

Interview

# India and the Rise of Religious Nationalism - The BJP, Masculinity, Islamophobia and Neoliberal Politics, Violence and the Decline of the Left

Wednesday 25 February 2015, by [BANNERJI Himani](#), [KHAN Salmaan](#) (Date first published: 21 August 2014).

**India recently concluded its 2014 federal elections in which a record 550 million people cast their votes, electing Narendra Modi of the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as Prime Minister and securing his party's position with a majority 282 out of 543 seats in Parliament. New Socialist editor Salmaan Khan had the opportunity to discuss the election results with Bengali-Canadian writer, scholar and activist Himani Bannerji. What follows is a three part interview series.**

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## Before the elections

*In this first piece Dr. Bannerji lays the context for what India looked like going into these elections and outlines the conditions that helped pave the way for the appeal of religious nationalism.*

**Salmaan Khan: This is the first time in 30 years that a single party has won a clear majority. It is also the first time since India's independence in 1947 that the Indian National Congress (INC) will not be in a dominating position. What did India look like going into these elections? And is this simply an "event" or a more permanent turn in Indian politics?**

Himani Bannerji: There are a lot of things here to start with. One thing to remember is that the BJP did in fact come to power before, though not with an absolute majority. In the late 1990s, the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was a BJP member. So this is the second time. The BJP had actually made several attempts to come to power before. They kept trying, but finally they won during the elections around 1998. Though they needed coalition partners who largely resembled them in ideology and economic policies.

Do I think it's a turn in Indian politics? I think it expresses a turn that has been developing since the last few decades along with the weakening of the Congress Party, which has become largely ineffectual, and its splintering into different groups that are actually breakaways of the old Indian National Congress. As well, there has been a gradual decline of the left, which although never overwhelmingly present in Indian politics, was strong enough to form alternate governments in places like Kerala since 1957, and in West Bengal from 1977 to 2011 as a "left front" whose main component was the Community Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M]).

Tripura is the only one of these states for the last few decades that still has a Communist government. It's a very small province and the CPI(M) has done very active development work among the different factions of Bengali's and tribal peoples. Their ability to create a better playing field for different parties has reduced some of the tension in that province, and neither the BJP nor the Congress made any kind of headway there.

So yes, it does signify a turn. The other thing to remember is that in many Indian provinces, such as Uttar Pradesh (UP) - which is the most populous state with the largest number of seats in Parliament, caste politics was strong. Two caste parties in UP were strong, one the Samajwadi Party, which means "socialist party," and the other Bahujan Samajwadi Party, "great socialist party." The latter particularly addressed the lower castes. Its leader is a Dalit woman, and it was based on Dalit politics. But none of these were left parties. They had the general ambition of creating small capitalists, entrepreneurs among lower castes, including the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, aiming towards some kind of social and economic entitlement. But, by no long stretch of imagination were they left wing in the sense of class politics or anti-capitalism.

The emergence and development of these parties fractured the Indian political terrain, taking a lot of voters and breaking up the earlier political space dominated by a few large parties. Though with this election, they too disappeared. So, as we see it, we have a receding Congress Party, an almost defunct communist left and defunct caste parties, thus leaving a space empty for the current BJP victory.

**SK: Given the dominating role that the Indian National Congress has played on the Indian political landscape since Independence, can you talk more about it's the role as a party and the platform it sought to bring to Indian politics?**

HB: The Indian National Congress is a very old party which started out in 1885 and took on the major agency of political struggle for nationalist, anti-colonial independence. Though something to understand is that it has never had one single political platform with a single ideology and class base. It has always had a very complicated platform with at least three or four political voices and some very important political figures and social and political thinkers in it.

So there hasn't been one discernible strand. And this is actually why the INC succeeded for so long; because it could have appeal on different grounds to different kinds of people, ranging from big capital to farmers.

Supporting capitalist development in India, it also had elements of socialist thinking, particularly in the strand that is called Nehruvian Congress. Jawaharlal Nehru's thinking was influenced by socialism and in particular Fabian socialism. So, he didn't see a fundamental contradiction between capital and labor, but had a kind of Fabian view of distributive capitalism and social involvement of the state.

Nehru was well read in British socialist literature and a strongly secular thinker. He wrote two books that would be good to read about regarding the kind of politics he preferred - the kind of India

he imagined. They are The Discovery of India and Letters from a Father to his Daughter, which were his prison letters to his daughter, Indira Gandhi. Nehru was not alone in the party and represented a tendency in the INC which desired a liberal social fairness, was anti-caste and held progressive views about women. He was keen on industrial development in India and industrialization of agriculture in particular. This made possible the "Green Revolution" that helped make India more self-sufficient in terms of agricultural production.

But the Congress also had a passionate populist - not socialist - approach represented by Mahatma Karamchand Gandhi. Gandhi developed his anti-colonial politics during his stay in South Africa where he remained until 1915. He was in his mid-forties when he came back to India and got involved in politics there. He had already helped develop the African National Congress and naturally joined the ranks of the INC. His was a foundationally populist politics that was awake to the issues of racialization and of race in nationalist struggle.

And whereas Nehru represented the secular strand of cultural tolerance, modernization and development, Gandhi's populism was rooted in the hindu and rural imagination of society. He relied on traditional material, particularly from religious epics like the Ramayana. Religion and religious consciousness were central to his project. His concept of justice laced the common law with ideas from the Ramayana through the image of the just king Rama and imagined the future kingdom of India as Rama Rajya - the rule of Rama.

