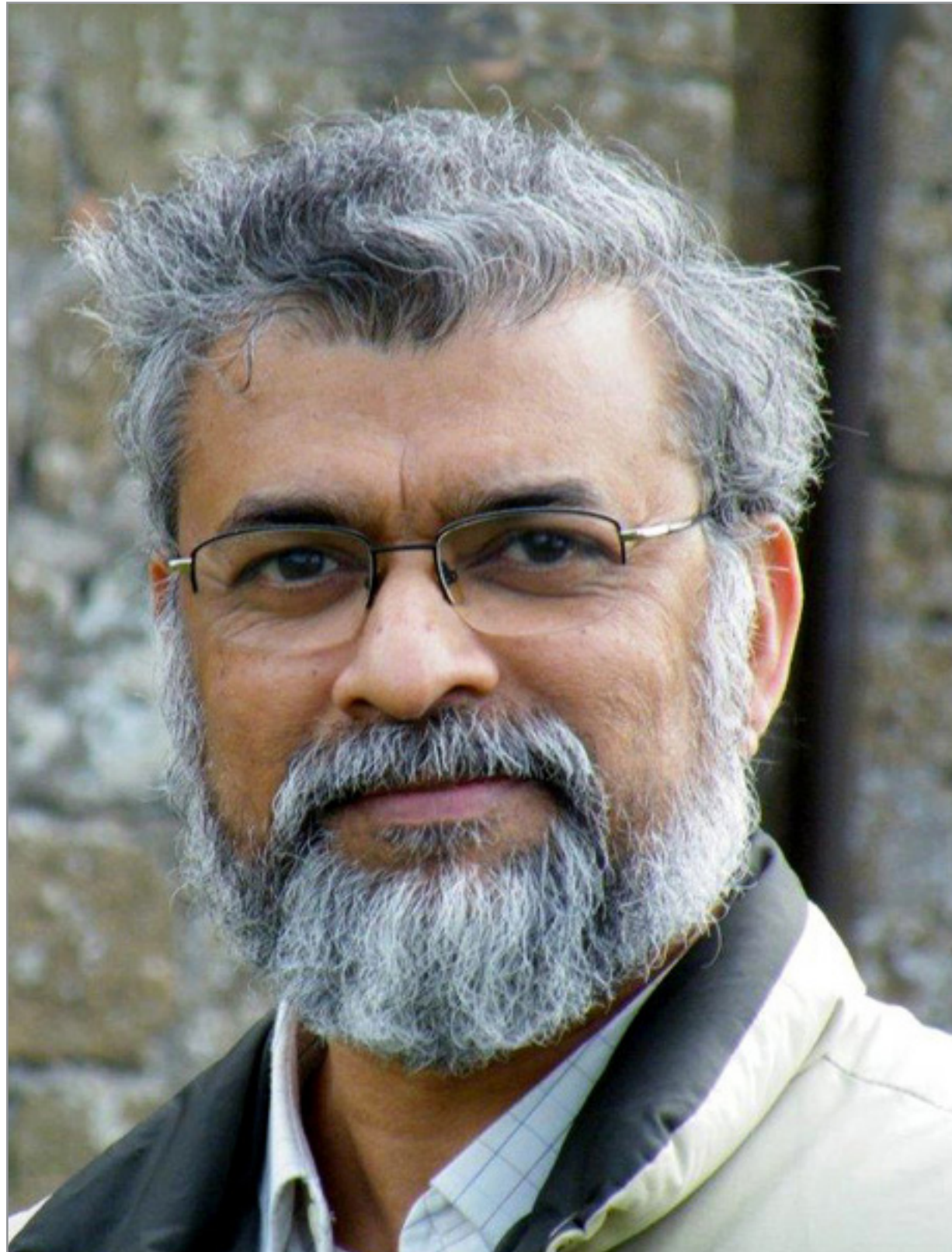
When markets do what they do best, but still are far from providing dignified livelihoods for all who need them, the unbounded solution is non-market livelihoods. What are non-market livelihoods? And what financing and/or in-kind talent and material resources make them possible? When you start to count them, and to study them, you find that they are innumerable, as many as the survival strategies of our ancestors thousands of years ago, as many as the stars in the night sky, as many as the social innovations our descendants will create that we now cannot yet imagine.

These few remarks may be sufficient to suggest that the word “unbounded” – whatever its other appropriate uses may be— describes a society loving enough and imaginative enough to include all and to exclude none.

End Notes

1. Crain Soudien, The Cape Radicals: Intellectual and Political Thought of the New Era Fellowship 1930s-1960s. Johannesburg; Wits University Press 2019, p. 16.
2. Id. p. 27
3. Many of the complications I do treat in other works, especially my book with the assistance of Gavin Andersson, Economic Theory and Community Development. Lake Oswego OR: World Dignity University Press, 2021.
4. Michel Foucault, Society Must be Defended. New York: Picador, 2003.
5. Among many others, Thomas Piketty, Capitalism and Ideology, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020,
6. John Dewey and James Tufts, Ethics. New York: Henry Holt, 1908.
7. Cape Radicals p. 43
8. Ibid.
9. Peter Diamandis and Stephen Kotler, Abundance: The Future is Better than you Think. New York: Free Press, 2012
10- Evelin Lindner, Making Enemies: Humiliation and International Conflict. Westport CT: Praeger, 2006
11. David Berreby, Us and Them. London: Hutchinson, 2006.

Peter Gonsalves, PhD, is a priest and a member of the [Salesians of Don Bosco](#). He teaches Media Education and Peace Communication in the Faculty of the Sciences of Social Communication at [Salesian University](#), Rome. He is the author of the Gandhian trilogy — *Clothing for Liberation* (Sage 2010), *Khadi: Gandhi's Mega Symbol of Subversion* (Sage 2012) and *Gandhi and the Popes - from Pius XI to Francis* (Peter Lang, 2015). Since 2017, he is a member of the international board of consultants for the Communication Dicastery at the Vatican. He may be visited at www.petergonsalves.in and academia.edu.



DR PETER GONSALVES, SDB

DISINFORMATION IN SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

An online-presentation for the 25th Annual Meeting of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference (FABC), Manila, November 19 to 20, 2020

