

On the specificities of Brahmanist Hindu fascism

K. Murali

Fascism as a political ideology has its origins in the crisis ridden monopoly capitalism of imperialist countries. It is a form of bourgeois rule. The growth of neo-fascist political parties and the repeated electoral successes of Rightists in imperialist countries is directly related to the continuing economic slowdown experienced in these countries, triggered off by the financial crisis of 2007-08. They are greatly aided by the resurgence of narrow nationalism, which portrays the 'other' (mostly identified as immigrants) as the main cause for economic stress.

As a form of bourgeois rule, elements of the fascist ideology are quite often internalised by the modern ruling classes of the Third world, ie., the oppressed countries, also. It is blended with the autocratic, 'rule by edict' system of rule commonly seen in the past under feudal regimes all over the world. In the imperialist countries also fascism resurrected aspects of the feudal polity, replacing bourgeois democracy's 'rule of law' and 'formal equality'. But there is a difference in the oppressed nations. This stems from persisting semi-feudal socio-economic and cultural relations. As a result, even when forms of bourgeois rule like the parliamentary system exist, they are inherently flawed. The blending is a permanent feature. The switch over from a formal parliamentary system with constitutionally assured rights to the blatant suppression of democratic rights, has an economic dimension even in an oppressed country. The difference lies in the near total permanence of economic distress.

When it comes to the situation in India, the inherent flaw of the parliamentary system is often discounted or ignored by mainstream political analysts. They consider this country to be a mature democracy as compared to other Third world countries. The decades long sustenance of the parliamentary system and separation of powers between the legislature, executive, and judiciary, are taken as proof. Fascist rule, like the one seen during the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi, is taken to be an aberration. A closer look would reveal something else.

For example, the application of the 'one person, one vote' principle in India produces results quite opposite to the promise of political equality (even if formal) it is supposed to assure. As warned by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, what it actually does is to reproduce a 'permanent communal majority', rather than a changeable 'political majority'. An examination of the caste composition of the Lok Sabha proves him correct. The BJP has replaced the Congress as the main political representative of the ruling classes. So long as the Congress was in that position it enjoyed solid backing from the Savarna Hindus. They have now shifted their allegiance to the BJP.

Meanwhile, the new Lok Sabha too remains overwhelmingly Savarna Hindu. Their share in MPs is nearly half of the total. Though the political dispensation has changed, the communal majority enjoyed by the Savarna Hindus throughout the nearly seven decades of the Indian parliamentary system remains unchanged.

This then is the context in which we must situate and analyse the fascism being promoted in India, presently by the Sangh Parivar through the Modi government. It is an outgrowth of the reactionary foundations on which the Indian parliamentary system rests. By reactionary foundations I mean persisting semi-feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism unique to all oppressed countries. But that is not all. It also represents a further step in the ruling classes' project to tackle and overcome the longstanding legitimacy crisis they have been facing for decades. Under the Sangh Parivar dispensation it has acquired a distinct hue and doubly venomous content. This makes it appropriate to name it Brahmanist Hindu fascism. But Brahmanism is by no means restricted to the Sangh Parivar. Therefore, to make an accurate analysis of this fascism it must be done in a broader context.

The aggressive Brahmanist stance advocated by the RSS and other Hinduvadi forces had existed parallel to the Gandhi-Nehru ideological theme from the beginning itself, all along vigorously contesting it. But that stream never gained traction among the ruling classes. In the aftermath of the Gandhi assassination it even faced severe isolation and suppression. Yet it was never completely excluded. On the contrary, it had always been allowed some space, even if limited. The passage of this aggressive Brahmanist stance from the margins to the dominant position it now enjoys in the hegemonic consensus of the ruling classes has been the most significant development in the Indian polity during the past few decades. It can be properly situated and understood only if its viewed on the light of the legitimacy crisis of the Indian state and the direction taken in the recasting of the ruling classes' hegemonic consensus. Otherwise one will remain trapped in the superficiality of parliamentary politics.

