

# Legacies crucial for the commons

Why Gandhi and Marx are more relevant now than ever before



The 150th birth anniversary year of Mohandash Karamchand Gandhi and the 200th birth anniversary of Karl Marx went by this year. Such anniversaries can become occasions of tokenism – for instance, the Indian government has set up a committee with more than 100 members to coordinate celebrations of Gandhi’s anniversary, crammed with political bigwigs from various parties, a few academics and Gandhian workers. I am sceptical it has achieved much more than a significantly heightened scale of the hypocritical display that October 2 brings around every year. Hopefully I’m mistaken, but since any meaningful homage to Gandhi would call into question the very fundamentals of today’s political and economic power, and point a sharply critical gaze at the rampant abuse of religion and nationalism, I think I’m pretty safe in being sceptical. And so too perhaps for Marx, at least where the celebrations are being led by so-called revolutionary governments in those parts of the world where Leftist parties still hold power.

This does not mean that these two figures are of no relevance now. On the contrary, they are even more so than before. Their legacy is crucial for the majority of the world’s population, marginalised by capitalism, statism, patriarchy and other structures of oppression. As it is for the rest of nature, so badly abused by humanity. And it is a legacy that is still alive and thriving, not so much in the orthodox Gandhian and Marxist organisations and in academic circles where the tussle between the two ‘ideologies’ is more dominant than the urge to make them relevant to the struggles of the marginalised, as in these struggles themselves.

**Resistance and construction**  
And so we must turn for hope to the many movements of *sangharsh* (resistance) and *nirman* (construction) throughout the world. These movements realise that the injustices they are facing, and the choices they must



“One thousand farmers have objected to their lands being taken up by the bullet train project.” Farmers and villagers, who might have to relocate from the areas along the proposed route of the project, protest in Mumbai. ■AFP

make, are not bound by the divides that ideologues play games with.

Let’s take *sangharsh*. At any given time in India, there are dozens of sites where Adivasis, farmers, fisherpersons, pastoralists and others are refusing to part with their land or forest or water to make way for so-called development projects. One thousand farmers have filed objections to their lands being taken up by the Prime Minister’s pet project, the bullet train. News that is both inspiring and depressing keeps coming from Latin America, of indigenous people standing up for their territorial rights against mining and oil extraction, and all too frequently paying the price when state or corporate forces kill their leaders. Nationwide rallies were organised by the National Alliance of People’s Movements and the Ekta Parishad in October. They involved movements for land and forest rights, communal harmony, workers’ security and other causes that are not so easy to place in any ideological camp.

The same goes for *nirman*, or the construction of alternatives. Across the world there are incredible examples of sustainable and holistic agriculture, community-led water/energy/food sovereignty, worker takeover of production facilities, resource/knowledge commons, local governance, community health and alternative learning, inter-community peace-building, reassertion of cultural diversity, gender and sexual pluralism, and much else.

It is in many of these alternative movements that I find inspiration for building on the legacies of Gandhi and Marx (and Ambedkar, Rabindranath Tagore, Rosa Luxemburg and various luminaries) and, equally important, on the many indigenous and Adivasi, Dalit, peasant and other ‘folk’ revolutionaries through history. There are many examples that dot the Indian landscape: the few thousand Dalit women farmers who have achieved *anna swaraj* (food sovereignty) in Telangana while also transforming their gender and caste status; the several dozen Gond Adivasi villages in Gadchiroli that have formed a Maha Gram Sabha to stop mining, and work on their own vision of governance and livelihood security; a Dalit sarpanch near Chennai who combines both Marxist and Gandhian principles in his attempt to transform the village he lives in. Similarly, there are others across the world: a thousand people have experimented with anarchic community life in the ‘freetown’ of Christiania in Copenhagen for four decades; indigenous peoples in Peru, Canada and Australia have gained territorial autonomy; small peasants in Africa and Latin America have sustained or gone back to organic farming; fisherpersons in the South Pacific have their own network of sustainably managed marine sites.

What I find of significance in many resistance and alternative movements is the exploration of autonomy, self-reliance, people’s gover-

nance of politics and the economy, freedom with responsibility for the freedom of others, and respect for the rest of nature. While these movements do often call for policy interventions from a more accountable state, there is also an underlying antipathy to the centralised state, as there is in both Gandhian swaraj and in Marxist communism and in many versions of anarchy. Private property is also challenged. In 2013, the Gond village Mendha-Lekha in Maharashtra converted all its agricultural land into the commons. Note that commons here does not mean state-owned, a distorted form of ‘communism’ that has prevailed in orthodox Leftist state regimes.