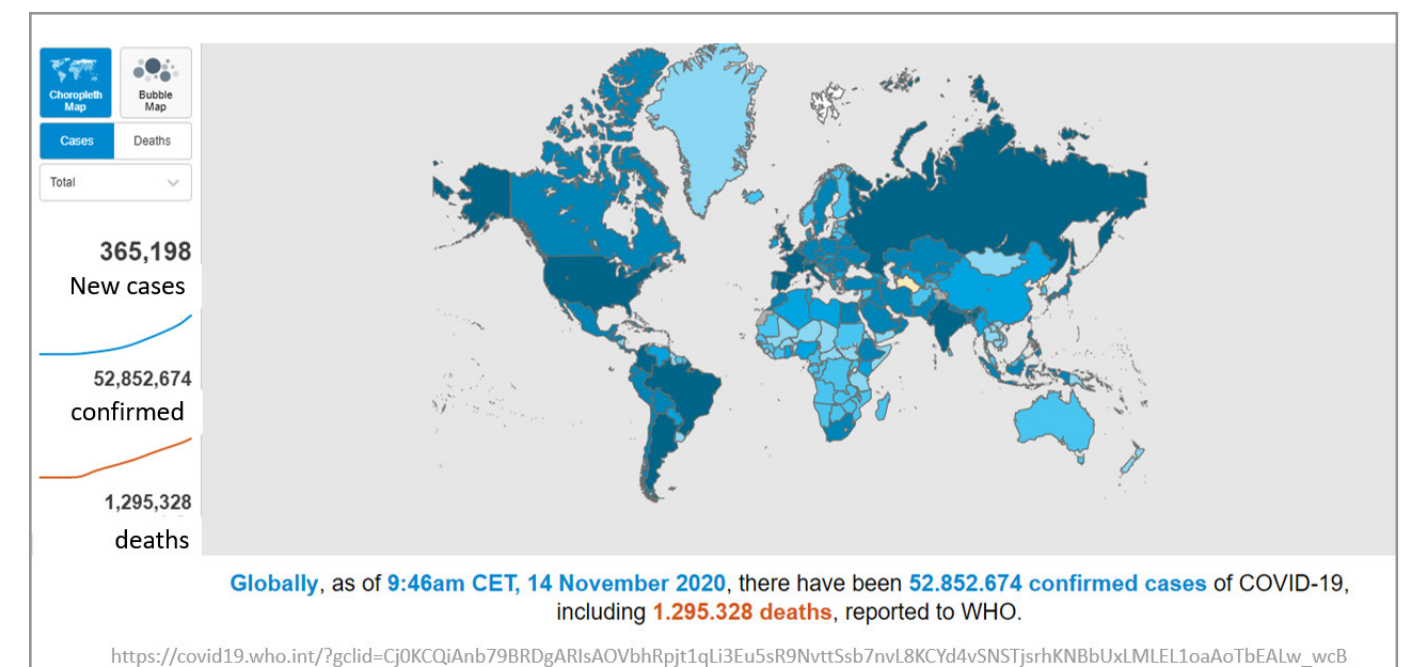
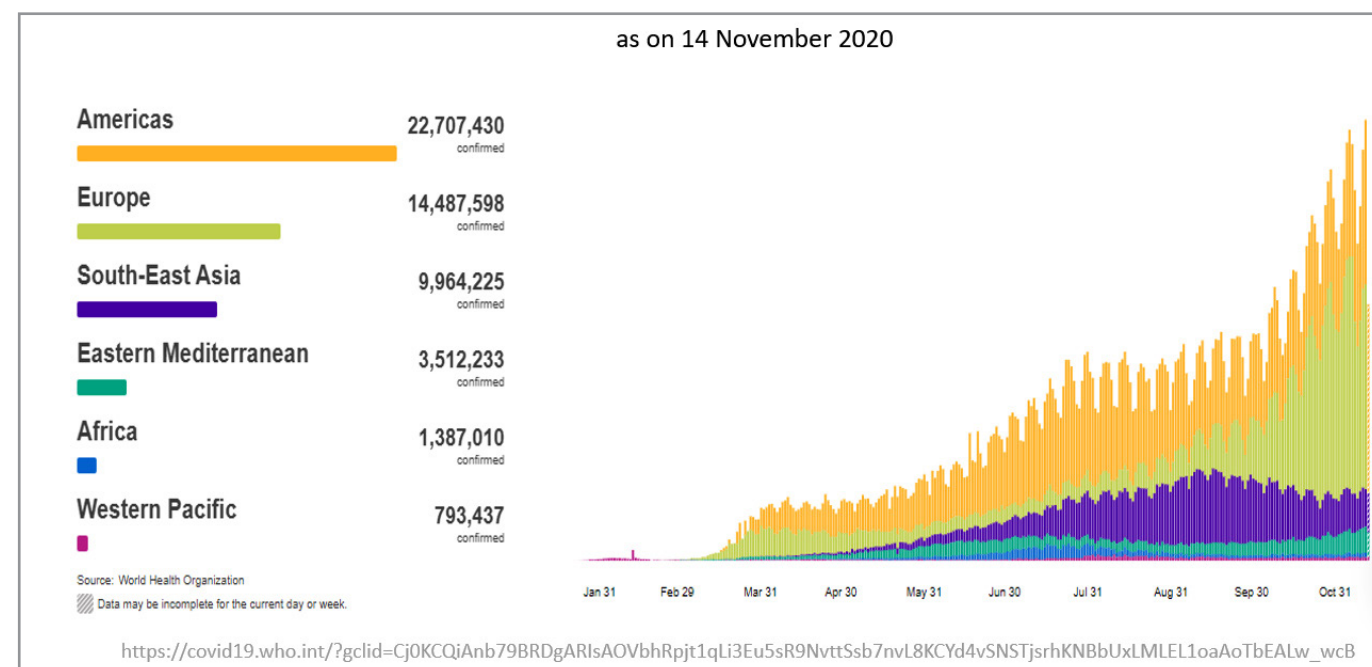
For those of us in South-East Asia, the information age had its advent in the late 1990s. We were filled with hope then, as we looked forward to being active participants in the digital revolution in the cause of development and peace. Twenty years later, we are perhaps warily aware that the information ecosystem, almost taken for granted and upon which we have come to depend, can no longer be deemed entirely trustworthy and is getting increasingly complex and dangerous. The situation today is even more alarming with Covid-19 taking centre stage.

The reality

The website of the World Health Organization (WHO) – the principal point of reference for this presentation – has been keeping people updated on a daily basis. Its regional statistics across the globe reveal that on November 14, 2020 the Americas were most affected (22,707,430 confirmed cases), Europe was next (14,487,598), South-East Asia followed (9,964, 225) with the Eastern Mediterranean (3,512,233), African (1,387,010) and Western Pacific regions (793,437) in tow.¹

Reports received by WHO on a single day, November 14, 2020, at 9.46 am CET, indicate that globally new cases were 365,198; confirmed cases were 52,852,674; and deaths were 1,295,328.²

Dr Peter Gonsalves



These numbers above demonstrate that the pandemic is real and not, as some still believe, a conspiracy created by those who wish to profit from generating fear and the possibility of millions being affected.³ From the months that have vanished under the COVID cloud, we have learned the following:

- We are all vulnerable to the virus. It spares none.
- We are all interconnected and interdependent. (e. g. individuals and society, young and old, hospitals and banks, patients and medical staff, life and death, etc.)
- Before the commencement of the year 2020, most of us had taken our 'normal' lives for granted (e.g. The gifts of breathing clean air, degrees of proximity/intimacy, employment, etc.). Now we have been constrained to adapt to the 'new normal'.
- Masks and social distancing work – they prevent saliva droplets considered major viral carriers.
- *Disinformation, supported by social media technology, is higher than ever before.*

My presentation will concentrate on this last phenomenon. In the limited time I have, I will restrict my sharing to the problematic. I will merely hint at a solution, so as not to tread on the areas allotted to speakers after me, some of whom would have the onus of explaining ways to tackle the disinformation-bull by the horns.

Disinformation is gargantuan indeed. The WHO calls it an *infodemic* – an occurrence of stupendous magnitude, a cause for urgent concern comparable only to the pandemic itself. Statistics reveal that in the month of March alone, 361,000,000 videos were uploaded on YouTube under the “COVID-19” and “COVID 19” classification; about 19,200 articles had been published in Google Scholar since the pandemic started; around 550 million tweets included the terms coronavirus, corona virus, covid19, covid-19, covid_19, or pandemic.⁴ Due to the sheer volume, extension and rapidity of information available on social media and traditional mass media, we have been confronted by a global reality never ever witnessed earlier.

On social media platforms, disinformation comes in different forms and is described variously as ‘questionable accuracy content,’ ‘conspiracy theories,’ ‘clickbait,’ ‘hyper partisan content,’ ‘pseudoscience,’ ‘fabricated news,’ ‘fake news,’ etc.

