Is Hindu Communalism Fascism? – The Rise of Hindu Authoritarianism in Narenda Modi's India, cultural exclusivism, xenophobia and the nation, strategy

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From part three of *The Rise of Hindu Authoritarianism*, Achin Vanaik's proposed framework for evaluating contemporary authoritarianism and nationalism [1]

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Only the most rudimentary outlines of an alternative paradigm will be attempted here. From the end of the third quarter of the twentieth century, in all major zones — formerly the First, Second, and Third Worlds — there has been a dramatic rise in the politics of cultural exclusivism and xenophobia. Ethnic separatism or hatred have been sentiments on the increase.

Across the globe, the politics of cultural exclusivity have taken four major forms. First, there has been the rise of religious fundamentalisms — not just Islamic, but also, though less powerfully, Jewish and Christian. Second, there has been the growth of Hindu nationalism and communalism, and what with some caution might be called Buddhist nationalism and revanchism. Third, there has been the rise, especially in the former Second World, of irredentist nationalisms — the unfinished business, it might seem, of the death throes of the Habsburg, Tsarist and Ottoman multinational empires put into deep freeze by communist victories in the USSR, Yugoslavia, Eastern Europe, and the post-Yalta Cold War glacis in Europe. Fourth, the spreading and swelling carbuncles of racist and anti-immigrant xenophobia have been clearly evident in the First World.

In all these forms, the nation is either the focus or arena of contestation, the dominant point of reference. It is in the name of fulfilling the nation's destiny that the most barbarous political acts (those that most easily evoke the accusation of fascism) are justified. Why this centrality of the national unit? So international a phenomenon must have, to begin with, generic and global causes. Moreover, the temporal bunching of its irruption in these varied forms is too close for it to be dismissed as a temporal coincidence. Its primary roots are surely the crisis of late-twentieth and early-twenty- first-century modernity, albeit differentially mediated by the dilemmas of capitalism in its liberal-democratic guise in the First World, in the collapse of communism in the Second, or in the relative failure of developmentalism in the Third.

Though an all-round crisis, it has a distinctive cultural dimension. From the mid-twentieth century onwards, there has been an unprecedented rise of cultural politics involving contestation over

norms, values and meanings. This in turn produces conflicts over questions of identity, since norms, values and meanings have to be felt and lived. Of course, both the content and frequency distributions of cultural politics have been uneven. So, too, the lessons imbibed from a global historical experience — of world wars, fascism, the decline and rise of liberal democracy, anti-colonial movements, the rise and decline of communism, the spread of consumer capitalism, the growth of mass communications networks, and so on. But what, then, is the universal experience of modernity?

It is a recognition of the unavoidability of constant flux, the permanence of change. Modernity institutionalizes the principle of radical doubt. It weakens, where it does not destroy, the absolute authority of tradition, including religion. It provides a plurality of claimants to authority. Modernity creates the self-reflexive personality, for whom existential dilemmas can be more intense because there are no longer any easy answers. The certainties of custom and tradition are replaced by the uncertainties of reason and knowledge, the ambiguities of progress, and of development and fulfilment — whether of the society one lives in or of the self. Even as religion and religious identity are relativized and compartmentalized, the preconditions for their resurgence are also created.

The devastation of older values, ways of life, forms of belonging, and even of recently acquired values, ways of life and communities is traumatic enough. It is made bearable if what replaces what has been destroyed is "better" — if the promise of greater fulfilment, empowerment and emancipation is believable. It is the fading of this Enlightenment promise of interrupted, uneven but nonetheless continuous progress that has provoked a new kind of social disorientation and cultural despair, whose forms vary geographically, and are preceded by different histories, rooted in different combinations of the old and the new. The dangers and threats they pose differ in intensity. But everywhere the fall-back positions are the same.

When the future appears bleak, when neither steady generational progress nor the possibility of successful social transformation is believable, the incorrigible past is the only source of guaranteed security. The imagined communities of ethnicity, nation, and religion (of which the most important is the nation) provide the most sought-for continuities with that past. Of these, it is the community of the nation that can subsume other identities, because in its modern form, the nation-state, it is the prime locus of power. These three are the communities one is born into, that one can escape from only with the greatest difficulty, that one can belong to with the greatest ease, without doing anything in order to belong.