**Bridging gaps**  
And while Gandhi was weak on challenging capital, and Marx on stressing the fundamental spiritual or ethical connections amongst humans, these movements often tend to bridge these gaps. Insofar as many of them integrate the need to re-establish ecological resilience and wisdom, some even arguing for extending equal respect to other species, they also encompass Marx’s vision of a society that bridges humanity’s ‘metabolic rift’ with nature, and Gandhi’s repeated emphasis on living lightly on earth. With this they also challenge the very fundamentals of ‘development’, especially its mad fixation on economic growth, reliance on ever-increasing production and consumption, and its utter disregard for inequality.

This is not to suggest that Gandhi and Marx can be happily married; there are points of tension (for instance, on the issue of non-violence as a principle). There are points of ambiguity in recognising that indigenous peoples have already lived many elements of their dreams. But I have found enough in grassroots movements to be convinced that there is critical common ground amongst them, if our ultimate goals are well-being, justice, and equity, based on ecological wisdom. We would do well to honour their legacy by identifying such common ground and building on the struggles and creativity of ‘ordinary’ people in communities across the world.

Ashish Kothari is with Kalpavriksh and Vikalp Sangam, Pune

# Remembering Iravatham Mahadevan

He knew more about Indian epigraphy and the linguistic aspects of Dravidian and Indo-Aryan than some specialists



I heard the news on Monday morning of the passing of Iravatham Mahadevan and was deeply saddened. Mahadevan, or Jani as his friends called him, was a special person of extraordinary talent and a much-respected scholar despite his having worked in administration for most of his professional life.

I met him first in 1968. I had received a small book from Asko Parpola of the University of Helsinki: it was his initial attempt at deciphering the Indus script. The news that I had a copy spread quickly and I was inundated with callers asking to borrow the book. One of the calls was from Mahadevan: he introduced himself as the Director of Modern Bakeries in Delhi but added that he spent his spare time working on epigraphy and on the Indus script. He added very quickly that he was not a man of idle fantasies but a serious student of the subject. He said he only wanted to come to my house and sit in a corner and read the book, so I took a chance and invited him.

I was startled to discover that he was more knowledgeable about Indian epigraphy and the linguistic aspects of Dravidian and Indo-Aryan than some of the specialists. So we got talking on and off on what he was doing and there were even long telephone calls discussing his theories. This also resulted in a friendship between him and his wife and my mother and myself. He maintained that Gowri made the softest idlis and so she did and we would go to their home for an occasional Sunday brunch.

**Two interests**  
His main interests were two. One was the study of the adaptation of the Brahmi script to Tamil, what came to be called Tamil Brahmi, which was available in large numbers of short inscriptions scattered in south India. The second was the decipherment of the pictograms from the Indus Civilisation, based on the seals in the main, and found in large numbers at Indus sites – what is often called the Indus script.

The first was relatively easier once the language of the inscriptions was recognised as Tamil. It required a few small adjustments

which Mahadevan recognised and that he worked out and that enabled him to read them. They had names of people and recorded small gifts. But they were, significantly, the earliest written records in Tamil, dating to a couple of centuries before the Christian Era and continuing for a few centuries. Both the names and the locations of the inscriptions, which were often found on rock surfaces, were important. Mahadevan became quite an explorer of the south Indian landscape in searching for the inscriptions. He published the corpus with readings and annotations in 1966 but the major volume was published as *Early Tamil Epigraphy from the Earliest Times to the Sixth Century A.D.* by Harvard University Press in its prestigious series, the Harvard Oriental Series, in 2003.

**Deciphering the Indus script**  
The work on deciphering the Indus script was a far more complicated study on which he spent half a century. His was not a hit-or-miss reading of what the symbols might represent. He applied the rules of linguistics and determined by positional analysis what might have been grammatical forms. As in all his work, his essentially rational approach was impressive. He realised that there was a need for an up-to-date concordance of all the symbols, so he spent some years preparing this. It was published by the Archaeological Survey of India in 1977 as *The Indus Script: Texts, Concordance and Tables*.

From this Mahadevan moved to examining individual symbols and testing readings in possible languages. He was initially more inclined to read them as designations. Gradually he arrived at an interesting linguistic relationship where he argued that the Harappans were Dravidian speakers with their own distinctive culture and religion. The presence of the later Indo-Aryan speakers led to some degree of cultural and religious interconnections that are apparent in the sources of the post-Harappan period.

In some ways he continued the earlier tradition of some of the administrator-scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries. What was truly amazing was that he was professionally so good as an administrator and yet, at the same time, was acknowledged as a scholar of a dimension that many of the best scholars would envy.