On September 23, 2020, international humanitarian associations sent out a joint statement to leaders of the world requesting their collaboration in a document titled *Managing the COVID-19 infodemic: Promoting healthy behaviours and mitigating the harm from misinformation and disinformation*.⁵

Terminology – from infodemic to infocalypse

If the WHO has called the disinformation linked to the COVID phenomenon an ‘infodemic,’ the UNESCO uses the word ‘disinfodemic’. What are the varied meanings of similar terms/synonyms employed to describe the type of information shared across social media?

Dictionary meanings converge on the difference between the terms ‘misinformation’ and ‘disformation’. The former means ‘incorrect information’. The latter, however, is ‘the *deliberate spreading of misleading information*’. The term ‘fake news’ was popularized in 2016 to imply ‘news that is not authentic’; or ‘untrue information presented as news’. ‘Rumours’ are ‘a mixture of truth and untruth passed around verbally’.⁶

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We are on the threshold of yet another type of disinformation, more dangerous and difficult to deal with than the types that preceded it. In authenticating the veracity of a datum, photographs were once proof until ‘Photoshop’ appeared on the scene. Then videography replaced the photograph. Videoclips, Webcams and CCTV cameras are currently indubitably being accepted as recordings of reality itself. Now, however, even this sliver of credibility is about to be taken away from us. We have to get ready for the coming of ‘deep fakes’ or what Aviv Ovadya calls the *Information Apocalypse*⁷ and Nina Schick calls *Infocalypse*.⁸ The algorithms of Artificial Intelligence (AI) are already here, and malicious agents are working at publishing statements or actions of adversaries that the latter have never uttered or done simply to compromise their moral reputation.⁹ Ovadya’s prognosis is alarming: “What happens when anyone can make it appear as if anything has happened, regardless of whether or not it did?” Or, what would happen if the credibility of a true fact is easily doubted? “It’ll only take a couple of big hoaxes to really convince the public that nothing’s real.”

For instance, “[y]ou don’t need to create the fake video for this tech[nology] to have a serious impact. You just point to the fact that the tech exists and you can impugn the integrity of the stuff that’s real.”¹⁰ From “what is truth?” we are sliding downward to “Can truth be proved at all?” In the infocalypse, everything is false until proven true. The rise of autocracy around the world bodes ill for the planet: the infocalypse has already begun.¹¹

Myths and their effects

Spreading myths about COVID are ever on the increase. A page dedicated to busting myths on the WHO website mentions 30 different myths.¹² It is possible that such myths have been diffused by well-meaning agents concerned about assisting others in preventing the spread of the viral infection. The problem, however, is that their solutions have not been scientifically verified. Some of them can do more harm than good by making it difficult for people, decision makers, and health workers to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it. (By sources we mean apps, scientific organizations, websites, blogs, “influencers,” and more...) The infodemic can thus impact those decision-making processes where immediate answers are sought and not enough time has been allotted to deeply analyse the evidence. People may feel anxiety, depression, be overwhelmed, feel emotionally drained, and may be unable to meet important demands. Most of all, the data shared in the infodemic has no quality control on what is published, and sometimes, on what has been used to take action and make decisions. Anybody can write or publish anything on the web (podcasts, articles, etc.), in particular on social media channels (individual and institutional accounts) which can tragically affect ignorant or gullible users.¹³

Causes of the Infodemic

Notwithstanding the amount of good we are capable of contributing to building a global community, human existence has been plagued with misunderstandings, half-remembered facts, and biases. Psychological or *cognitive bias* has always been the root cause of our poor judgements in relation to the information we access and consume. This in turn, makes us respond to facts or information we encounter in ways that are not always rational. Often influenced by subliminal prejudices, we seldom have a rational relationship to information and are more prone to allowing our emotions rule the roost.

These biases inadvertently entangle us in logical fallacies, some of which have consequences, albeit minor. The major ones morph into tragedies that can impair/cost the lives of individuals, families and society at large. Malicious actors capitalize on online confusion, fear, and sorrow for profit and political gain, intentionally spreading falsehoods and conspiracy by stoking the emotional engagement of social media users. In a press release, the WHO with the UN made an appeal to all nations:

*We can beat COVID-19 only with facts, science and community solidarity. Misinformation is perpetuating stigma and discrimination and must not come in the way of ensuring that human rights are protected and people at risk and those marginalized have access to health and social protection services.*¹⁴

Some examples of discrimination fuelling the pandemic are: the stigmatization of Asian people residing or working in Europe and America following the outbreak of the virus in China in early February 2020;¹⁵ the rise of xenophobic speeches against immigrants in Italy by the political far-right who were against immigration years before the pandemic began;¹⁶ the increase in caste discrimination in some parts of India¹⁷ and a political party's promise to deliver free vaccines in exchange for votes before the Bihar elections.¹⁸

Another cause of the infodemic is the *technological bias*. The thing that can affect some of the negative attributes of social media is the structure of technology itself. Social media is a public platform on which anyone, including news outlets, can post anything without being accountable for fact-checking. Furthermore, the thought that 'technology is just technology' or the idea that mere content matters – not the medium through which it is communicated – is not true. Marshall McLuhan reminded us that "the medium is the message"¹⁹. As such, people are lured to alter their perceptions, opinions, identities, lifestyles, relationships, ... in ways that they have never experienced before and in a manner that many of them are not even aware of. Indeed, information about COVID-19 impacts our lifestyles for better or worse, depending on the content to which we are exposed. The algorithms that determine what content we see are meant to reward our emotional responses and create *echo chambers*. We begin to encounter only beliefs or opinions that coincide with our own interests, so that our existing views are reinforced and alternative ideas are not considered. (We see what we like and we like what we see. Then we post more of the same to gain more likes.)

As if pampering the ego were not enough, the algorithms that profile similarities in preferences bring people with shared interests together (just as Facebook shows you requests from friends of friends,

Another cause of the infodemic is the *technological bias*. The thing that can affect some of the negative attributes of social media is the structure of technology itself. Social media is a public platform on which anyone, including news outlets, can post anything without being accountable for fact-checking. Furthermore, the thought that 'technology is just technology' or the idea that mere content matters – not the medium through which it is communicated – is not true.