Gandhi also had a paternalistic and benevolent approach towards the peasants and believed that, while the rich must protect the poor, the poor must not revolt or display signs of class struggle. Gandhi, being a lawyer by training, was also aware of how businesses are run, properties made and secured, and he also approved of capitalism and had a positive relationship with facilitating business houses.

In fact, predominant industrialist families in India, particularly the Birlas, contributed massively to the Congress's funds. As a return, after independence, they were granted leases on certain areas of industry and development through the very offices of Gandhi and Nehru.

So, the INC had, through Gandhi, two voices: one meant for the rural and ordinary population believing in religion and tradition, and another for the Indian (hindu) businessmen and the middle classes in whom he tried to imbue a kind of a "moral" consciousness and seek a "moral independence." He named his political method "satyagraha," which means quest for truth. His autobiography is called My Quest for Truth, and he programmatized this politics with non-violence involving civil disobedience, boycott of British goods, works stoppage and so on.

Gandhi and Nehru aside, there was a third voice in the Congress. This was alive and well from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century on and developed out of hindu proto-nationalisms. In this version the country was conceived as a mother goddess and the people who would bring independence as devotees and her children. This hindu approach was non-secular and had a negative relationship to the muslims. It displaced onto the muslim period of medieval north India a kind of anger that would have been better served by being used against the British.

Some of the key figures involved in this hindu nationalist approach were members of the INC. So, we see how the INC was never explicitly secular or religious, it simply never had one voice. It had all of these different voices, pro-capitalist, pro-people, pro-hindu, pro-secular, pro-westernization and development, and pro-tradition, with an ambivalence or suspicion towards muslims.

But the Nehruvian aspect of the INC won out through the '30s and '40s as Gandhi came to support Nehru. He was after all a western educated lawyer, not the popular saint that he is thought to be,

and wrote very trenchant letters on diplomacy and statesmanship to the British Governor Generals and so on.

Politically speaking, Gandhi was a ventriloquist, and once in a while he would give a call for popular uprising and it made India “ungovernable.” Love of tradition and religion notwithstanding, Gandhi’s modernist tendencies, his understanding of the importance of a modern state and belief in liberal values made his affiliation with Nehruvian secularism comfortable.

And so, Nehru became the dominant spokesman for the INC by the early 1940s. This was very effective as the Congress had a huge machinery of public mobilization, the like of which no country in the world has ever had except China.

As well, when India became independent it needed to quickly industrialize and the Nehruvian approach continued to triumph. With independence also came the Indian constitution written by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a Dalit leader, who wrote a most enlightened constitution. Though there were elements of socialism, it was liberal democratic with no room for communism.

The constitution was secular, with no caste, creed or gender bars in citizenship. It also gave a distributive role to the state and the right of people to work, to dignity, to food, and so on. But class and capital did not form a factor in it.

### **SK: What about legislation around property rights or land distribution?**

HB: It did challenge property to the extent that there was a huge inequality in landed property in India. For example, in the 1950s Nehru and his cabinet produced the anti-landlord Act whereby you couldn’t own beyond a certain amount of land, but this was more honored in the breach than ever enforced.

Farming rather than landlordism was meant to be the goal. Though not all parts of India had landlordism (zamindari), the disparity in landed property was huge and land or rural labour abounded. Wherever there was an excessive concentration of land possession this law was supposed to be used, and was used to some limited extent.

But the real use of this land ceiling law happened under the communists after 1977 in West Bengal where, taking this bourgeois law, they tried to implement it to the very letter. Thereby masses of land become released from the hands of illegitimate owners and were distributed among the land poor. So, land distribution happened in its concrete sense in just two places - Kerala and West Bengal.

You have then in India an interesting state formation which was dedicated to some amount of Keynesian protectiveness towards the deprived, seeking a planned and mixed economy. The state played roles in industrialization as well as in introducing capitalism and industry into agriculture. India’s nonalignment left a lot of space for the Indian industrialists to develop.

The aim was to develop an import substitution policy and practice. For example, cars were not imported into India. India produced its cars, its trains and its airplanes instead of buying them from the West.

The Indian state’s planning commission took its duties quite seriously and adjusted its priorities in five-year plans. It moved steadily towards capitalist modernization and tried to protect the poor from the ravages of all this if possible. When the idea of the “Green Revolution” became popular there were large increases in production in places like Punjab as the use of machinery, specialized seeds, chemical fertilizers, etc. slowly began to rise. But in most of India rural poverty was still pervasive.

And so, through this favour to Indian capitalism, foreign capital was effectively blocked out, leading to a lot of complaints from the West. At this time there was also a large growth of the left, particularly the Communist Party of India - Marxist, which after its split from the Communist Party of India (CPI), gained prominence. Many peasant organizations emerged and trade unions became important too. India at this time was largely outside of the circle of the USA's client states.

**SK: It seems like there was a strong Indian National Congress-dominated state that was trying to regulate the economy through a Nehruvian or Fabian Socialist approach. When do we begin to see the decline in the Nehruvian modernist and secularist project?**

HB: You begin to see seeds of it after the death of Nehru, or even before. There was always a constant pressure on India from Western governments and capitalists to take over the economic field, and inside the country there was a pressure to push the state towards stronger privatization.

However, none of this worked very effectively until Nehru died. And even after that there isn't a sustained break with secularism or it doesn't just disappear as there was a murmur of the non-secular approach that was always there. A slow anti-secularism and a quest for a hindu identity became pronounced.