Eric Hobsbawm had this to say about this kind of imagined belonging:

"After all, nobody can change the past from which one descends, and nobody can undo who one is. And how do men and women know that they belong to this community? Because they can define the others who do not belong. In other words by xenophobia. And because we live in an era when all other human relations and values are in crisis, or at least somewhere on a journey towards unknown and uncertain destinations, xenophobia looks like becoming the mass ideology of the 20th-century fin de siècle. What holds humanity together today is the denial of what the human race has in common." [2]

Like much else, the politics of cultural exclusivism are qualitatively less destabilizing in the advanced world than elsewhere. These negative cultural movements, primarily racism and anti-immigrant xenophobia, have come into the foreground recently. They were preceded (from the 1960s to the mid 1980s) by an extraordinary and unparalleled flowering of progressive movements and struggles over ecological and peace issues, against race and gender discrimination, and for freedom of sexual orientation and life-style. As Gramsci had suggested in his writings on Fordism, ideology and culture became more than ever the arenas of struggle in modern capitalism.

Unanticipated by him or by other Marxists, these struggles were accompanied by a relative quiescence of the traditional working-class movement. The politics of identity have overshadowed the politics of class. Culture had become a dominant, if not pre-eminent, terrain of social struggle, the preoccupation of the "new social movements." The end of the "long boom," the transition from what some have called Fordism to post-Fordism, marked a new phase — the rise of conservatism and neoliberalism, the partial containment and domestication of the new social movements, the growth of nationalist xenophobia.

Part of the reason is socio-economic decline. When the national cake no longer grows as fast, or it stagnates (the collapse of the cake is no longer feared), then whether you "belong" or not determines your entitlement to a share. Capitalism in its best liberal-democratic garb still delivers the goods, but not enough of them and to not enough people. In the increasingly multi-ethnic societies of the West, it is inter-ethnic competitions that have grown fiercer. But the failure is not simply economic. Social disorientation also means a loss of sense of community. When the old links have been disrupted, what are the values that can bind people together?

In the more secularized West, with its more settled nationalisms, the preferred options have been the ethnic communities of race and language. In the former socialist world, what else is there for the ordinary citizen to fall back on except ethnicity and religion, separately or together? Here, cultural chauvinism is not just nationally xenophobic, but often separatist. Serbian and Croatian nationalisms are not proto-fascisms, however barbaric their activities have been in Bosnia. They are brutal attempts to forge new collectivities of meaning and political coherence along the lines of administrative convenience left by the collapsed socialist order. As such, they are not the- simple revival of the old, pre–World War I nationalisms. That socialist order ultimately failed to provide a stable new principle of collective belonging — loyalty to the socialist nation-state or to the socialist multinational state. It could not even provide the "Fordist" prosperity of advanced capitalism, or transit to a technologically more advanced "post-Fordist" era.

The former Second World saw no equivalent to the cultural politics of the period from the 1960s to the 1980s in the West. The politics of life choices could have no secure foothold when the agenda of the politics of life chances was so under-fulfilled, and independent political life was not allowed to exist. [3] When it was finally allowed to surface, cultural politics moved along the tracks already laid out — the formally legitimized, ostensibly self-determining "nationalities" of what had formerly been Yugoslavia, USSR, Czechoslovakia, and so on.

In the Third World, the failure is the faded promise of the post-colonial project. The basic content of these anti-colonial nationalisms was negative, defined primarily by what they stood against rather than by what they stood for. Since the colonized entities were rarely culturally homogeneous, neither for the most part were the emerging "new'" nations of this developing world. The cultural content of these nationalisms was not a settled question. It would remain a part of the post-colonial agenda, and its composition, organization, and trajectory would be marked by the relative successes or failures of that project.

In India, Hindu nationalism was already an important stream in the wider flow of anti-colonial cultural nationalism. But it is the decay of the post-colonial project as originally defined that best explains the subsequent rise of reactionary authoritarian populism embodied in the Sangh combine. It is not the newness of its ideological themes or messages, but the new receptivity to older, quite familiar messages that most explains its rise. It is not the slow "Long March" of Hindu communal ideology and its disseminating organizations that best explains its rising popularity, but factors outside the purview and control of the Sangh combine. This new receptivity is grounded not in pre-fascist preparations or seedings of the economy and polity (the New Economic Policy, whatever else it means, does not mean that), but in the collapse of the Nehruvian Consensus — the name that best

defined the post-colonial project in India. The institutional embodiment of that project was the Congress, whose historic decline forms the crucial backdrop to the story of how and why Hindu communalism has grown. [4]

The guiding principles of the Nehruvian project included socialism, secularism, and democracy. As the consensus collapsed, the guiding principles themselves were called into question — the first and second openly, by the Congress itself and by the Sangh, respectively; the third surreptitiously. The first meant a vague but important commitment to social justice. The second meant a commitment to the preservation of a non-denominationalist and religiously unaffiliated state.