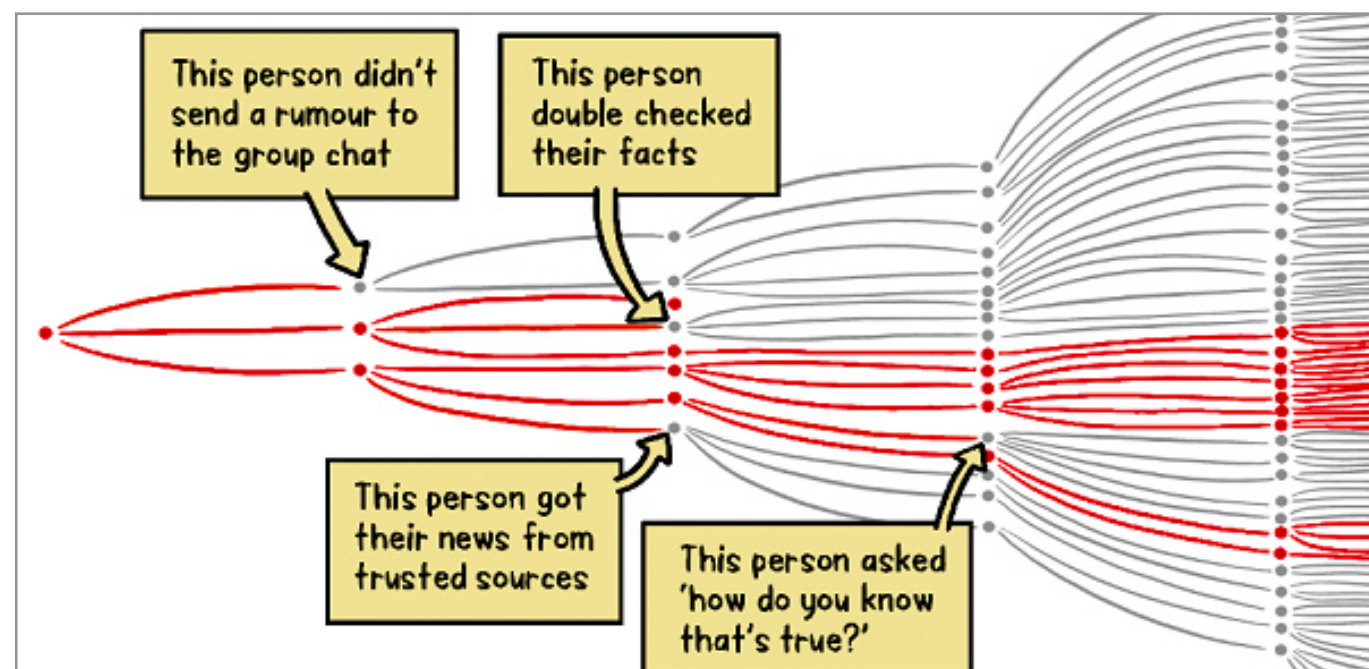
or relatives of relatives, or artists with artists, etc..). Thus, *filter bubbles* are formed. We, who enjoy the comfort of our echo chambers, open up only to others we are comfortable with, with no desire to interact with those outside our bubble. Meanwhile the technology pushes deeper into our pockets by fine-tuning the filters of our choices. As Johnathan Stray, a journalist on the AI beat says, the algorithms "continually explore the boundaries of your interests, looking for what you *didn't know you wanted*."²⁰

Knowing what we have explained above makes it easier to put the blame for the current polluted information ecosystem on the technologies of social media. Indeed, technology is an amplifier of human intentions, but at its heart, the darkest manifestations of social media are precisely intentions that are all too human.

The FABC response?

With regard to solutions, I do not wish to usurp the time and the ideas of speakers who follow this presentation. However, permit me to suggest that much can be done by educating Church members and our institutional policy makers to implement the procedures suggested by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) that works in tandem with WHO. These can become personal and community rules, which will certainly go a long way in order to 'flatten the infodemic curve'.²¹

1. Work with WHO.
2. Avoid fake news.²²
3. Identify evidence underlying the information shared.
4. Respect privacy.
5. Confirm that the information has been shared before by other people.
6. Confirm the source, in particular the threads on WhatsApp.
7. If the information is not confirmed, it is better not to share it.
8. Share information responsibly.
9. Report harmful rumours.²³
10. Participate responsibly in social conversations.
11. Continue collaborating.
12. Keep learning.
13. Examine if the information really adds up (is worth diffusing to others) even if it is from a secure source and has been shared before.



The effects of responsible sharing or not sharing information can save lives, as demonstrated in the above diagram from the WHO website.

I hasten to add, the principles for dealing with disinformation shared above are not at all new. Some of them have been part of the critical education against media disinformation ever since the 1960s. McLuhan, a convert to Catholicism and a practising one at that, was recognized widely as the prophet of the electric age, and, at the end of the last century, as the prophet of the internet age. Here is one of his many prophecies made in 1967: "Ours is a brand-new world of all-at-once-ness. 'Time' has ceased, 'space' has vanished. We now live in a 'global village'... a simultaneous happening. Information pours upon us, instantaneously and continuously."²⁴ Thanks to his foresight and his Centre for Culture and Technology at Toronto, he received a growing number of offers from other universities spread chiefly across English-speaking countries.

They turned critical awareness and analysis of media consumption and production for responsible citizenship into the Media Education (ME) movement (similar to Media Literacy or Media Information Literacy, Digital Information Literacy, etc.) which, encouraged by Church documents²⁵, began in a number of Church-run institutions all over the world, as well as in South-East Asia. Of the latter, we may mention PAME (Philippine Association for Media Education), the ME manuals of the Salesians of Don Bosco in South Asia and the Philippines, and the various ME initiatives in the FABC region by members of SIGNIS (formerly UNDA-OCIC).

One of our responses to the global infodemic can be the strengthening of these already existing centres of Media Literacy and, perhaps, an updating of their involvement in the urgent issues of our time, such as the infodemic of fake news, stigmatization, injustice and the deep-fakes caused by AI that is soon to be upon us.

ME or Media Information Literacy is one of the sure ways to help digital natives and future citizens of our countries become alert and conscientious leaders today for vibrant democracies tomorrow. It is an opportunity that the Church-as-a-whole cannot afford to squander in yet another battle²⁶ for the rights of humanity against the might of technology in the hands of the wrong people.

Thank You all for your patient listening.

End Notes overleaf...

End Notes

1. WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard, 2020/11/14, https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=Cj0KCQiAnb79BRDgARIsAOVbhRpjt1qLi3Eu5sR9NvttSsb7nvL8KCYd4vSNSTjsrhKNBbUxLMLEL1oaAoTbEALw_wcB

2. WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard, 2020/11/14, 3:59pm CET. https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=Cj0KCQiAnb79BRDgARIsAOVbhRpjt1qLi3Eu5sR9NvttSsb7nvL8KCYd4vSNSTjsrhKNBbUxLMLEL1oaAoTbEALw_wcB

3. Some think that COVID-19 is a conspiracy theory designed by pharmaceutical companies. Cf. Identifying Conspiracy Theories, European Commission website, https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories_en (23-11-2020)

4. Cf. Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) in https://iris.paho.org/bitstream/handle/10665.2/52052/Factsheet-infodemic_eng.pdf?sequence=14&isAllowed=y (24-11-2020).

5. The joint statement was made by WHO, UN, UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO, UNAIDS, ITU, UN Global Pulse, and IFRC. Cf. <https://www.who.int/news/item/23-09-2020-managing-the-covid-19-infodemic-promoting-healthy-behaviours-and-mitigating-the-harm-from-misinformation-and-disinformation> (22-11-2020)

6. The reference is The Free Dictionary by Farlex, <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/> (01-11-2020).

7. Cf. Charlie Warzel, He Predicted The 2016 Fake News Crisis. Now He’s Worried About An Information Apocalypse, 11-02-2018, in <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/charliewarzel/the-terrifying-future-of-fake-news> (21-11-2020).

8. Cf. also Nina Schik, Deepfakes: The Coming Infocalypse, Grand Central Publishing, 2020.

9. See the video by Supasorn Suwajanakorn et al., Synthesizing Obama: Learning Lip Sync from Audio, SIGGRAPH 2017 in https://youtu.be/MVBe6_o4cMI (21-11-2020)

10. All citations of Ovadya are from, Warzel, He Predicted The 2016 Fake News Crisis.

11. The good news, however, is a solution to identify deepfake videos is being developed. Cf. Reality Defender 2020 a force against deepfakes, <https://rd2020.org/index.html> (20-11-2020) A non-partisan and non-commercial effort to help reporters and campaigns uphold truth and ethical standards.