What lay underneath layers of effective secular politics became prominent as a hindu national imaginary. The logic of elections often demanded the appeal to religion, so for example, of having muslim candidates from muslim areas. But this anti-secularism grew stronger with the drive toward a greater role for private capital. Though Indian secularism had meant for a long time accommodation of all religions, hindu supremacy began to win out as non-secular parties emerged.

**SK: You said there was a murmur of religious nationalism and anti-secularism that was always there. Can you speak more on this and how it has contributed to religious nationalism coming to the forefront in India today?**

HB: The hindu cultural nationalist element that lay underneath for a long time became increasingly stronger when the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which means National Volunteers' Association (established in 1925) took hold of the national polity. With a eugenics-believing doctor at its head, it was a splinter of a political party called the Hindu Mahasabha (Great Hindu Association).

Some of its members were previously connected with the Indian National Congress. In 1925, the Mahasabha inspired the birth of the RSS with Dr. Golwalkar at its head and they developed as a cultural nationalist group, a civil society group really. They didn't show interest in contesting in the elections or struggle against British rule.

They wanted to forge a hindu Indian identity for the country. They were not so interested in worshipping gods and goddesses either. They sought to distill a kind of a casteist hindu -brahmanical essentialist identity, which they call "hindutva". And their enemies were not the British, but the muslims who were also contesting for a state. They saw muslims as invaders of India, foreigners who led the downfall of Indian (hindu) culture.

The RSS had no negative things to say about the British. Some of its prominent members, like Golwalkar and Savarkar, were even admirers of the Aryan theorization of the Nazis and the Aryanist nationalist politics which they sought to use for themselves. They also believed in eugenics for the purposes of creating a pure hindu nation. They considered themselves Aryans as the German linguist Max Mueller identified Sanskrit as the stem of Aryan language.

Now, these people did something very interesting in that they never formed a political party. They

formed civil society cultural cells and branches across North India, the Hindi speaking area in particular, and established numerous cultural organizations. In doing this they focused on filling some social needs, such as giving afterschool health training and recreation to mainly boys, but also girls, and teaching children piety and filial obedience in relation to the elders and devotion to the hindu motherland.

They militarized these children through physical and martial training and made them into paramilitary groups by teaching them sword and stick fighting and various other fighting techniques, largely because they believed that the hindus had become emasculated. The muslims had helped to do that. Now they needed to get their masculinity back and become hindu heroes.

They also believed in strong brahmanical patriarchal families. They gave women roles of strong mothers and supportive wives, as preservers of the community, transmitters of tradition and as mothers of heroes. So, it was this kind of martial code with a hindu supremacist identity which they called hindutva or hinduness. The essence of this hinduness was being against muslims.

So the RSS's hinduness doesn't demand that you compulsorily worship in temples, but rather a conduct of brahmanical austerity, revival of hindu scriptures and "traditional" culture, and a morality of the pure and the impure. And every once in a while there were riots inspired by them. And each time they got more hindus mobilized to its project. This is all pre-independence.

There were massive pre-independence riots associated with the idea of claiming a separate land for muslims and the rise of the Muslim League, both of which the RSS and its "hindu" allies repudiated. The RSS became a powerful agent of colonial "divide and rule" policy. It was strongly anti-Ghandian.

Gandhi's populism and his unwillingness to be actively anti-Muslim and pro-partition made him unacceptable to the RSS. And one member of the RSS who rescinded his membership but remained inspired and attached to it, Nathuram Ghodse, assassinated Gandhi in 1948 shortly after Indian independence.

With the killing of Gandhi, the RSS was temporarily banned and could not blossom into a big political organization or contest elections. So it continued in a low key fashion, going kind of undercover until they were unbanned in the late 1950s. But even after that, they still did not contest in the elections and continued with their cultural civil society work.

Following the lifting of the emergency in 1977, the RSS contested in the Indian elections through its wing, Janata Dal (People's Party). There were many anti-muslim figures who were prominent in it and they were anti-Congress as well, mainly on account of the Congress's secularism. This party over a period of time developed into the BJP, the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party).

Throughout this time the Congress weakened, especially following the assassination of Indira Gandhi. In a way, she had been apprenticed in politics by Nehru, and retained some of Nehru's third-worldism, an interest in south-south relations. She had a foreign policy in keeping with this. For example, she allowed the Palestinians to have an office in Delhi and did not have diplomatic relations with Israel. South Africa was another banned territory, and Portugal, because it still had colonies in Africa. Mrs. Gandhi was also close to Cuba and Castro. She maintained an adherence to secularism and her anti-Khalistan policy did not stem from hindu supremacy or a hatred of Sikhs.

Now while all this was going on, through decades of Western capitalist expansion, mainly under the auspices of U.S. imperialism, the Indian economy was becoming less competitive. The capitalist class had accumulated but didn't have much space for investment, and they resented the state's involvement in the economy. Pressure from other countries also grew. The Indian planning

commission with its policy of mixed economy became weaker, and the hungry industrialists were waiting to privatize.

Following her death Mrs. Gandhi's son, Rajiv Gandhi, came to power. He was a weak prime minister and susceptible to the privatization lobby. He introduced the first privatization initiatives in India. At this time the BJP, born of the RSS, had also developed into a political party and also had nothing against privatization and the state's withdrawal from the economy.

So from the early 1990s on neoliberalism became the guiding principle in India. More and more laws pertaining to nationalization were rescinded. Foreign debt accumulated, inequality increased, muslims were consistently seen as terrorists, the province of Jammu and Kashmir was the place where the Indian army showed its might and relations with Pakistan continued to further deteriorate.