The danger, then, is the discarding not of the Nehruvian project, which was clearly flawed, but of the principles that underlay it. Yet the appeal of Hindutva and its reactionary political encasement is precisely that it promises to provide a new project altogether, based on very different guiding principles. It offers no overall socio-economic, political and cultural–ideological programme. On the economy and foreign policy (the discarding of nonalignment and the pursuit of a strategic relationship with the United States), the Sangh has followed more aggressively in the footsteps of the Congress. Its distinctive focus is overwhelmingly on the cultural-political front, its promise deceptively simple. If the nation is to be strong, it must be culturally united through a clarification, acceptance and consolidation of its nationalist "essence." It is a new understanding of the past that provides the best means for handling the future. Knowing who we are, individually and collectively, somehow suffices in establishing, and guiding us towards, our destination.

This is a perspective that seeks not to "solve" the crisis of modernity as it applies to India, but only to cope. It offers neither revolution nor counter-revolution, but a programme of neoliberal consolidation and cultural retrenchment. Cultural exclusivism and xenophobia are not means to the creation of a new, more powerful and transformative project, but the end-goal, the project itself — which will, of course, result in an even more "degraded democracy."

Does It Make a Difference?

How significant a difference does accurate theoretical characterization of a phenomenon make? Given a bottom-line agreement that politically institutionalized Hindutva is a dangerous and pernicious phenomenon, that it is responsible for barbarous actions akin to those perpetrated by fascists of the past, and that its coming to power would further reinforce the authoritarian drift of the Indian state, does it really matter if it is explicitly defined as fully or partially fascist, even if there is no strict theoretical warrant for either label? This cannot be answered in any straightforward fashion. The significance of the difference between a truer and more false characterization, between political rhetoric and theoretical accuracy, varies according to the purposes of analysis. There are three aims that analysts separately can emphasize — explanation–understanding, prediction and practice — though all explanatory–interpretive frameworks have their own predictive and practical policy biases, if only implicit.

The first is in some ways the most important. The best test of a theory in the social sciences is its explanatory and interpretive power. Failure in prediction of an outcome or the inability to formulate or effectively apply practical solutions to a problem does not suffice to disqualify or discredit a theory or paradigm, as long as its explanatory and interpretive power is greater than that of rivals. The very nature of the social sciences makes the link between the range and plausibility of explanation and efficacious application of its directives or orientations a much more tenuous affair than the equivalent linkage between pure and applied fields in the natural sciences. [5] Whatever the failures of Marxism in prediction, or as a guide for social transformation, its

explanatory–interpretive power relative to other paradigms guarantees it a major presence in the social sciences.

To know or understand phenomena more accurately is of great epistemological value its own right, whatever the practical or other consequences might be. But when it comes to political phenomena, and especially if these are of a contemporary kind, then the extra-explanatory consequences of different types of explanation are usually real enough, even if of uncertain and varying significance. A good social science theory or paradigm must above all furnish a superior explanation and understanding of the matter in hand. The arguments laid out in this chapter have sought to show why the paradigm of fascism fails to perform well in this task. But better theories or paradigms should also have a reasonably strong tendency to make better predictions in comparison to worse theories or paradigms. And better predictions or assessments about the future behaviour of the political phenomena in question should make it easier to find better means of coping with them. Whether or not we consider Hindu communalism and the forces that embody it to be fascist certainly makes some difference to political anticipations and practical perspectives.

Again, the differences in regard to anticipations are likely to be less significant, less diverse, and less detailed than those on the level of explanatory–interpretive rivalry. The further one moves from "pure" explanation to "practice" (via predictions and anticipations), the less likely are paradigm differences to matter significantly. This does not mean such differences cannot be significant, but only highlights a general tendency inherent in the nature of the differences between more theoretical and more practical endeavours. The fascist and non-fascist views of self-described Hindu nationalism do have different analytical logics, giving rise to different conjectures and practical injunctions. Some of these differences will be addressed later, after discussing the third aim: the practice that is derived from one's theory. A political practice aimed at combating a threatening phenomenon must have a shorter-term as well as a longer-term perspective. Sometimes this can be seen as the division between tactics and strategy. On other occasions, the short-term goal is of such paramount importance — for example, preventing the Sangh combine from achieving state power — that it, too, is seen as requiring a distinctive strategy.