12. Cf. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public: Mythbusters in <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters> (12-11-2020)

13. Cf. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public: Mythbusters.

14. WHO-UN PRESS RELEASE: COVID-19 pandemic: countries urged to take stronger action to stop spread of harmful information, 23-09-2020, in UNAIDS, https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/pressreleaseandstatementarchive/2020/september/20200923_infodemic (14-11-2020)

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16. Annalisa Merelli - Luca Powell, Coronavirus is actually hurting Italian fake news and xenophobic propaganda, in Quartz, 21-03-2020, <https://qz.com/1820215/coronavirus-is-hurting-xenophobic-propaganda-in-italy/> (16-11-2020).

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18. Webdesk, Free vaccine only for Bihar opposition netizens question BJPs poll promise, in The Week, 22-10-2020, <https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2020/10/22/free-vaccine-only-for-bihar-opposition-netizens-question-bjps-poll-promise.html> (14-11-2020)

19. Marshall McLuhan, The Medium is the Massage, Penguin Books, 1967.

20. Johnathan Stray, Are we stuck in filter bubbles? Here are five potential paths out, 11-06-2012, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2012/07/are-we-stuck-in-filter-bubbles-here-are-five-potential-paths-out/> (14-11-2020)

21. Cf. Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), cited above.

22. See Facebook’s suggestions on Tips to spot false news, Facebook-Help Centre, <https://www.facebook.com/help/188118808357379> (12-11-2020)

23.

24. Marshall McLuhan, The Medium is the Massage, Penguin Books, 1967, 63. See his explanation on video: <https://youtu.be/HeDnPP6ntic?t=169> (23-11-2020)

25. Cf. Franz-Josef Eilers, svd, Church and Social Communication 40 years of Inter Mirifica and beyond, in Ad Veritatem. UST Graduate School, Manila, Philippines, Vol. 5/1 (2005) 1-9. See also: <http://www.fabc.org/offices/osc/docs/pdf/Inter%20Mirifica%2040%20Years%20and%20Beyond.pdf> (23-11-2020).

26. The previous battle we are referring to is the one against imperialism. On April 5, 1930, Mahatma Gandhi solicited the support of his American friends in the struggle for India's independence (and, by consequence, global imperialism) as follows: "I want world sympathy in this battle of right against might." The battle continues in our disinformation age.



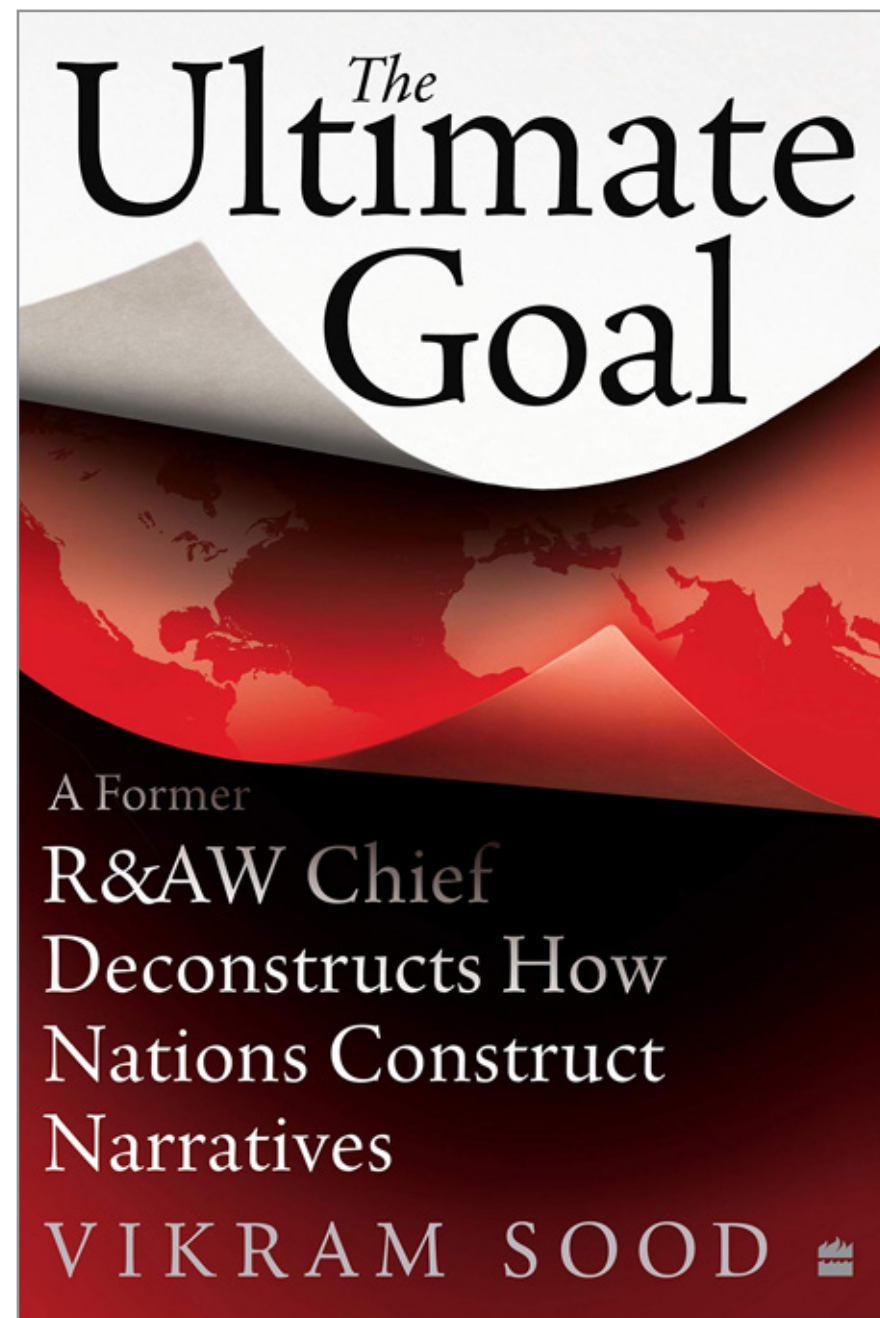
Vikram Sood, a career intelligence officer for thirty-one years who retired in March 2003 after heading the R&AW, is currently an adviser at the Observer Research Foundation, an independent public-policy think tank based in New Delhi. He writes regularly on security, foreign relations and strategic issues in journals and newspapers and has contributed chapters related to security, China, intelligence and India's neighbourhood to books published in the last few years.

His book, *The Unending Game: A Former R&AW Chief's Insights into Espionage*, was published in 2018.



Dr. Shanthie Mariet D'Souza is founder & President, Mantraya; Visiting Faculty, Naval War College, Goa; Board Director, Regional Center for Strategic Studies, Colombo; International Adviser, Nordic Counter Terrorism Network, Helsinki; Research Fellow, WeltTrends-Institut für internationale Politik, Potsdam; Senior Analyst, South Asia desk, Wikistrat; Expert and Contributor to the Middle East-Asia Project (MAP) at the Middle East Institute, Washington DC; Adviser, Independent Conflict Research & Analysis, London. Tweets @shanmariet. She can be reached at shanthie.dsouza@mantraya.org

This article was first published by Rediff Vikram Sood: 'Real power comes not from the barrel of a gun, but from those who control the narrative' - Rediff.com India News



<https://www.amazon.de/-/en/Vikram-Sood-ebook/dp/B08FCY724J>

DR SHANTHIE MARIET D'SOUZA BOOK REVIEW

*The Ultimate Goal: A Former R&AW Chief
Deconstructs How Nations Construct Narratives*
by **Vikram Sood** (Harper Collins: 2020)

Everyone has a story to tell. The story may or may not represent truth. But strategic narration of an event can have a lasting impact on the mind of the person shaping her/his attitude and outlook. In the context of nations, telling stories is about setting a narrative, which is crucial to its existence, its flourishing, its capacities to finding allies and dealing with enemies. It is defensive as well as offensive. Powerful nations have mastered this art of narrative building. Those nations who aspire to become global powers must do so. This, in short, is a message that reverberates through 'The Ultimate Goal', a seminal book by Vikram Sood, the former chief of India's Research & Analysis Wing (R&AW).