The economy and politics were in such disarray that one could draw together this fracturing neo-liberal nation through the mythology or ideology of religion. So, what the economy divided religion united. And as neoliberalism and religion can go hand in hand the national imaginary was ethnicized.

The need for an enemy was urgent for the hindu bloc to develop. Hindutva or hinduness created a solid block of an RSS-imagined ideology of a hindu nation, and pitted it against muslims as another homogeneous solid block. In the unification of neo-liberal capital with hindu supremacy, fascism became an active political process in the country.

So, we have a situation here where the growth of neoliberalism, the withdrawal of the state from every sector, the growth of poverty and hunger, and the appeal of religion as a way of drawing things together, culminated in December 1992 in the cry of returning India to hindus through the destruction of a 15<sup>th</sup> century mosque built by Babur, claiming it to be the birthplace of the epic man-god Rama. This followed a "chariot" journey of one of the BJP leaders, L.K. Advani, across north India gathering RSS/BJP cadres.

This kind of violence went to its peak in 2002 in Gujarat, where there was a state orchestrated pogrom led by one Narendra Modi, the then chief minister, using the police apparatus to facilitate the attacks against muslims. At least two thousand muslims were killed, housing complexes and businesses were destroyed, women were raped, pregnant women attacked with swords. Unspeakable atrocities happened. This was a genocide.

But, other smaller and different proportions of riots went on and the criminalization of muslims proceeded apace. And sometimes the RSS itself was carrying out certain attacks and attributing these explosions and bombings to "muslim terrorists." Few were caught that did this.

So finally, then, you can see that the election in 2014 brought all these developing tendencies and activities to its head and ethnicized the political soil completely, with very little exception. And the lure of wealth and success in certain sectors in India was overwhelming. The new middle classes who couldn't wait for anything anymore and who thought that Modi would give them development took the election with them.

It is impossible to really grasp what is going on in India without knowing the context of these developments. It's a country of a 1.5 billion people with many millions in starvation, malnutrition and eviction, with neoliberalism rampant, and frequent explosions. Muslims are terrorized and other religious groups too, as are secularists. The situation can only be called fascist.

## Masculinity, Islamophobia and Neoliberal Politics in India

*What follows is Part 2 of Salmaan Khan's interview with Himani Bannerji. After laying the context for what India looked like going into the 2014 federal elections in Part 1, Bannerji now speaks more directly to the nature of the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the advance of neoliberalism, and the continued oppression faced by marginalized groups in India. Also discussed are the geopolitical implications of a BJP dominated India and the consequences of its relationship with the West.*

**Salmaan Khan: Some commentators attribute the Bharatiya Janata Party victory to an aggressive election campaign that had a lot of media exposure and corporate backing. Yet, given the economic reforms initiated under the leadership of the Indian National Congress, a sort of shock therapy for market friendly policies, why did India's elite choose to back the BJP instead? And how does this relate to Modi's characterization as being "pro-development" and "pro-business?"**

Himani Bannerji: Well, that is true, because we need to realize that Manmohan Singh and his cabinet had two full neoliberal terms. The economic advisors and policy makers of the Congress were thoroughbreds from the US - from Harvard and MIT, World Bank, the IMF and other places - who were committed neo-liberalizers. The planning commission was not able to hold any form of protectionist or Keynesian stand and had moved to a very different mandate.

But, in the second United Progressive Alliance [a coalition of centre-left political parties in India formed after the 2004 general election], the Congress Party had become aware - perhaps through their observation of the massive dispossession of peasants, thousands of middle-level farmer suicides, as well as the great upheavals in areas handed over to mining companies which in effect became mini warzones - that they had to do something about all this.

The Indian state has been increasingly facing a rise in armed insurgencies of "Maoists" and tribal and landless peoples. These rural insurgencies which believe in armed struggle are not urban worker-based. Unlike the communist parties, they are extra-parliamentarian and have created a lot of fright in the government but also among big businesses. For example, mines couldn't go ahead and complete their projects, and they remain sites of much armed conflict. Mines have been a great source of unrest in India, as have been expropriation of land for industry, housing developments, airports, etc.

As for the farmers, the lack of competitiveness of Indian cash crops with foreign cash crops began leading to tens of thousands of farmer suicides, many connected with Bio-Tech cotton and their lack of competitiveness, as well as farmer indebtedness.

So all this, along with pressure from the left parties, made Manmohan Singh turn toward some "pro-poor" measures. Those measures related to a limited degree of food security for the very poor such as 100 guaranteed days of work per year, guarantees of food security for people living on less than \$1.00 a day and greater access to public distribution systems which had previously existed in a big way in India, but which had been disbanded in the Rajiv Gandhi period.

As well, rural poverty has become desperate, given that about 65 percent of Indians still live in the country side and have little or no work. The implementation of the 100 days guarantee is not regularly enforced and has come to be perceived by the neoliberal economic advisors and new middle classes as a big waste of money.

The UPA government also introduced a program of midday meals in poor state schools, which again,



was scantily implemented. These too were considered worthless expenditures by their critics. They introduced quotas for minorities, not muslims though, but for the very low castes and Scheduled Tribes, and that too was considered by the new middle classes as a waste of money.

Essentially any right to necessities of life was challenged by the new middle classes, whose general disregard for the deprived is nothing short of amazing. And it was assumed by them and the capitalist class that neo-liberal development will, and should, destroy any obstacle in its path.