The "art" of political practice is different from the "science" of theoretical analysis. The best theorists are rarely the best political strategists, and there is no straightforward relationship between best or good theory and best or good strategy or practice. Theoretical differences are in an important sense less significant than programmatic differences, and are usually secondary to the latter. [6] Programmatic agreement is more valuable than theoretical agreement. Precisely because there often is such agreement despite theoretical– analytical differences, practical alliances between, and collective action by, disparate political forces is possible.

Programmatic perspective and practical strategy are directed distillations of theoretical wisdoms. They involve a drastic reduction in the number of variables that have to be accounted for in order to make theoretical insight operational. They also call for intellectual gifts of evaluation, other than theoretical–analytical expertise of the usual kind. The operational significance of the theoretical differences may sometimes be small, or even negligible.

Any political strategy must do certain things. It must first determine the principal aim — for example, defeating the forces of political Hindutva. It must then break down this principal aim into a series of more specific objectives that are in some sense more strictly time-bound — for example, preventing the reactionary Hindu Right from gaining state power, or expanding further from its existing strongholds, or advancing on the ideological front. Corresponding to these objectives, priorities have to be established. Actual and potential resources that can be deployed to achieve these priorities and objectives have to be assessed, and rational courses or plans of action charted and adopted to connect potential means and desired objectives. And all this must be done within an

overall understanding of the constraints of the system, of what is feasible at a given moment as well as over a longer timespan.

Over a longer period, differences in theory become more important, since they are the primary and general way in which operational strategies — political programmes and practices — are affected. In attempting to prevent the Sangh combine from coming to power, theoretical rivalries may well translate into significant differences of political practice, even in the short run. But perspectives for defeating the forces of political Hindutva for good — for destroying its social roots in the longer run — will likely be much more significantly affected by theoretical differences over the phenomenon's very character.

Some Political Conjectures

For a Marxist to believe that the forces of Hindu communalism embody the threat of an Indian fascism is to give the struggle to prevent it from coming to central state power an exceptional gravitas. It is to give it an apocalyptic charge, to believe that the working-class movement will be crushed before the accession of fascism to power; or, à la Pinochet's Chile, that it will be so crushed immediately upon or soon after fascism's seizure of state power. Fascist dominance in power may, however, be preceded by a coalitionist interregnum in which fascism briefly "marks time." In all Marxist notions of fascism, its accession to more or less full state power represents the culmination of the logic of fascism, not just an early transit point on a political trajectory that ultimately may lead to fascism. That is too open-ended a formulation, and is alien to any Marxist notion of fascism that bases itself on the lessons of the fascist era. Such an open-ended formulation may be in consonance with an understanding of the forces of Hindu communalism as authoritarian, reactionary and anti-secular, and even as potentially fascist — but not as fascist already.

Clearly, a major difference of political perspective emerges from the two contesting (fascist and non-fascist) paradigms. One will more greatly emphasize the drastic curtailment or elimination of any democratic space for opposition once "fascism" comes to power. It follows that the opposition must resort to primarily clandestine forms of struggle, and that mass and legal forms of resistance are near-impossible in the short and probably medium term. Only slow, molecular, underground forms of resistance can create the conditions for the subsequent and painful emergence of more collective and large-scale forms of resistance. In a very basic sense, the "political game is lost" if political Hindutva comes to state power. Its anti-Muslim character (even including state-endorsed anti-Muslim pogroms) is secondary to a more fundamental logic: the destruction of even the possibility of any organized resistance on any significant scale.

The logic of such a perspective should be to align the widest possible spectrum of "anti-fascist" forces. In propaganda, it would be a dereliction of political responsibility not repeatedly to highlight the "fascist" threat behind the outward garb of political Hindutva, of selling this "truth" about its real character, however reluctant its potential consumers (and fascism's prime victims, the working class) might be to see things this way. One of the most striking aspects of the fascist era was the lag in consciousness of the leadership behind the rank-and-file of the organized working-class movement, which had an intuitive hostility to the fascist threat and was more aware of its danger. (Even in Allende's Chile, the working class was much more sensitive than the political leadership to the imminent possibility of a military coup, and clamoured for armed self-defence, which Allende and his fellow leaders opposed.) However, the organized working class in India does not see the forces of Hindu communalism in this way, though much of the leadership of the various left-wing political formations does. This does not lead these leaders to reject the notion of fascism, but apparently makes the task of convincing the working-class movement and other oppressed sectors of the