From a former spymaster, Sood has metamorphosed into an accomplished writer of a kind. His previous book, 'The Unending Game' was a master narration of the nuances of espionage. The second book makes a leap forward in highlighting the intricacies and importance of narratives. Whereas the first book is a must read for those trying to understand how spy games are played between nations, the 'Ultimate Goal' is a treatise for all those involved in and aspire to be powerful nations on a global scale. "Real power comes not from the barrel of a gun but from those who control the narrative," Sood asserts.

The importance of narratives has been least studied at a time and age when the rampant use of social media creates its very own self propagating truth. Sood fills in a critical gap in the understanding the use of narratives. Powerful nations use narratives to advance their agenda. He deconstructs 'the narrative' and explains how a country's ability to construct, sustain and control narratives, at home and abroad, enhances its strength and position." Building narratives and sustaining them is part of the effort to control storylines, which in turn help control the world-the ultimate goal of the ambitious and powerful"(p.xiii).

A 'narrative' may not necessarily be based on truth, but it does need to be plausible, have a meaning and create a desired perception. Intelligence agencies invariably play a critical role in this, an often-indispensable tool of statecraft. During most of the twentieth century, intelligence agencies helped shape narratives to advance their countries' agendas through literature, history, drama, art, music and cinema. Today, social media has become crucial tool in manipulating, countering or disrupting narratives, with its ability to spread fake news and provoke instant reactions.

The book makes a gripping start with an interesting anecdote that depicts the murky Cold War politics and the intelligence games played by the then superpowers- U.S. and U.S.S.R, including the mysterious role of assassination of American President John F Kennedy in 1963, the military industrial complex

"Narratives are not the truth; rather, they nudge you to understand the truth in a particular way, Sood adds. China has succeeded in distancing itself from the 'Wuhan virus', the place where it had originated to maintaining the name as 'Corona virus'. He further states that, "Narrative to be successfully sold requires a receptive audience. It is like terror and insurgency. External assistance alone cannot create an insurgency simply by supplying funds and arms. There must be a local grievance-national, religious or ethnic, real or imaginary, created over time through propaganda- which is then exploited by the external entity to create an insurgent movement" (p.4).

and the U.S. interventions in far flung theatres. It then seamlessly travels into different regions of the world, talking about conflicts, global power politics and terrorism, all intertwined into the paradigm of building narratives. It succeeds in unmasking, bit by bit, the process of narrative-building, its main drivers, tools and vehicles used by the then superpowers to shape and influence collective thinking for political outcomes favourable to them.

"Propaganda Always wins, If you Allow it" states Sood citing Leni Riefenstahl' (p.118). Soon after 9/11, the U.S. media began to carry sensational stories about the Iraqi weapons programme. What followed thereafter is a military campaign that devastated Iraq, and in a way, provided the space for the birth of the Islamic State. More importantly, the shift of attention and troops to Iraq in 2003, changed the tide in Afghanistan and led to the re-emergence of the Taliban since 2005-06.

In Chapter six, Sood provides one of the scathing critiques of the American strategic objectives in Afghanistan and West Asia. He calls these a 'failure' which had led to rampant radicalization in the region. 'The real but undeclared truth was that the US was in the region to preserve its way of life and global dominance that is inherently based on an unlimited availability of cheap oil.

Helping the region redeem itself in accordance with the American ideals was simply an excuse'. It is evident that as the US attempts desperately to extricate itself out, it is leaving behind a highly destabilised region, which will inevitably become the launching pad for terrorism 3.0.

Neatly interwoven into 12 chapters, the book probes into how China is dealing with criticism over the deadly Corona virus - now ravaging the world - emanated from its soil. The former spymaster explains how it is trying to damage control a narrative that interferes with its geopolitical and economic goals and points out that the Corona crisis has deepened the fault lines between China and the U.S. under Donald Trump.

"Narratives are not the truth; rather, they nudge you to understand the truth in a particular way, Sood adds. China has succeeded in distancing itself from the 'Wuhan virus', the place where it had originated to maintaining the name as 'Corona virus'. He further states that, "Narrative to be successfully sold requires a receptive audience. It is like terror and insurgency. External assistance alone cannot create an insurgency simply by supplying funds and arms. There must be a local grievance-national, religious or ethnic, real or imaginary, created over time through propaganda- which is then exploited by the external entity to create an insurgent movement" (p.4).

Putting out your message first is more important rather than merely countering them. This is one of the key contributions of this book. This finds resonance in the “The India story”, where Sood points out how India’s narrative was created by the West, thereby creating a distorted image of the country. To rise as a global power of consequence, India needs to put out its own story. As a civilizational power, “the first step would be to accept and propagate the notion that the country has a civilizational heritage that is much larger and older than its present history”.

Sood perhaps could have further elaborated on this aspect by analysing the use of narratives and branding by international terrorist groups, particularly al Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Taliban, which could be extremely relevant in countering terrorism and insurgencies in the South Asian context. In Afghanistan, the battle of narratives has played to the advantage of the Taliban. The negative narratives emanating from that country, particularly as portrayed by the international media, has worked to the advantage of the Taliban and influenced international public opinion adversely.

But negative stories sell faster and the media with the its competition for higher TRPs and links to business houses with profit motive are seldom into objective reporting or even reporting both sides of the story. All this adds to the political economy of conflict and a lack of strategic communication strategy on the part of the governments which this book could have further explored.

While much focus has been put on building narratives not much has been explored in terms of counter narratives. In the existing literature and strategies of countering violent extremism (CVE), counter narratives are critical in terms of neutralizing the messaging from extremist groups.

Counter-narrative is messaging that offers an alternative view to extremist recruitment and propaganda. These are considered crucial in countering the virulent ideology that aids extremists groups in recruitment, branding and execution of violent acts.

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Sood further states that in crafting India’s new narrative (p. 284) , “it is important to make India’s past an inspiration for its future’. Yet, he clearly states that ‘honouring the past by remembering it does not mean a return to obscurantism, exclusivism or fundamentalism. It is simply a conscious act of taking pride in one’s heritage ...it binds diverse people together and transcends religion, language, caste and region. It means having one’s own narrative for the past, present and future”. This would require a visionary and inclusive political leadership that can build on a narrative which includes and binds the diverse people in one common thread.

This book which is pathbreaking in the realm of narrative building will be useful not only to the intelligence agencies worldwide but will also attract a much bigger audience including the policy makers, strategic planners, military, media, film industry, psychologists and the corporate sector.

Sood writes, “Narratives are for self-justification; they are designed by the narrator not only to tell his version his way but also to tell your version his way. “None would have known this better. Sood had been in the business of spy craft for decades. In this book, he ably deconstructs and makes it easier for others to understand, learn and act. The policy makers, strategic planners and practitioners need to pay heed to the utility of the narratives as brought out in this important and timely book to get on the global stage.