**SK: So, what can the poor expect now that the BJP is in power? Will there be a rollback on these policies, as limited and as ineffectual as they are?**

HB: I think not right away. But yes, as the year unfolds, the BJP - which is interested in absolute development - as Modi has so advertised himself - as the man of development - will roll these back. Modi himself will probably drive the bulldozer that will take it all down.

Now, a key issue to note is that the BJP government has also been greatly facilitated economically and culturally by nonresident Indians living in the United States, United Kingdom and Canada, and Western political powers in general, toward taking down the last barriers for conquering India through neo-liberal economic regimes and financialization. As such they have promised to withdraw the Indian state from any welfarist activity, introducing what George W. Bush would call "shock and awe" through a decimation of public spending.

**SK: We briefly mentioned the role of the Modi government in the 2002 riots in Gujarat where over 2,000 muslims were systematically killed, more than 200,000 displaced and millions of rupees worth of property were damaged and destroyed. What is further revealing is a leaked report by the British High Commission in India, which stated that the violence had "all the hallmarks of ethnic cleansing" and "far from being spontaneous" it was "planned, possibly months in advance, carried out by an extremist Hindu organization with the support of the state government." The report also added that "reconciliation between Hindus and Muslims is impossible while the chief minister [Narendra Modi] remains in power."**

We also saw similar communal riots this past September 2013 in Muzaffarnagar, Kairana and Bijnore, where muslim communities were largely targeted. These three constituencies ended up recording landslide wins for the BJP, even though all three candidates were under investigation for their participation in the killings.

What does the future look like for muslims, as well as other marginalized groups such as Dalits, Adivasis or Bangladeshi migrants in a BJP dominated India? What makes the threat of state-sponsored violence more pertinent under the rule of the BJP given that the INC also has a history of orchestrating massacres, as was the case with the pogroms against Sikhs in 1984?

HB: The future for muslims in India looks quite bleak and has become increasingly worse over the last decades. And what is happening is a steady process of marginalization and intimidation since the Babri Masjid destruction and massacre following it in 1992. This amounts to installing a hierarchy, a minoritization of citizenship.

Whereas the Indian constitution calls for full citizenship for all peoples residing in India without prejudice, the fact is that relations on the ground have always produced hierarchical forms of participation among the poor, among the minorities, and of course, among women. And so, this is only going to increase. And in fact, I wouldn't be surprised if in five years' time, if this reign lasts, that some kind of formal means are adopted of excluding at least the muslims as "foreigners,"

because they are the most substantial minority group.

Sikhs are seen as historically opposed to muslims. Christians are few in number, buddhists and Jains are seen as hindus, and as for the Dalits, the “untouchables” and the tribals, there is a constant pull and push effect because they are trying to push them into a general definition of hindu. So that really leaves us with just the muslims as the undesirable “other,” aliens in a hindu nation.

And under the post 9/11 circumstances muslims cannot come to the West, cannot find a comfortable space in Indian society, and Pakistan is impossible for them as a place of refuge. Bangladesh doesn't want them on the grounds of their poor economy. So, a big question mark remains underneath what is going to happen to the muslim population in India. Don't forget, at about 15% of the total population there are 177 million Indian muslims.

There are also a few members of the muslim community who have joined the BJP. What that means to them I don't know. It seems strange, but they have. But I also think that the muslim community, by not being allowed general participation and in the face of the left and Congress decline, will probably turn back into itself in a kind of retreating motion. And within this context, the rise of muslim extremism is quite likely, especially as moderate or secular muslims haven't much space, in their own communities or in others. And so, things will not be good for muslims for sure, and not only not good but positively bad.

But, the other thing is that it's not going to be good for women in general either, as women of all ethnic groups, as inhabitants of India, have a low social and political status. The general atmosphere of violence that has now become normalized in the Indian polity, where the value of human life seems to be at its lowest premium, is starker than I have ever seen.

Masculinity is so privileged in this muscular version of hindutva, and an imported neoliberal machismo, especially from the US, that it's no surprise to me that there has been a great increase in not just rape but gang rape, which is qualitatively different. In gang rape the rapists do not hide - they parade quite openly and in a self-congratulating manner and others emulate them.

And it becomes like a social war that they declare against women and the weaker sections of society. Some kind of territorial gangsterism is rampant within which all the resources, including human life, the bodies of women and muslims and other undesirable groups, become fodder for the social and political fascist nature of the polity. It's also signaled by the Indian state in the Supreme Court's now overturning a lower court decision to legalize same sex relationships.

The Supreme Court of India itself, or certain elements within the Supreme Court, are very deeply influenced by the RSS and BJP and share their belief in hindutva. In fact, a few Supreme Court justices, after they retire announce their BJP affiliation. Others who have done this are the election commissioners who also, after they retire, become BJP members.

So the thing to keep in mind is that the BJP is not composed of only rural and urban small businessmen and petty bureaucrats and so on. There is a big mass base in these groups, but the higher aspects of the BJP, with their RSS cultural revolution and complete neo-liberal agenda, extend high up into the corporate sector and professional and governmental spheres.

And now with positive encouragement from the West and political figures like Barak Obama saying they look forward to working with India, and David Cameron and others following suit, the BJP is going to become even more popular. Not to mention that the hindutva identity project has provided a pseudo or ersatz religion which has given a signal to the domestic market for buying objects associated with religious rituals, festivals, etc., and the leisure class has enthusiastically bought into

this.

