

Re-imagining the Future : Peoples Agenda for a Post Covid Economy

Report of the 15th May 2020 inaugural session of webinar series

Panelists: Hon'ble Finance Minister of Kerala Dr. T. M. Thomas Isaac, Ms. Aruna Roy of Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, Dr. Vandana Shiva of Navdanya and Prof. Prabhat Patnaik, Professore Emeritus at Jawaharlal Nehru University

Background

The unprecedented health, economic and livelihoods crises resulting from the lockdown imposed to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare structural failures in the nature of governance of India and its economic planning. In particular it has exposed that neo-liberal economics practiced for two decades now in India, which has resulted in aggressive reliance on profit making private corporations to deliver public services whilst withdrawing public sector from its due and obligatory role in delivering State functions such as health, education, rural development, addressing needs of urban poor, environmental conservation, etc., has left India in a dangerous position in dealing with a crisis such as this pandemic poses.

Despite a nation-wide lockdown, now in its 4th round, COVID-19 cases continue to rise exponentially. Millions of migrant workers stranded from the very first day of the lockdown, have suffered immensely and are trying desperately to go home, braving inhumane push backs from State agencies. Tens have perished in this arduous journey and in terrible accidents. Millions of job losses, in the industrial, infrastructure, farming and urban sectors, has resulted in hunger and starvation, and could worsen chronic persistent hunger, malnutrition, and adverse health impacts, especially amongst children, women and elders.

Rather than respond to this compounding crises with measures that reach out to people, the Prime Minister of India and the Finance Minister have issued a slew of financial measures which every pundit or common person realises provides the common person nothing at all. This also when the number claimed to COVID relief 'package' is as massive as Rs. 20 lakh crores. Most analysts consider this as re-packaging of earlier commitments, and also returning to the citizenry what anyway is theirs – such as tax returns. Dangerously, the Centre has used the pandemic to de-regulate labour and environmental laws at the behest of corporate India.

This pandemic could just as well be an opportunity to get things right. For there are other imminent challenges to deal with, such as the climate crisis. Because the Centre is in no way interested in responding to peoples' needs, and is clearly only working to serve the demands of the elite, it has become necessary for people across India to serious engage with economic planning and ensure the government works for the people.

WEBINAR

RE-IMAGINING THE FUTURE

PEOPLES' AGENDA
FOR A POST COVID ECONOMY

INAUGURAL:

May 15, 2020 (Friday) 2-4 pm

Every
Tuesday
& Friday

Speakers

TM Thomas Isaac: Minister of Finance, Kerala State
Aruna Roy: Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS)
Prabhat Patnaik: Professor Emeritus, JNU
Vandana Shiva: Navdanya

Moderator

Leo Saldanha: Environment Support Group

Organised by

All India Union of Forest Working People | Centre for Financial Accountability | DASAM | Delhi Forum | Environment Support Group | Financial Accountability Network India | Focus on the Global South | Indian Social Action Forum | Institute for Democracy and Sustainability | Mahalir Association for Literacy Awareness and Rights | MAUSAM | Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan | National Alliance of People's Movements | National Confederation of Officers Associations | People First | People's Resource Centre | Pakistan-India Peoples Forum for Peace and Democracy | The Research Collective

For Registration & Details: www.cenfa.org/rtf

Inauguration of the Webinar Series

Re-Imagining the Future

With this intent, various civil society organisations, trade unions, peoples movements and networks have come together to evolve the basis for a **Peoples Agenda for A Post Covid**

Economy through a webinar series entitled: *Re-imagining the Future*. (The details of collaborating organisations are in the attached poster.)

The webinar was launched on 15th May 2020 with a video-conferenced inauguration that was addressed by Hon'ble Finance Minister of Kerala Dr. T. M. Thomas Isaac, Ms. Aruna Roy of Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, Dr. Vandana Shiva of Navdanya and Prof. Prabhat Patnaik, Professore Emeritus at Jawaharlal Nehru University. The session was moderated by Mr. Leo. F. Saldanha of Environment Support Group.



In his inaugural statement, Kerala Finance Minister Dr. Thomas Isaac held that “the COVID pandemic is an opportunity to improve and enhance the quality of the public health system, and ensure that it is inclusive and easily available to all. This will enable us to handle future pandemics in an efficient manner”. He also advocated that “this is the time to bring local governments into the national agenda”. He argued that “the ideal post pandemic economy in India should be such that it is reshaped to have strong State Governments, strong Local Governance and improved Centre-State fiscal relations.” He said the Kerala Government’s

efforts in tackling Covid have been largely “successful because of two important factors: it’s strong public health system and its strong local government”. He warned about serious dangers to democratic functioning of the country due to the Central Government not working with States in a framework of federated governance. He also shared that the Kerala Government is considering the need for approaching the Supreme Court for a direction to the Centre to part with the state’s due share of GST revenues, which has been held for several months now. The lockdown has disastrously affected the State’s revenues, and economic conditions would worsen if the Centre did not part with the revenue fairly, and also provided reserve cash for States, so that could reach the public, even if it required borrowing and other fiscal measures.