Bibhu Prasad Routray

Dr. Bibhu Prasad Routray held the position of Visiting Professor and Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) chair, India Studies at Murdoch University, Perth between July-December 2017. He served as a Deputy Director in the National Security Council Secretariat, Government of India and Director of the Institute for Conflict Management (ICM)'s Database & Documentation Centre, Guwahati, Assam. He was a Visiting Fellow at the South Asia programme of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore between 2010 and 2012. Routray specialises in decision-making, governance, counter-terrorism, force modernisation, intelligence reforms, foreign policy and dissent articulation issues in South and South East Asia. His writings, based on his projects and extensive field based research in Indian conflict theatres of the Northeastern states and the left-wing extremism affected areas, have appeared in a wide range of academic as well as policy journals, websites, and magazines. This article republished by permission of www.mantraya.org

DR BIBHU PRASAD ROUTRAY

FUTURE OF THE MILITARY'S 'DUAL FUNCTION' IN MYANMAR

Abstract

Myanmar's parliamentary elections, held on 8 November, have produced a predictable winner—the National League for Democracy (NLD). The military-backed party— Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which finished a poor second in the race, has alleged fraud and irregularities, demanding a repoll. The defeat, however, is unlikely to curb the military's yearning to play a decisive role in the civilian administration. To this effect, the coming months may witness an intense contestation between the NLD-led government and the military and USDP. NLD's goal of strengthening democracy in this Southeast Asian nation would remain a pipedream unless it unites all opposition parties including those representing the ethnic minorities.

Introduction

Dwifungsi is an Indonesian word for 'dual function'. In the country's political landscape, starting with throughout the era of President Sukarno and subsequently President Suharto, the military's involvement in what are essentially civilian functions grossly undermined the role and functions of the political parties.[1] While that phenomenon is now a part of Indonesia's history, in Myanmar, the *Tatmadaw* (military) remains firmly entrenched in the country's body politik. Its popularity may have reached rock bottom among the pro-democracy populace and yet, through the flawed 2008 constitution, it continues to maintain a dominant position and overarching influence over the civilian government. [2] The results of the elections held for the bicameral parliament on 8 November, in which the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) fared poorly, may lead to pathways in which the *Tatmadaw* will seek to avenge the continuing loss of its popularity and the danger of its powers gradually slipping away.

Poor Electoral Show

Of the 1117 seats[3] for which elections were held, the USDP won only 71, down from 117 in 2015. The Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy (NLD) secured a resounding victory winning 920 seats, surpassing the 859 seats it had won in 2015. Several USDP candidates including top leaders and former ministers were defeated in areas considered to be the party's stronghold. [4]

While the results are proving to be a source of jubilation for the NLD,[5] the USDP's sense of shock translated into rejection of the polls as 'unfair'. It demanded a repoll, citing alleged malpractices favouring the NLD. Notwithstanding the international observers' clean chit to the elections[6] and the role of the independent Union Election Commission (UEC),[7] the USDP described the polls as an ugly legacy "for the future generations" and "an election which did not confirm to democracy norms"[8]. The levelled allegations included duplicate voter lists which allowed voters to cast their ballot multiple times, proxy as well as underage voting, harassments to genuine voters and vote-buying. All these charges have been dismissed by the UEC which has confirmed the NLD's seat count. The UEC has also said that all those who have complained against the polls could register their formal protest within 45 days in their respective townships. That method, even if chosen by the individual USDP candidates, is unlikely to have an impact on the results.

Political Contestation

The *Tatmadaw*, however, steered clear of the demand of a repoll. The spokesperson clarified that the USDP's call was neither the view of the military leadership nor was it approved by the military. [9] Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, chief of *Tatmadaw*, on 8 November clearly mentioned, "I will have to accept the people's wish and the results that come with it. [10] There is no denying it." Lest this be considered a schism between the USDP consisting mostly of retired generals and the *Tatmadaw*, the latter had sought to question the UEC's capacities to hold the elections, only six days before the polls were held. [11]

In a statement in English on 2 November, the military had accused the commission of incompetence, particularly regarding voter list errors, disputes and complaints relating to early voting. The statement also sought to blame the government for such weakness saying that "the government has the complete responsibility for all the intentional and unintentional mistakes of the commission at its different levels." [12]

A day before the polls, the military went a step further by warning President U Win Myint with impeachment if he failed to uphold constitutional responsibilities. The President's office had criticized the military's statement on the UEC. Reminding the President that military, as the guardian of the constitution, has every right to involve itself in national politics.[13] These statements raised apprehensions regarding the *Tatmadaw*'s intentions with some commentators speculating about a possible coup de etat. That, however, would have been unrealistic and unnecessary extreme step for the military, which continues to enjoy enormous power in both the military as well as civilian affairs.

Future of Tatmadaw's dual function: Four Pathways

The poll results will be grudgingly accepted by the USDP and the military. However, instead of marking an end to the USDP's attempt to reclaim the political space lost to the NLD, this may start a phase of intense effort by the *Tatmadaw*-USDP combine to undermine the NLD's political mandate and ability to govern. This may play out in four different ways, in the coming months.

(i) *Worsening of the NLD-Tatmadaw relations*: The flawed 2008 constitution makes the consolidation of democracy an impossibility of Myanmar. It allows the ascent of a truly civilian government, but stops it from becoming the final decision maker in key areas including defence, home, and border affairs. In short, the military which holds these ministries, runs the government by proxy. The NLD, in countless ways, has attempted to correct the anomaly proposing constitutional amendments, only to be rebuffed by the military. [14] Suu Kyi has also tried to cajole the military by supporting its brutal "clearance operations" against the Rohingya in Rakhine state in 2017. However, the military has refused to return the favours and has blocked every move of the NLD government to introduce democratic reforms.

The NLD was also able to retaliate in kind on odd occasions, although with little impact on consolidating democracy. This included the government's refusal to convene meetings of the National Defense and Security Council (NDSC), the country's highest security authority. The NDSC is chaired by the President, but is dominated by the military by a ratio of 6 to 5. Throughout the entire tenure of the first NLD government (2015-2020), not a single NDSC meeting was convened, in spite of several reminders issued by the military. This led the military chief to remark that it is too risky if the country is run by a single person without the guidance and consultation of other sectors.[15] The *Tatmadaw* will have reasons to believe that in her first tenure Suu Kyi was given too long a rope to operate, which has proved to be detrimental to the interests of the military. Their inter-relationship in all likelihood will delve into deeper levels of acrimony.

(ii) *Impact on constitutional reforms*: The 2008 constitution reserves 25 percent of the seats in the parliament for the military and thereby makes any constitutional amendment an impossibility unless some military members break ranks with their colleagues. The military voting always en bloc has been a clear stumbling block for the NLD’s vigorous attempts to bring about constitutional reforms. Suu Kyi this time has given an indication of building further pressure on the military by floating the idea of a ‘government of national unity’[16] including members from ethnic parties. This idea is still in its infancy. However, irrespective of whether a national government materialises or not, attitude of the USDP and the military are likely to further harden on constitutional reforms and may even expand to blocking the NLD government’s routine legislations.

(iii) *Paralysing governance*: In the absence of constitutional reforms, the *Tatmadaw* continues rule Myanmar by proxy. Not only that it holds key ministerial positions of Home, Defence and Border Affairs, the NLD government in its previous tenure has been forced to defend the military’s brutal actions against the ethnic minorities. While the Rohingya persecution project was an essentially sanctioned by the military, Suu Kyi had to bear the maximum brunt for defending it. The *Tatmadaw* may continue to employ this policy to discredit the NLD government and block its ability to govern. While the NLD may have been guilty of trying to court the military in order to receive its support for consolidating democracy, the *Tatmadaw*’s strategy of making the NLD responsible for its actions may prove to be detrimental to the NLD’s image.