And in that sense, you might say that the BJP and the leisure classes and the businesses are constantly reinforcing this new national enterprise of unbridled neo-liberalism laced with religious-cultural ideology and its consumerist marketing. I have gone to weddings where all the rituals are a thousand times more magnified now in modern India than when we were young in a more “traditional” and less socially capitalist India.

This is a phenomenon that is not sufficiently noted. I think that present day religion is actually capable of producing a huge market with the building and construction of temples, their decorations, the tourism industry connected with them, as well as hindu rituals associated with birth, marriage and death and initiation into the sacred thread ceremony. The grandeur and gross display of wealth has only one market for it: it's a domestic market. So we cannot forget how capital at this stage in India gains not just through corporations and ideologically but also through this religious onslaught.

If you saw Modi's inauguration you'd have seen how much was spent even in flowers, and garlands which were at least three meters in diameter. A large ground was covered in flowers and provided him with a carpet to step on. Never in the history of India has the parliament watched this kind of extravaganza in its signature ceremony of the prime minister and the cabinet. And also, Modi worshipped at the river Ganges in Varanasi, something no inaugural leader in the history of India has done since its independence. No religious ceremony is required by the Indian constitution. All this provides an oversized, spectacular state.

### **SK: It's like the building up of an icon, a “leader”**

HB: Yeah it is. It's the Nuremburg rally of hindu supremacy, with a spectacular self-presentation of the state. Never has India witnessed such a market extravaganza associated with the conversion of politics to religious ethnicity.

So, I think things will be very bad for India - Modi is a true fascist. He's not a dictator, and this is a Mussolini type fascism rather than a Hitler type fascism. It's populist. Modi has a popular base, but he didn't create that base. That base was created over almost a hundred years ago, throughout that period from then to now by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS - National Volunteers' Association) about which I spoke earlier. And the RSS remains a solid presence behind him. He's never going to be able to get rid of the RSS. If he does, he's finished. The RSS is implacable in its demands and did all his work for him. Now he has to do his work for them. It is pay-back time.

**SK: We talked about Modi's role in the 2002 massacres, and in 2005 the Bush administration had even denied Modi a visa to the US, citing a US law barring entry to foreigners who “committed particularly severe violations of religious freedom”. Yet, following the 2014 Indian elections, as you mentioned, President Obama personally congratulated Modi on his victory, inviting him to visit the White House. David Cameron also extended the hand of friendship, tweeting “congratulations to Narendra Modi on his victory in India's elections, keen to work together to get the most from UK/India relationship.”**

What does the election of Modi and the rise of the BJP mean for India's relations with the West? What role does the US or the UK seek to play in South Asia, and how will this further shape the geopolitics in that region?

HB: Well, as you know, it's pretty predictable. To start, the Bush administration did not spontaneously refuse a visa to Modi. There are left groups in the United States and Canada, but

mainly a US group called the International South Asia Forum (INSAF), which pointed out the fascist nature of Modi's politics and governmental agenda. They offered the US congress facts and figures pertaining to the Gujarat massacre. So, even though the rich nonresident Indians were patronized by George W. Bush, he was actually forced or shamed into denying Modi a visa. So, the denial of the visa was forced out of them.

Nonresident Indians are influential in the United States, unlike, let's say, nonresident Indians in Canada, and have a lot of say in American politics and in the funding of the political parties. And as I mentioned earlier, they are also important in the context of the Indian government's business policies. There are special days in India designated to honour them.

This happened after the coming of United Progressive Alliance 1 - Manmohan Singh's first term - where they developed this day where nonresident Indians are celebrated in India, and if they are Nobel laureates like Amartya Sen, and major business figures, scientists and writers and so on, they come to India and huge amounts of money are spent on wining and dining them with the hopes of successfully attracting business and other kinds of connections. The aim is to wield influence with the American government.

Canadians are not of great importance. The UK and some European countries are also important. So nonresidents are and will be influential for the new era, and will be of course for the US. The UK, of course, would like to get its old colony back; Holland too, which is also looking abroad - though it looks mostly into Africa, but Africa has become so volatile that India for the time being will do.

But, there's also another country which has already flocked in and is close with India, especially with the coming of first BJP government, and that is Israel. Israel is the second largest arms supplier to India after the US. Israel even trains the Indian security forces through Mossad. India and Israel have also come into agreements to exchange intelligence and technological know-hows, and also to fight "(muslim) terrorists" together.

The rampant islamophobia of India and Israel have now completely changed the relationship between India and Palestine, which, as I used to be very positive during Mrs. Gandhi's time. It was seen as an extension of India's own anti-colonial past.

The geopolitical logic behind these relations is very important because China is a growing, if not already grown, threat to the West, particularly to the US. India has itself got a lot of problems with China since the early 1960s, when Sino Indian border conflicts started. India also housed the Tibetans who were displaced from Tibet and the Dalai Lama's center of operation is in Dharamshala, India.

Generally speaking, the US really doesn't want boots on the ground anymore. It doesn't want a direct bloody battle with China. And I think India will solve this dilemma by fighting America's proxy wars in the region.

So, with the help of Myanmar and Aung San Suu Kyi, with the help of the current Indian government, friends of the US in Cambodia and in Vietnam, the conflict zone around the South China Sea and with Japan forming a block with the US against China, I think India will become a crucial geopolitical base.

And I think that's what India will offer in addition to its supply of minerals and other natural resources and the starvation level wages for Western outsourcing. And since the Indian middle class is also quite educated, in fact overproduced for India's own need, they will work effectively and efficiently for the United States in India, and come on time-bound contracts to the United States.