Brahmanism has always been at the core of the Indian ruling classes' ideological make up. It was a key ingredient during the emergence, coalescence and alliance forging of these classes during the British period, as ruling classes in the making/waiting. Yet this was not the Brahmanism of the Middle Ages, of caste-feudalism. Complying with the pressures and influences of colonial modernity, it was recast, remoulded. Moreover, throughout this period, in keeping with the changing demands to be addressed while shaping up the consensus being forged under the hegemony of these classes, its articulation and stance have been modified. This became particularly noticeable with the formation of the Indian National Congress (INC) in the late 19th century and its successful positioning at the van of the anti-colonial struggle.

The forging of a hegemonic consensus is never a top down, linear, affair. It always has to respond to, and even adapt to, the pressures from below, from the people. The gradual awakening of the broad masses to political life under colonialism thus soon found its resonance in a deepening rift within the INC, between the 'moderates' and the 'militants'. The latter's insistence on political action, as opposed to the petitioning of the former, gained them favour among the masses. But there was also another side to this. The 'militants' unabashedly defended Brahmanism as a matter of 'national pride'. They explicitly placed it as an integral component of the 'Indianness' sought to be articulated by them. Social reforms were vigorously resisted. This exclusion of the 'social reformist' agenda had its repercussions. Both with their own agencies and as response to the uncompromising Brahmanism espoused by 'militant' leaders like B.G. Tilak, more and more social sections began to distance themselves from the Congress. The 'militant' stream thus ran into a dead end. This prepared the entry of M.K. Gandhi and a new recasting of the hegemonic consensus being forged.

In the new dispensation the stress was on Brahmanism's capacity to retain and extend its domination through accommodating and assimilating the 'other'. The concerns of all those social sections organising and struggling outside the Congress were partially addressed. The INC expanded into a conglomeration of diverse interest groups headed by the emerging ruling classes. The Brahmanism favoured by them during this period was implicit. It was one of moderation, infused with prominent aspects of modernity's political symbols. Take the case of the local elite's imagining of an 'Indian' nation. This was made possible by colonialism. As such it was a very modern product. Yet it was also useful to breath new life into Brahmanism's dream of a 'Bharat' spanning the whole sub continent. Simultaneously, by providing a sense of ancient origins, Brahmanism allowed this creation of colonialism to be conceived as the resurgence of a held back, glorious, past. Continuing as an integral component of this 'Indianness', Brahmanism was now positioned implicitly, embedded in the discourses of modernity. The Brahmanist precept of 'unity in diversity' secures its supremacy by deeming all diversity to be mere manifestations of a 'one' acclaimed by it. This was now projected as the ethos of the 'Indian' nation, thus placing it at the root of all the actually existing nationalities. Gandhi was instrumental in this whole endeavour. Many others too contributed. In particular Jawaharlal Nehru brought in a 'Western' slant, with economic 'development' as a major theme.

Under neocolonial conditions of indirect imperialist control and exploitation, the semblance of independence is of much importance – both for the local ruling classes and imperialism. Post-1947, imperialist designed and funded projects and technology were absorbed. Deeper penetration of foreign finance capital was welcomed. Amidst this heightened dependence, all of this was heralded as development. Thus, the false

consciousness of independence and development became crucial in the new hegemonic consensus.

The pretension of secularism was yet another of its prominent ingredients. Secularism can only mean the separation of the state from religion, making it the private affair of a citizen. This was never the case in India. Instead, the state's 'equal treatment of all religions' was deemed as secularism. In practice, it always favoured the majority religious community. Religious minorities, especially the Muslims, were dealt with in a prejudiced manner. The dismal conditions of the Muslim masses, even after more than five decades of 'secular' rule was well exposed in the Sachar Committee report. Yes, there certainly has been a spike in attacks on Muslims under the Modi Raj. The unabashed justification of such attacks by their perpetrators, the apathy of government agencies, the socio-political-cultural milieu where such murderous incidents get accommodated as the 'new normal' – these are surely new developments. However, one must also not forget that they have their antecedents in decades old state and non-state violence against Muslims and other religious minorities.