Romila Thapar is a distinguished historian of early India

## SINGLE FILE Rules for a resolution

Ajit Doval’s visit to China presents an opportunity to take stock of the boundary question

SOURABH GUPTA



National Security Adviser Ajit Doval’s visit to China for the 21st edition of Special Representatives talks presents an opportunity to take stock of the dos and don’ts related to the resolution of the boundary dispute.

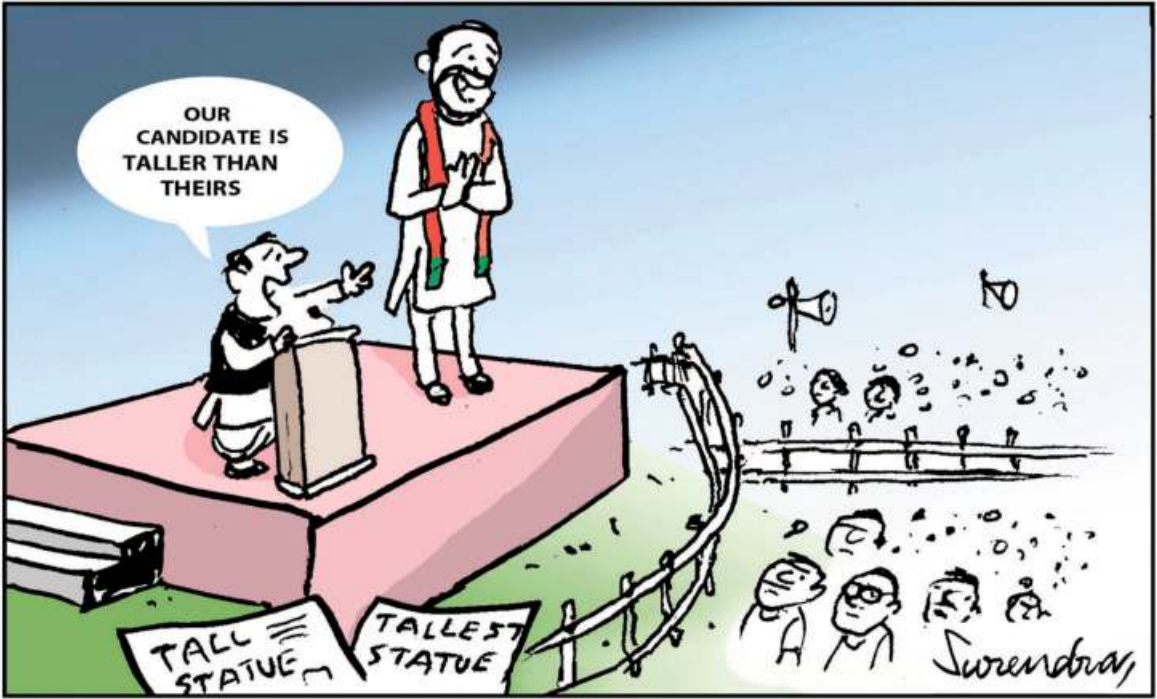
First, China has resolved all its continental land borders, except with India and Bhutan. In those instances, the U.S. was neither an ally nor a key defence partner of that counterpart country. New Delhi’s blossoming maritime ties with the U.S. implies that the India-China frontier will remain an expedient pressure point in Beijing’s playbook, to signal disaffection. Full resolution will have to await that as-yet distant day when New Delhi is willing to elevate its ties with Beijing at par with Washington. Vigilance and patience are counselled in the interim.

Second, the lack of a medium-term resolution does not preclude the two countries narrowing their boundary-related differences. Each easing cycle in Indian-China ties, going back to the establishment of the Special Representatives mechanism in 2003, has witnessed an initial focus on repair and stabilisation on the ground followed by a successful effort at narrowing the underlying dispute at the table. With the ‘Wuhan spirit’ as the backdrop, the recent effort to link up military headquarters and regional commands with hotlines bodes well for an intensive phase of settlement-related discussions after the general election next year.

Third, none of China’s 12 territorial settlements has been concluded under duress or reflects an obsession with cartographic detail. Rather, an opportunity cost-based calculus tied to good neighbourliness has prevailed. The received wisdom that New Delhi can leverage its American relationship or the Dalai Lama to extract a stiffer bargain on the boundary is wrong. Both recent periods of effusive Indo-American warmth (2007-2010 and 2015-2017) witnessed more, not less, pressure on the boundary.