specifically fascist danger all the more urgent, though extraordinarily difficult. An alternative view might see the forces of Hindu communalism as viciously authoritarian and capable of launching anti-Muslim pogroms, fomenting civil strife at a hitherto unknown level, and so on — though as non-fascist, or at best pre- or potentially fascist. Such a view would be more inclined to predict that the scenario, even after the formation of a Bharatiya Janata Party government, would be very different. It would be more inclined to emphasize the significant domestic and international constraints preventing any rapid elimination of all democratic space for open and mass forms of resistance. Precisely because the decisive battles to crush all democratic and working-class opposition have not been waged, there would continue to be significant prospects for delaying, halting, and even reversing the extent of authoritarian degeneration. The securing of government power by political Hindutva would be a qualitative defeat for democratic, secular, and anti-communal forces. But the political game would not have been lost, and there would still be much to play for.

Such a perspective would have a more open-ended and flexible view of the range of outcomes and degrees of authoritarianism possible. The state's authoritarian evolution would continue to depend on the unforeseeable outcome of continuing political struggles and pressures. At the same time, those holding such a perspective would, as much as the anti-fascists, seek to build the widest possible secular and democratic front to prevent this reactionary right-wing populism from coming to power in the first place.

Apart from its rhetorical value, the use (certainly the excessive use) of the label "fascist" would be seen as misleading, and possibly counterproductive. It would imply "extreme" outcomes if political Hindutva were to continue rising, rather than suggesting the longer menu of options that would presumably be the truer and more open-ended reflection of the reality on the ground. This could disorientate the organization of opposition to the Hindu communal Right.

Over a longer time-span, the differing paradigms would also tend to suggest something else. The focus of the fascist paradigm is the question of state power — its loss to fascism (with all its baleful consequences) or otherwise. An alternative approach which refuses to situate these proponents of Hindu nationalism within the fascist paradigm is much more likely to see the principal danger as residing not in something that lies behind Hindu communalism, or in some fascist core contained within or hidden in Hindu communalism, but as Hindu communalism itself, as the specific manifestation of the politics of cultural exclusivity and radical right-wing reaction.

The long-term, and in a sense more basic focus would be not on the potential or likelihood of a "fascist" suborning of the state, but on politicized Hindutva's deep roots and growth in civil society, well beyond the question of its capacity to appropriate the state. In a sense, the phenomenon is more deep-rooted than fascism, more enduring and more difficult completely or comprehensively to destroy. The ultimate decay or defeat of the Hindu state would not have the same decisively damaging effect on Hindu communalism as the ultimate decay or defeat of the fascist state has on the forces of fascism. The effect of the demise of a Hindu nationalist and communal state on this Hindu communalism would almost certainly be less complete than that of the demise of the fascist state on fascism. Its "traces" would be stronger and longer-lasting; indeed, they would be more than just "traces."

Whereas fascism in civil society is the prelude and the preparation for fascism coming into power, this relationship does not hold so tightly between Hindu communalism in civil society and the Hindu state. The task of secularizing Indian society is a much more arduous one than that of simply preserving or deepening the secular and democratic character of the Indian state.

The analysis presented in the above paragraphs, which was initially outlined before the BJP came to power in 1998, has not only stood the test of time, but constitutes a powerful refutation of the views

of those who have resorted to the term “fascist.” In order to retain credibility, the latter themselves now have to argue a) that Sangh fascism is a longer-term danger, and is of a “creeping” or “slow-motion” or “accumulating” or “gradualist” kind; b) that the crucial terrain of struggle if one wants the permanent defeat of the Sangh is civil society; c) that, even if the Sangh ascends to power, the degree to which democratic institutions, rights, norms, laws, practices, and so on, will be dismantled is uncertain.

As far as I am aware, before 1998 and the formation of the first NDA government at the centre, none of the four whose work I have focused on here (nor many others who have described the Sangh as fascist, or believed that fascism had arrived in India) have provided anything explicit, in writing, resembling the kinds of anticipations presented here, or argued why the overall scenario outlined above would be the most likely.

At the same time, whatever the label one uses to describe the Sangh, the way it has behaved while in power at the centre means there is now, in 2016, much greater agreement about the nature of the danger the Sangh represents to the Indian polity. Thus, despite continuing theoretical disagreements, when it comes to programmatic and practical issues concerning how to fight the Sangh — what the spaces are that would remain available; the possibilities for the use of existing institutions of the state and civil society; the resort to popular mobilization — the differences have substantially narrowed. The main area of practical and programmatic dispute on the Indian Left now has to do with the question of identifying which are the available forces with which one should forge principled alliances to confront the Sangh. Chief among these questions is that of how, and whether, to relate to the Congress on this matter.