This 'new normal' too needs to be situated in the socio-political process it has emerged from and which it further embellishes. Otherwise we would end up in simplistic and artificial divisions. The distinction sought to be made between a supposedly 'secular democratic' past and a threatening 'ethnic democratic' future is one such example. An index offered for such differentiation is the under-representation of Muslims in the Lok Sabha. The fact is that this has been the norm throughout. It has never been anywhere close to their proportion in the population, right from the very first LS of 1952. Yet, just like triumphalist sermons on 'self-reliance' masked deepening dependence on imperialism, secularism too remained a convenient disclaimer absolving the Indian State and the party in power of their communal crimes.

All of these elements of the hegemonic consensus started to come under severe stress from the 1960's onwards. The reality of imperialist dependence and the hollowness of the 'socialist, secular, democratic' claims of the rulers, became more and more exposed. Their state's legitimacy was increasingly being challenged by various sections of the struggling masses and by national movements. The Naxalbari armed peasant rebellion shook up the whole country. Attempting to regain ground and restore the hegemonic consensus, the INC led by Indira Gandhi first tried a mix of populism coupled with fascist rule. When that failed, an ideological remoulding raising the need to revise hitherto sanctioned views on caste-based reservation, secularism and other elements of the old consensus was promoted. The state-controlled, public sector-led, economic model began to be dismantled. The semblance of self-reliance made way for deeper penetration of TNCs. All of this would take a

leap with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the wholesale promotion of the globalisation agenda in the 1990s. There was greater concentration of power at the Centre. The Prime Minister's Office emerged as the real centre of power. Congress ideologues began to openly raise the need to shift to a Presidential style of elections and governance in place of the existing Westminster model. Elections began to be focussed on personalities.

The recasting of the hegemonic consensus was accompanied by a conscious attempt to bind the Savarna Hindu castes into an all-India compact as a core social base of the state. Energetic promotion of 'national integration', vicious suppression of revolutionary movements and nationality struggles and aggressive expansionist acts against neighbouring countries – all of this was put to the service of fanning up national chauvinism, now openly given a Hindu communal colour. Over the years, the undertones of the new hegemonic consensus being shaped up became more and more apparent as an explicit Brahmanism, packaged as resurgent Hinduism. All sections of the ruling classes, their political representatives across the whole spectrum from right to left, have endorsed and promoted it. Remember, the attack on the Golden Temple, pogroms against the Sikhs, the opening of the Babri Masjid giving a boost to the RSS' plans eventually leading to its demolition – all of this took place under Congress rule. Rajiv Gandhi had symbolically launched his LS election campaign from Ayodhya. This was also the period when a Supreme Court bench had conveniently declared 'Hindutva' to be a 'way of life', greatly aiding the RSS and other Hinduvadis. While the ruling classes as a whole endorsed the promotion of explicit Brahmanism, they differed among themselves (and still do) on the limits of its aggressiveness and the modes of its articulation.

The extension of reservation to the intermediary castes (OBCs) at the Central level by the VP Singh government's implementation of the Mandal Commission's recommendations and the rise of caste based parties like the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) were two important developments during this period. Were they counter-currents to the ideological remoulding going on? These developments are often clubbed together and termed as the 'Mandalisation of the polity'. However, the social dynamics underlying them were distinct. They need to be examined separately. The implementation of the Mandal recommendations certainly was a tactical move aimed at checking the RSS' game plan. But that was not all. It was also intended to ease caste contradictions inevitably sharpened by the promotion of explicit Brahmanism and thus related to the overall design of consensus recasting being pursued. Similar in intention was the countrywide celebration of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's birth centenary, also initiated from the Centre by the VP Singh government. In the process, he was being positioned as some sort of a 'Father of the

Constitution' and co-opted into the ruling classes' political pantheon. His primary and prominent role in the anti-Brahmanist struggle was thus back sided.