Produced at the social cost of India, there already are waves of these skilled migrants to the US or Canada - who won't get a chance for permanent residence. This will also keep local workers vulnerable and antagonistic towards foreign workers coming in.

So this is my reading. Inside India, in the period preceding this government there was a profound sense of lawlessness that could be judged by the fact that police were not taking first information reports when there are charges, or by the special powers granted to the army to deal with rapes and other crimes. And bribes are rampant to protect criminals, which include BJP candidates who have won in elections.

## **The Allure of Violence and the Decline of the Organized Left**

*This is Part 3 of the interview with Himani Bannerji by New Socialist Editor Salmaan Khan on the outcome of the Indian elections. This final portion of the interview focused on the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M]) which fared poorly in these past elections, securing only nine seats out of 97 candidates - a progressive decline from the last two national elections and the lowest since the formation of the party in 1964 - followed by a discussion of the difficulties that come with organizing people according to a formula derived from outdated and inappropriate conceptions of industrialization and capitalist development.*

**Salmaan Khan:** To what can we attribute the all-time low for the Communist Party of India (Marxist) as well as for other "left" parties that ran in West Bengal under the coalition of the "Left Front?" Aside from the allegations of "widespread rigging, violence and intimidation" cited by the Left Front, what is the basis for their lack of support among the masses, especially in the states of Kerala, Tripura and West Bengal where they have historically had a strong presence? What does this lack of support tell us about peasant and rural populations who have traditionally acted as a base for left politics in these states?

Himani Bannerji: Like everything else in politics, it's conjunctural. The reasons for the left decline are to be found not only in the left itself; and by left, since you mentioned 1964, we mean the CPI(M) - that itself has to be contextualized and placed within certain circumstances and changes developing in India. A couple of important things come to my mind:

One, that the changes in neoliberalism that have happened in India since, let us say, the late 1980s, and the highly accelerated development of it in the last two decades, created a disarray that is difficult for any political party to adequately respond to strategically toward organizational action. That is, there is a tidal wave of privatization that has thrown the trade unions into both a crisis and a decline.

Competitive desires for acquiring business has changed the focus from jobs to entrepreneurialism from the lowest to the highest level. There is the flooding of the market with massive amounts of consumption goods, the eviction of people from land and the general dispossession in the countryside and their destitute arrivals into the city. None of these developments have any easy political solution, especially in a polity of nearly one and half billion people.

The Communist Party that has existed for the last many decades assumed the existence of a more organized kind of capitalism that connected directly to the state and industrialization. It assumed a working class, factories, a manufacturing population; it assumed a more stable form of state with a big administrative bureaucracy; it assumed a continuation of agriculture as an occupation, and it assumed self-supportive middle class professionals. Now, in the last 20 years, all of this has come to

a crisis.

The countryside of India is absolutely deranged. Agriculture is being torn out by the roots. What is happening is a merger of the farming classes with industrial capitalist farming steadily drawn into the orbit of foreign corporations. The incursion into the market by GM and biotech companies; the withdrawal of subsidies for the peasantry, and the masses of loans that farmers are taking, have all led to tens of thousands of farmer suicides over the past two decades.

So any communist party that assumes some structural stability and an industrial model of capitalism supported by a nation state with a degree of autonomy from foreign governments and capital has no structural ground for it to root itself in. How can it now serve the needs in the present time? The traditional idea of the working class has vanished along with the welfare state.

For these left parties the conception of class depended on gradations of types of work and trade union belonging. The model of communism we have now is based on that earlier experience. Now you have new political subjects. They are not workers or peasants in the old sense. The average professional middle classes are also unsteady. Not much actually gives you a solid ground to stand on as a left organizer or party.

So how do you become close to these new social subjects? It's being assessed that mass fronts should have been better worked with, that the CPI(M) lost their popular connection and so on. But the question is where are you going to go and connect with people when infrastructural spaces for such social relations as existed have been eroded?

What you've got instead is a desperate, fleeing, destitute population, a kind of transient information technology type of workers or contractual workers at all levels of the economy, and shantytowns and starvation both in the city and the villages. What is steadily arising is small entrepreneurialism or predatory gangs, groups of gangsters who are preying on whatever is around them.

So, I don't know what party that has a democratic or communist basis can actually sustain itself through this. The situation reminds me of the 1920s Germany when a desperate German political and economic world produced volunteers for Nazism, the Freikorps. And what I have seen in the four months I spent there recently was the daily presence of volunteer fascist groups. They are not cardholding fascists.

They are relatively young, endowed with the power machine called the motorbike, and parading their masculinity regardless of the police or any legal restrictions. They rely on techniques of terrorizing the left and the so-called decent middle classes, and feel that they can snatch whatever they want. Many possess handguns and other armaments.

**SK: Do these groups of armed men have any associations with political parties?**

HB: In West Bengal they are associated in particular with the Trinamool Congress (TMC), literally The Grassroots Congress. But the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS - National Volunteers' Association) have the same support base who are eager participants in attacks against muslims.

I saw four or five months of this terror, and was terrorized myself. And their ability to terrorize people, unless you actually see it, is unthinkable. So, there is much truth in the news of people fleeing villages and poll booths being destroyed, and in people being physically harmed for voting for the left. For example, a woman who voted for the CPI(M) and publicly acknowledged it was attacked the next day by TMC supporters who cut off one of her breasts.

These people are not rooted in anything. They have no stake in social life. They are often not married, and even if they are, they don't give a damn for their families. They don't have any jobs to aspire to or promotional levels to rise through. They know that having a BA, which many of them do, or even an MA will not get them anywhere, so why not at least seize the power that being local bosses provides?