The Problem of Alliances

The two kinds of strategic alliance for opposing the Hindu communalist Right — corresponding to the fascist and non-fascist paradigms, respectively — are the “anti-fascist” front and the “secular and democratic” front. But each can have different meanings for different people, including Marxists. Within the Marxist tradition, there have been two distinct and competing candidates for the best means of fighting “fascism.” There is the United Front, formulated in the course of the first four Congresses of the Third International, and developed further by Trotsky; and the Popular Front, developed in 1935, at the Seventh Congress of the Comintern.

The United Front concept envisioned a unity in action of the main working-class parties, in a context in which (unlike in the Third World with its populist parties) the characterization of working-class parties (communist or social-democratic) was unproblematic. This unity, with the assent of the respective party leaderships, could not be based on any “common long-term programme” between revolutionary and reformist forces, but was focused on common specific goals to defend common interests. Since “unity in action” and “common experiences in action” were crucial for developing greater self-awareness and self-confidence within the working class in relation to class opponents — including fascists — the United Front should extend to all forms of working-class organization — unions, for example, as well as parties. Structures to facilitate such “unity in action” should not be artificially imposed, but instead based on the forms of class unity that already exist or are periodically thrown up in struggle in specific contexts. Moreover, the United Front must under no circumstances entail an “ideological non-aggression pact.” Revolutionary organizations must remain free to carry out ideological warfare against reformist ideas. Such a proviso clearly creates practical difficulties, and is more likely to be acceptable where the revolu- tionary wing of the labour movement is of significant weight.

In two countries of the developing world, China and Nicaragua, where strategic fronts were instrumental in ensuring victorious revolutions through nationalist and democratic struggles, these fronts, while true to one fundamental principle of the classical United Front, nevertheless violated another. The revolutionary party or force in the strategic front retained its organizational and military independence, but at the same time the Front incorporated a major bourgeois political formation. They were, in effect, Popular Fronts, but the significant weight and organizational independence of the revolutionary component was the guarantee against successful betrayal by the "bourgeois partner."

The Popular Front perspective was different from that of the United Front. It, too, sought at its core to unite the working-class movement, with its divided political loyalties; but this was to be integrated with the effort to create the widest possible unity of all forces, including bourgeois political parties and other formations opposed to fascism. Thus, three concentric circles were envisioned, each with a different level of unity: first, the front of working-class parties, with strong unity; then a broader and looser anti-fascist front of parties; and then an even looser national front including all anti-fascist elements. A possible fourth circle was an even looser international front against fascism. [7]

The problem with the Popular Front approach is its political underdetermination, and therefore its capacity to incubate a variety of approaches to how such alliances were perceived and organized. When used by Stalin as a subordinate instrument of his foreign-policy goal of protecting 'socialism in one country', or in Spain, Popular Frontism justified disastrous opportunist alliances – especially when the working class could strike for victory. And yet, as in China and Nicaragua, when interpreted and carried out differently (keeping in mind some of the key principles of the United Front policy), it proved remarkably fruitful.

One of the central problems of the United Front perspective is its limited usefulness in countries where the working class is not hegemonized in its large majority by working-class parties. In situations of political urgency or crisis, where working-class parties are clearly not strong enough, even in combination, to triumph on their own, it is not a serious strategy for meeting the imminent threat or changing the overall relationship of forces decisively in its favour — though it can be useful in the narrower task of revolutionary party-building.

Since, in most Third World countries, such hegemonization of the proletariat (urban and rural) by specifically working-class parties is a rarity, and the proletariat itself (understood even in the broadest sense as all wage earners) may not be a significant majority of the general population, the strategy is something of a non-starter. In the Indian context, to believe that the working-class parties of the Left (the CPI, the CPM — far-left Maoist groups), even if they could get together in a United Front, could on their own alter the relationship of forces decisively against the reactionary Hindu Right's current political onslaught, is frankly absurd.

The Popular Front represents a far more realistic project. But it embodies a strategy fraught with dangers, some of which are so grave as to render the whole strategy, in certain circumstances, counterproductive. It is a double-edged strategy, but in most developing countries — certainly in India — one cannot simply counterpose the United Front to the Popular Front. The latter, understood as operating at different levels or "circles," leaves room for many on the Left or far Left to pursue a classical United Front strategy as part of a wider Popular Front strategy. But the bigger and more influential the Left party or organization, the more it has seriously to reckon with the question of alliances with which bourgeois parties and organizations and with what reservations?