Fourth, while India has been admirably flexible in accommodating a variety of dispute settlement modes, including third-party arbitration, a solitary principles-based package approach has characterised China’s territorial settlements. Mr. Doval’s preference for a bottom-up approach that clarifies specific points of contention along the Line of Actual Control is unlikely to find purchase with State Councillor Wang Yi. That said, it is nowhere written in stone that a package-based settlement must extend across every inch of the frontier all at once. Mr. Doval should aim to realise an early harvest settlement that delimits a substantial portion of the boundary in the east and west, while shelving the most intractable points to a future date when India and China are more geopolitically supportive of each other’s aspirations in Asia and the world.

The writer is a senior fellow at the Institute for China-America Studies in Washington, DC



## NOTEBOOK Following a trail of destruction

Cyclone Gaja has painted a different picture of the affected districts

B. KOLAPPAN

There is a dialogue in the Tamil blockbuster *Thillana Mohanambal* that captures the indifferent attitude of a people towards a tragedy. When the heroine’s mother mentions Nagapattinam, Nagesh, the comedian, says: “Is a cyclone arriving? That donkey comes every year anyway!”

For a music lover and cultural enthusiast, the composite Thanjavur district, now trifurcated into Thanjavur, Tiruvarur and Nagapattinam, always conjures up images of great composers, musicians, dancers, bronze idols, and majestic temples built by kings, particularly the Cholas. The writings of T. Janakiraman, which capture the cultural milieu of Thanjavur, further strengthen my bond with these districts. I have visited these districts several times for stories on musicians, musical

instruments, bronze statues and temples, and occasionally to report on an agrarian crisis.

Cyclone Gaja, which has ravaged Nagapattinam and parts of Thanjavur and Tiruvarur, painted a different picture of these districts for me. I forgot all about temples and music when I travelled the length and breadth of these districts.

It looks as if the rice bowl of Tamil Nadu is being transformed into a drought-hit area, with its great past being buried in the process.

The cyclone has changed the lives of the people there forever. The poor are left with nothing, and the middle class and the rich have become poor. Villages and towns look like the sets of a Hollywood war film. Only concrete structures have survived; huts and tiled roof houses are beyond repair. Electric posts and cell phone towers lie twisted. Not a single electric post has been left untouched by the speeding winds. It may take at least a month to fully restore power supply. Sea water has spoiled the groundwater in the area. The delta region has been left without drinking water and is now dependent on water supply from tankers.

People have been put up in camps or in temporarily created structures at the entrance of their villages, which are connected to the main road. This draws the attention of those distributing relief material. When I visited, I saw many of the affected stopping vehicles and pleading for help. When they came across media vehicles, they requested journalists to visit their villages so that the extent of the damage could be reported and could reach the ears of the administration.

The bird sanctuary in Point Calimere

## FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO NOVEMBER 27, 1968

### Attack on DSP office in Calicut

The northern armoury and the southern armoury of the office of the District Superintendent of Police here [Calicut] were the targets of attack in the early hours of this morning [November 26]. The timing of the attack was about the same as those carried out on Tellicherry and Pulpalli stations – about 3.15 a.m. – but with a difference in that in the latest attack only soda bottles were used. Two persons have been taken into custody for interrogation. In all 22 persons described as Marxists and extremists among Marxists have been taken into custody by the police so far in connection with the Pulpalli incident. Ten persons, stated to be Marxist extremists, were apprehended at Manantoddy in North Wynaad... The police acted on getting information that there was a secret conclave going on in a house at Thalappuzha.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO NOVEMBER 27, 1918.

### Buckingham and Carnatic Mills. Trouble again.

The public will learn with feelings of deep concern that the above mills have been closed to-day [November 27] in consequence of the mill authorities apprehending some trouble. It would appear that on Monday last the weaving master at the Carnatic mills was assaulted by a number of weavers who, it is alleged, threw three spindles at him thereby causing injuries on his forehead. We are not at present able to say what led to this regrettable incident. The weaving maistry who was present at the scene on being asked to give the names of those who had taken part in assaulting the weaving master refused to do so and in consequence his services were dispensed with on the same day. Everything apparently went on well until this morning when at the Buckingham Mills brick-bats were thrown at the Manager and the weavers numbering about 1,100 shouted in a disorderly manner. At the Carnatic Mills the weavers refused to start work and began shouting. On Sir Clement Simpson asking them to clear out they refused to do so.

## CONCEPTUAL Scully effect

SOCIOLOGY

This refers to a social phenomenon wherein movie characters can surprisingly inspire behavioural changes in people in the real world. It is named after Dana Scully, a woman character in the American television series *The X-Files* which was aired mostly in the 1990s. Studies have found that the character, portrayed as a medical doctor and a special agent successfully working for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, inspired many women who watched the series to take up education and careers in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics and with various law enforcement agencies.

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