The invasion of neoliberalism, consumer seduction and political cynicism has now produced these disbanded terrifying groups who can intimidate and kill for hire. They create riots. These are not violence involving two equal sides, but a pogrom by one group of people, namely hindus of a certain kind, against muslims. These political subjects are not predictable or calculable within our conventional notions of class - this is the type that created the Freikorps and TMC's volunteer army of terror.

There is a culture of terror developing in India. For example, something happens in a railroad station, someone accuses someone of having touched their sister, and immediately ten men start beating a man unconscious without asking any questions. The police rarely interfere, even when they are near or at the site. You have to be in it to see it.

Every day Howrah station houses thousands of transients, maybe a million people. The crowd is densely packed. There are men wandering around with nothing to do. They are unemployed. They cannot go home. Many have no home. Maybe they go in for a meal or a bit of work, they scrounge some money and eat something in a food stall. This is their life.

The atavistic, teleological nature of violence becomes really evident in these places. Millions in India have lives of no money, no arrangement to live, the heat in their hovels is 40 degrees or more, there is no water or clean air. This human degradation has created a situation that really needs to be seen to get a sense of how violence can become a palpable existential mode.

Everything is about violence. Not just the beating-up kind of violence, but a violence of deprivation, a general destinationlessness of violence. The hunger with which children and women roam about wanting something to eat is violence. The social ambience is violent. These are the disposable people of India. If half of India's population were wiped out, even then perhaps, given the political economy, violence would reign.

But right now most of these people are detritus - they're debris of primitive accumulation of the turn in Indian and neo-imperialist capitalism. They only look like people, children in particular. They look like human children. Concentration camps probably could provide as an example of how people live or work.

The emaciation of children, their tiny twine-like thin muscles, eyes stuck in their sockets, the hopelessness, come swirling at you. The indifference of women sitting and gazing at nothing can only be the manifestation of this violence. The BJP with its fascist agenda can actually maneuver this violence. It suits its agenda of riots, pogroms and rapacious development projects.

Yet you see decencies in the interstices of this devastation. You go to the streets of Calcutta and you see families living there with children, mainly mother-headed. And the mothers are cleaning their children from broken hydrants and with laundry soap. They make these children glistening clean, try to clean their little section of the sidewalk, to roll up their bedding in a corner, and cook. And the kids sit around their mother and she feeds them. Suddenly you see that it's a peasant family, the peasant family that does not live in the village anymore.

**SK: Peasant families that are dispossessed and forced to move into the cities...**

HB: They keep coming to the city as villages and agriculture die. And you can see on certain ritual days they have drawn little chalk patterns on the sidewalk, and lit a little lamp as they did in their village homes, and you just sort of want to die. You watch this and you think, why? Even if you know the rational, social analytical answer, something human inside of you refuses to, is unable to grasp this violence.

These are the problems, the reality that the Communist Party has to face. What it faces, what is in front of it, is unthinkably large. It has to get re-done atom by atom, molecule by molecule. It's not only a question of massive organizing. Our actions can range from cleaning sewage to cooking public meals.

That's why I find it very cruel that people should talk dismissively about "mere" economy, because they don't know what economy means. It means food, shelter, cleanliness, medicine. They just don't understand it, that the human needs some basic life-sustaining things through which we become "human."

And I think that's what the work of the Communist Party is. I don't know whether we'll be able to do it, how we'll be able to do it. But, there is no other way except to persist, however imperfect the attempts of persistence might be.

**SK: Some folks would point to the Indian Maoist movement as an example of effective resistance to state oppression. Do you think the situation would be different today if the Communist Party pursued a similar - some would say more militant - path of struggle? What do you think they could have done differently had they the chance?**

HB: For us [the CPI(M)], we tailed our government. And we could not even give a bowl of rice to a person and instead became completely absorbed in parliamentary politics. Instead of identifying as a communist party, it should have identified more as a social democratic party. It lost the revolutionary game and instead engaged in extremely well-meaning social democratic enterprise of elections, and won time and time again.

And in fact, many good laws came through that. But we could no longer talk about revolution because we were part of this system. On the one hand, you might say change is incremental and therefore we should have just kept doing it and got more people on side.

But the reality is that a real social world continued to unfold in which capitalism in class struggle wasn't the winning side. Instead we became adjunct to the story of capitalism.

Now, that puts us in a very strange mode, because it's kind of a damned if you do, damned if you don't situation. What could have happened in India if we didn't join the government? I don't know. Would we have had another China? I have no idea.

But we didn't. We just kind of merged our self-definition into a good bourgeois party. And those who took up the standard of struggle outside of that turned out to be thoughtless, gun happy, sensational, and in fact creating a situation in the countryside that made thousands of villages vulnerable to the army.

So I have no decisive answer to any of what we talked about. I just know that something is being tried out by communists in India, though the reflection on the tasks of communism is inadequate. As they say, the Owl of Minerva flies after dark, but I haven't seen any big owls yet, though the dark is here. And I think that my friends and comrades are trying to fulfill these needs.



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## **P.S.**

\* New Socialist Webzine. Saturday, 16 August 2014 15:26 (part 1). Published on Monday, 18 August 2014 15:22 (part 2). Published on Thursday, 21 August 2014 16:16 (aprt 3):

<http://newsocialist.org/763-india-and-the-rise-of-religious-nationalism-an-interview-with-himani-bannerji-part-1>

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