(iv) *Seeking alternatives to NLD*: Given the current popularity of Aung San Suu Kyi, the USDP, even with 25 percent reserved seats for the military, might find it difficult to win the required number of seats form a government in future. However, things may change during the next parliamentary elections, due in 2025. Suu Kyi is 75-years old and may not be politically active for long. In her absence, the NLD’s electoral performance may suffer. This void is likely to be filled up by other political parties which participated in the 2020 polls. A strategic alliance with some of these anti-NLD parties may catapult the USDP to power.

Outlook

In spite of having to settle for a quasi-democratic political set up, the *Tatmadaw*’s urge to preside over civilian administration remains undiminished. The 2008 constitution remains a key tool in its hands to subvert attempts at consolidating democracy in Myanmar. Results of the 2020 parliamentary elections have underscored the popularity of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD.

But that alone will not be sufficient for the NLD to bring about much changes in the nature of civil-military relations. Without the political parties opposing the military’s overbearing role coming together, the latter will continue to have an overbearing presence in civilian administration.

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Mark Ulyseas has served time in advertising as copywriter and creative director selling people things they didn't need, a ghost writer for some years, columnist of a newspaper, a freelance journalist and photo-grapher. In 2009 he created *Live Encounters Magazine*, in Bali, Indonesia. It is a not for profit (adfree) free online magazine featuring leading academics, writers, poets, activists of all hues etc. from around the world. March 2016 saw the launch of its sister publication *Live Encounters Poetry*, which was relaunched as *Live Encounters Poetry & Writing* in March 2017. In February 2019 the third publication was launched, *LE Children Poetry & Writing* (now renamed *Live Encounters Young Poets & Writers*). In August 2020 the fourth publication, *Live Encounters Books*, was launched. He has edited, designed and produced all of *Live Encounters'* 205 publications (till February 2021). Mark's philosophy is that knowledge must be free and shared freely to empower all towards enlightenment. He is the author of three books: *RAINY – My friend & Philosopher*; *Seductive Avatars of Maya – Anthology of Dystopian Lives* and *In Gethsemane: Transcripts of a Journey*. <https://liveencounters.net/mark-ulyseas/>
<https://www.amazon.com/Mark-Ulyseas/e/B01FUUQVBG>



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas

MARK ULYSEAS

Has Mother Nature resorted to Plan B?

Natural born killers?

The compartmentalisation of societies across the world continues despite valiant efforts by those who profess the oneness of humanity. How can we expect to inculcate this oneness when the basis of ethics remains fear and its bastard child, violence?

From the moment we open our eyes to the world, the conditioning of mind and body begins in earnest. Fear is instilled in us by warped notions in society – if we don't do this or that we shall face physical, mental or divine retribution in this life or the next. And when our minds are snared the rest follows, naturally. The time has come when we actually believe and this belief is being passed on to our offspring – Our Way (the only way) of the ethics of living.

We have become guardians of our own value based ethics of living, where ethics is elastic when applied to others' ethics with a host of subjective options on offer. This is where, perhaps, the problem lies – we gauge the 'authority' of our ethics of living from our religious beliefs, rituals and traditions that have percolated down from our ancestors. Hence what would appear to be ethical to one group may be offensive to others...female genital mutilation, child marriage, dowry, severing limbs of those accused of theft and adultery, and stoning others to death...Or, using the banking system to defraud people and more.

In our haste to 'impose' our ethics of living on others we resort to violence, beginning with verbal abuse, racism, social ostracisation, sexual abuse and culminating in the use of weapons to commit murder/genocide. This violence has become synonymous with breathing, a chilling involuntary action. Without violence our purpose for existence on this planet would cease. We will become redundant. It is the nature of the beast, the violence within us, which is guiding us to self-destruction.

Violence comes in many avatars. It begins in the mind of a child when it is 'brainwashed' by its parents through a process of osmosis and backed up by punishments so that it conforms to prevailing acceptable social norms. It learns at a very young age that violence solves problems and that violence is the only path towards overcoming fear; The fear that one feels of being at the mercy of the elements of humankind's 'way of life'.

Does education breed violence?

Perhaps the French General, Napoleon Bonaparte, was right when he said, "History is a set of lies agreed upon".

We creatively write our history which is peppered with battles won and lost by our ancestors. It is written in blood by those who view such acts of slaughtering the 'enemy' as a moral victory over forces of 'evil'. The glorification of the savage within us is self-evident.

The lies of history poison our perception of our fellow humans. This is embedded in our psyche by our well-meaning parents who want nothing than the 'best for us'.

Education is a powerful tool that sculpts our minds into lean, mean fighting machines. Minds contaminated by the ideology of violence, mental and physical.

Whose morals is it anyway?

Many years ago I had interviewed a prostitute who worked at one of the world's leading tourist destinations. She told me that prostitutes are the only truthful people in the world because they know who they are and never have any illusions about being 'above' anyone else. That they don't pretend to be anything other than providers of a service (sex) for money, money that is spent on helping their families to survive life; Unlike the 'ladies of society' who are happily married but bed hop, while spouses do likewise – both pretending to live a respectable life (whatever this means). Civilised society can accept this behaviour but not the services of prostitutes – prostitution is 'unethical'. Oscar Wilde put this in perspective, "As for society – civilised society, at least is never very ready to believe anything to the detriment of those who are both rich and fascinating. It feels instinctively that manners are more important than morals". Sadly, it was this very society that destroyed him.

Are religious rituals and murder ethical?

Religious beliefs and the attendant rituals are fiercely guarded by gendarmes of the faith. Animal sacrifice has been in vogue since time immemorial. There was a time when human sacrifice was popular, now it is viewed as murder. In some religions animal sacrifice is considered murder. But slaughter of innocent human beings in the name of one religion or another is acceptable and often condoned. Or the invasion and destruction of a country (Iraq) where hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians were killed by people to whom they had done no harm.

There are different degrees of murder: the mindless slaughter of animals is not murder: invading foreign countries and killing thousands of innocent civilians is not murder, it is war: killing one's estranged spouse is murder and this usually attracts the death penalty. In many countries the death penalty exists and various methods are used to 'kill' the murderer. We have taken on the mantle of the Supreme Being: deciding who lives and who dies. The circle of death appears to begin and end with our religious beliefs that influence our notion of the ethics of living, one size fits all and if it doesn't then cut it out or cut it off.

There are many among us who are the redeeming factors of a species running riot. I call them the 360° people...those who can embrace one and all irrespective of their caste, colour or creed etc.; People who work towards an understanding between cultures, a common platform where we can all take the same train; People who are often imprisoned or killed for attempting to build bridges across social barriers; People who speak the language of God – truth, love, charity, forgiveness, ahimsa. Many atheists speak this language. There is no fear within them because ahimsa is present. These 360° folk are growing in number everyday across the world. They speak out against injustice and face the wrath of those who are possessed by fear.

Now that the pandemic is upon us, is this too little too late?

Has Nature finally resorted to Plan B?

Or is this the trial period to test our abilities to reach out to one another, to help not just one another but also the flora, fauna and the biosphere with compassion and ahimsa.

The coming months will reveal this and more.

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11
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Live encounters

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