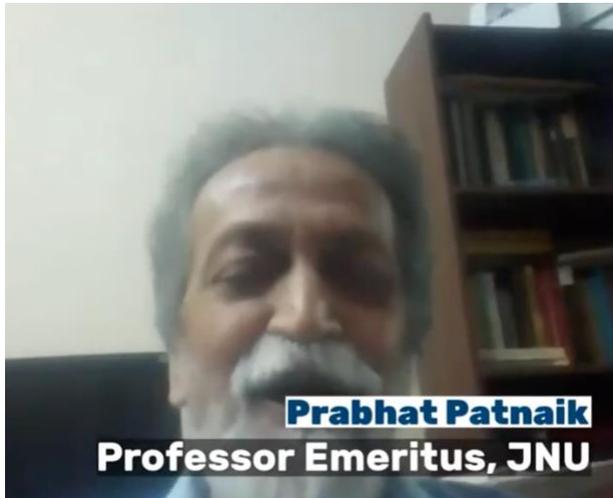
Dr. Vandana Shiva spoke of how the prevailing economic paradigms are shaped by metabolic rifts between nature, the individual and society, and how these rifts are compounding to create a militaristic and unsympathetic society. “We have created a debt ridden system by using concepts of intellectual property. This has left farmers drowning in loans”. She warned how transnational corporations and international foundations, such as those led by Bill Gates, are using the pandemic and its widespread impact on labour to promote the “idea of food without farming”, for instance. She cautioned that such

technocratic trends could seriously aggravate a health disasters, such as through diabetes and obesity. “Peoples' new agenda needs to be planning for the Earth and for the society. Human beings cannot be inputs in the agricultural system”, she argued. “The pandemic is the, moment to defend humanity, freedom, everything good and the best of the world,” she exhorted. Vandana Shiva advocated that “reclaiming democracy is an important process in breaking down crude democracies. This will protect the farmers, diversity of our communities and the diversity of nature”.



Aruna Roy expressed her worries about the technocratisation of administration due to the COVID enforced lockdown. She wondered if “the increasing dependence on technology due to COVID will go on to mould our democracies into digital mobilisers and digital protesters, as opposed to the traditional means of contestations”. She argued that the “physical distancing (disagreeing with the pejorative term social distancing and discouraging its use) has disable us from communicating with migrants in a manner that would reveal issues they are facing”, on the one hand. On the other, physical distancing is “interfering with policy making processes” and denying the majority a

possibility of engaging with decision makers. “We are moving backwards with the concept of transparency and public scrutiny in the democratic process”, she warned. “We must go back to the concept of welfare state & strengthen its hold on the functioning of the government and its policies,” she cautioned. Given the highly polarising results of the lockdown, which she also said has deepened the communal cleavages, she said “we need a Peoples’ Integration Council or a National Level Integration Council,” and invited the Kerala Finance Minister Dr. Isaac to set the ball rolling with a Kerala Integration Council.



For Prof. Prabhat Patnaik, “The neo-liberal globalisation has run its course. This economic arrangement is no longer viable. There was no fiscal response that any government could make to get the world economy out of this rut”. He argued that the post COVID economy is an opportunity to “put in an alternative economic regime that relies on the home market, that relies on agriculture and the building of a welfare state, and does so with some degree of de-linking from the phenomenon of neo-liberal globalisation to which we have been subjected to”. He called for the energetic industrialisation through

rural enterprises, aimed at producing millions of new jobs, especially for those who are returning from the cities, which he felt would “generate employment and make great contributions” to economic security of millions. But for all this to happen, he said “we require the broadest possible unity and a single mindedness in the fight against the COVID pandemic and in planning a new socially just and democratically aligned economy”. Adverting to the Prime Minister’s pitch on self-reliance, Prof. Patnaik said that it will work provide there is “significant de-linkage from economic liberalisation, as freeing the markets imposes a strategy that is opposite to self-reliance”. For real self reliance to work, he urged that India “requires to produce good inside the country instead of importing, as this creates employment”. He also highlighted the fact that we in India are fortunate to have a village economy and we need to think of an alternate strategy of development which generates employment in and around villages.

The webinar was broadcast live on Zoom (for pre-registered participants) and broadcast on Facebook Live. Hundreds interacted with the speakers and thousands watched it live. The complete video recording of this webinar is accessible at: <https://bit.ly/2LBHjki>

This webinar series continues every Tuesday and Friday involving leading thinkers, social activists, progressive politicians and academics. The series will include focussed discussion on Loss of Jobs, Employment & Livelihoods; Labour: Informal, Formal and artisans; Industry: Small, medium, large; Infrastructure; Banking, Finance and Financial Markets; Mineral Extraction; Energy; Urban Sustainability; Public Sector Units; Agriculture; Fisheries, Forest and Pastoral Economy; Environment and Economy.

The next webinar is on Tuesday, 19th May 2020

Webinar

RE-IMAGINING THE FUTURE: PEOPLES AGENDA FOR A POST COVID ECONOMY

May 19, 2020 11 – 1 pm IST

Topic:

Towards a Transformative Political Economy

Speakers:

Medha Patkar, Narmada Bachao Andolan / NAPM

M.G. Devasahayam, former civil servant / People First

Ashish Kothari, Vikalp Sangam / Kalpavriksh

Aseem Shrivastava, Economist

Moderator:

Shalmali Guttal, Focus on the Global South

For Registration & Zoom link: www.cenfa.org/rtf

Hindi Translation is available

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the Global South | Indian Social Action Forum | India Breathe | Institute for Democracy and
Sustainability | Kalpavriksh | Mahalir Association for Literacy Awareness and Rights | Mazdoor
Kisan Shakti Sangathan | People First | People's Resource Centre | Pakistan-India Peoples
Forum for Peace and Democracy | National Alliance of Peoples Movements | National
Confederation of Officers Associations | Narmada Bachao Andolan | New Trade Union Initiative
| MAUSAM | mines, minerals & People | The Research Collective | Vikalp Sangam | *more to join*

To participate in future webinars, register at: www.cenfa.org/rtf

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