The Popular Front must be pursued by the big actors on the Left, but with their eyes open, in full recognition of the risks involved. First, a Popular Front must never be based on some "common longer-term programme" shared with bourgeois parties. It is a unity only against a common enemy.

Second, since such fronts are neither socially nor politically homogeneous, they are always fractious. Even the common goals specified will, for some, be an initial step in the quest for a deeper unity, while for others they will represent the furthest they are prepared to go.

Popular Fronts, then, are likely to be brief political interludes. Furthermore, the internal relationship of forces between Left and bourgeois parties affects the Front's trajectory. The weaker the Left is politically and organizationally, the greater are the chances of its being used and discarded by its temporary allies, and thus also the prospect of the experience proving counterproductive for the Left and its social base. These are real dangers and real problems. The Popular Front is guaranteed neither to succeed nor to fail. But where working-class parties on their own are not strong enough to succeed solely through a United Front policy, properly articulated Popular Fronts cannot be ruled out purely on the basis of an abstract theoretical principle treated as a historical Holy Writ. Too much has happened in the last fifty years and more. Such Fronts are most likely to succeed where the goal is short-term and limited, and where the Left goes into them in some strength, with its organization independent, its critical faculties alive, and its eyes open.

In India, some concretized expression of the Popular Front strategy is unavoidable at both the extra-electoral and electoral levels in order to contain and push back the forces of the Hindu Right. Such a general strategic perspective could be endorsed both by some who insist that the Sangh combine embodies fascism and by those who believe it does not. Whether one subscribes to the fascist paradigm or not, this apparently does not have to make a significant difference to choice of strategy. In practical terms, the "anti-fascist Popular Front" and the "secular and democratic front" can converge on the same arrangement, even as their different nomenclatures indicate different evaluations of the nature of the main threat.

The stumbling block here is the question of the bourgeois centrist parties – the old Janata Parivar which has spawned a number of parties, bigger and smaller in Bihar, and parties such as the Dalit-based Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP) in Uttar Pradesh, as well as various other regional parties that are not part of today's National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Although it enjoys a parliamentary majority on its own, the BJP still welds together the NDA by giving its members minor positions in government. Are those outside the NDA to be part of the "anti-fascist front" or "secular front," or not? Regional bourgeois parties in the post-bifurcated Andhra Pradesh from which the new state of Telengana has emerged while Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Orissa and Karnataka, also have to be taken into account. But some of them, even if not part of the NDA, prefer to keep their options open with respect to Modi's currently incumbent BJP. So the establishment of an effective all-India anti-communalist or "anti-fascist" pole of political reference is by no means easy or certain.

The question of the Congress is pre-eminent. Marxists upholding the fascist paradigm are torn between those who see the Congress as a flabby, authoritarian-inclined but nonetheless anti-fascist force, and those who see it as so much responsible for the rise of Indian fascism, and insufficiently distant from the Sangh combine in its nature, as to disqualify it from any involvement in a strategy to combat fascism.

Those (Marxists and non-Marxists) who reject the fascist paradigm as applicable to today's India have the task of assessing the "secular" character of the Congress, or at least of judging its commitment to the preservation of India's as-yet-religiously-unaffiliated, non-denominationalist state. I believe that the rise of Hindu communalism is best seen not as the rise of an Indian fascism, but as the consequence of the collapse of the post-colonial project institutionalized in 1947. The decline of the Congress has been the condition for the rise of the Sangh combine, as also for the rise of all other parties. But its political and moral degeneration on all fronts has benefited and legitimized the BJP and Sangh the most. Unlike the programmatic communalism of the cohorts of

the Sangh, that of the Congress has been pragmatic and opportunistic. Though this means its secularism has also been opportunistic, rather than completely absent, the Congress has repeatedly failed the most important test of its "secular integrity." Various communal riots have taken place under its watch at the centre, and at the level of the states; in almost all cases the perpetrators have gone unpunished. [8] Despite the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992, Congress governments at the centre, fearful of losing the "Hindu vote," have never taken serious steps against the growth of Hindutva.

Though the Congress was the political force primarily responsible for the institutionalization of the Indian state in 1947, and for its continued existence as a weakly secular and weakly democratic state (despite its supervision of the authoritarian interlude of 1975–77), it is most responsible for the turn towards economic neoliberalism. This economic right-turn is of course not possible without a corresponding turn to the right at the political and ideological levels, thereby further nourishing the political field for the rise of other right-wing tendencies and forces. In fact, though the Congress was for so much of its post-independence life a bourgeois-centrist force — a classic populist-type party containing left and right factions; — over time, and well before the 2014 general elections, it has transmogrified into a much smaller, clearly right-wing party, while retaining a measure of social-democratic rhetoric.

A successful struggle to defeat Hindutva decisively cannot be waged without repudiating neoliberalism and all that comes with it, including the foreign policy turn towards a strategic alliance with the United States. What this means is that the Congress cannot be a strategic partner against the Sangh, even though very specific issue-based fronts can of course be entered into with it. Furthermore, its decline is now so dramatic and its weakness so profound that, in the near future, it might easily sink into irrelevance. Concomitant with the dramatic decay of the Congress is the crisis of the mainstream Left, which still constitutes the main battalions in opposition to the forces of Hindutva. Yes, this mainstream Left is today better seen more as social democratic (being pressed by internal and external forces to move further rightwards) than as communist, which it is only in name. Even so, it is actually the principal legatee of the older principles of the Nehruvian consensus, and as such more strongly and consistently opposed to Hindutva than the other bourgeois parties. Parties and groups further to the left (leaving aside the underground and politically extremely insular Maoist groups) are much smaller in membership and possess far fewer resources; but, given their political commitments, are indispensable allies in the common struggle against Hindutva. Since the Left as a whole will have to constitute the solid core of any broader secular and democratic front, there is every reason- for the coming together in action of this wider spectrum of the left, along with the other progressive groups in civil society and social movements that realize defeating the Hindu Right is both a precondition for achieving their own demands and a fundamental necessity of our times. This is the principal short-term, and perhaps medium-term challenge that the Indian left must address.

Achin Vanaik

P.S.

* Verso Books, 20 October 2017:
https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3446-is-hindu-communalism-fascism

Footnotes

[1] *The Rise of Hindu Authoritarianism* by Achin Vanaik. Paperback + Free bundled ebook £19.99 £13.99 30% off

[2] E. Hobsbawm, "Whose Fault-Line Is It Anyway?" *New Statesman & Society*, 24 April 1992, p. 26.

[3] See A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge, 1991).

[4] See S. Kaviraj, "On State, Society and Discourse in India," in J. Manor, ed., *Rethinking Third World Politics* (London, 1991), for a perceptive critique of the Nehruvian Congress failure in the realm of the "cultural reproduction" of its guiding principles, i.e. its failure to establish it as the Gramscian "common sense" at the base of Indian society.

[5] None of this should be taken as endorsing the view that it is possible or even desirable to separate theory from practice. A theoretical orientation is invariably based on a prior practical orientation, even if this is unarticulated. But, as in the natural sciences, there is a difference between the "context of discovery" or the more value-laden fixing of an agenda of theoretical–historical inquiry, and the "context of justification," the existence of "objective" protocols for evaluating better or worse theories and histories.

[6] It is only sectarianism that prevents political forces that have programmatic agreement, but theoretical differences, from working together in practice. Thus, within Left circles, theoretical differences over the nature of the USSR and its ruling stratum should have been subordinated to the common programmatic agreement on opposing the Soviet system, and believing that only a radical overthrow of its ruling stratum could release a sufficiently powerful forward momentum towards a socialist alternative. Instead, the implosion of the USSR saw a transition, by and large, in which the old elite became the new one.

[7] See E. Hobsbawm, "Fifty Years of Peoples' Fronts," in his Politics for a Rational Left (London, 1989). See also P. Rousset, The Chinese Revolution, Pt. II, Notebooks for Study and Research (Amsterdam, 1986). Rousset uses the same metaphor of concentric circles to describe Mao's successful "united front" strategy for defeating the Japanese and rapidly expanding the Chinese Communist Party's mass base. He perceptively points out that, contrary to traditional Trotskyist criticism of anything that smacks of Popular Frontism, the danger inherent in Mao's strategy was not opportunism or conceding too much to bourgeois cohorts. It was sectarianism, since the Chinese Communist Party was the nucleus of the whole concentric arrangement, and would brook no fundamental challenge to its authority in the name of socialist or democratic principles of pluralism, whatever its tactical "concessions."

[8] am not referring here to the Congress-led pogrom of 1984 against Sikhs in Delhi, and elsewhere in the north, following the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards; nor to the greatest ever massacre of Muslims in independent India, when in 1948 Nehru sent the army to overthrow the Nizam ruler of Hyderabad. The reference is rather to the dismal record from the early 1960s onwards, when there have been communal riots all over the country in which Muslims have been by far the most numerous victims.