Struggles for getting the Mandal recommendations implemented, going against Savarna resistance, did produce a new awareness among the oppressed castes. To that extent it brought forth a counter-current and also gave a boost to the growth of caste-based parties. But their formation and growth were essentially propelled by a different dynamics. The breaking away of social sections from the Congress conglomeration was already underway. It was not limited to the Dalit and intermediary castes alone. In some states Savarna castes concerned over the prospects of being side-lined in state politics moved away from the Congress. In some others, caste and nationality interests combined, allowing the formation of a broader break away. It was propelled by nationality based exploiting classes trying to shake off the control of an all-India party in order to facilitate their growth by gaining greater and direct control over governmental power at the state level. In yet some other regions, alienation from the Congress was spurred on by economic stagnation arising from the plateauing of the 'Green Revolution'. Overall, these developments indicated the sharpening of contradictions – economic, political and social. The new parties that emerged represented the aspirations and concerns of new elites forming up within various social sections, located in the nationalities and cultural regions. It opened up the spell of coalition governments, with and without an all-India party as anchor. The political churning this gave rise to did complicate the ruling classes' ideological project as well. However, soon enough the new elites too got integrated with the ruling classes and became participants in its remoulding exercise. The metamorphosis of the BSP from Savarna baiting to locating its own symbols in Brahmanist iconography is a striking example of this transition.

The Sangh Parivar stands at an extreme in the explicit Brahmanism commonly endorsed by the ruling classes. However, it would be wrong to identify this as an 'exclusionist' position as opposed to some 'inclusiveness' favoured by others like the Congress. Brahmanism thrives on the graded assimilation of the 'other'. It excludes the 'other' from an equal status precisely by allowing such graded space to it. It privileges itself by what may be termed as an 'exclusionist inclusion'. There is therefore nothing new or unusual in the sermons of RSS leaders on being inclusive, even while their fascist minions go around lynching Muslims and Dalits. Modi's tacking on 'Sabka viswas' to his earlier spiel of 'Sabka saath, sabka vikas' is very much a part of this.

Other than its extreme in aggressiveness, the shaping being given by the RSS to the hegemonic consensus has its own specificity. They are born of compulsions particular to it. To put its stamp, the RSS must recast it completely, displacing and marginalising the Gandhi-Nehru legacy. This is being done through an exercise in de-

hyphenation. While Gandhi is given a make over projecting his 'localness', Nehru is vehemently excluded, emphasising his 'foreignness'.

The Congress has all along staked a monopoly claim on representing the country by foregrounding its role as the main political stream in the anti-colonial struggle. This was a major facet of the old consensus. The Gandhi-Nehru legacy is tightly enmeshed with it. So long as it retains some credibility, the formal enthroning of an RSS-brand aggressive Brahmanism at the core of the new hegemonic consensus cannot be realised with full force. Crude substitution of its aggressive stance in place of the benign one of the Gandhi-Nehru theme, while leaving the latter's claim to an exceptional anti-colonial pedigree unchallenged, is not feasible. The historical record of the Sangh Parivar and its founder leaders simply won't allow it. They kept away from the anti-British struggle. The broader Hinduvadi forces too were no better.

Given this burden of its past, the RSS has been energetically pursuing a multi-pronged strategy aimed at manufacturing its own 'nationalist' narrative. This ranges from crude chauvinism centred on flaunting symbols and slogans born of its bigotry, to the appropriation of historical icons of past struggles, social as well as national. Facts are stretched to 'prove' the participation of the RSS in the anti-colonial struggle. In order to offset the Congress' monopoly claim on that struggle, it publicises all other streams hitherto ignored or side-lined in official narratives. (Those led by Communists and Muslims are carefully avoided.) In all of this, a repositioning or re-reading of their icons as votaries of Hinduvada, even if as mild ones, is sought to be realised.

Along with this, it has gone all out to establish its brand of communal chauvinism as the sole credential of patriotism. We are also treated to big talk on India's 'arriving' on the world stage as a 'power', on its own strength. Under Modi this propaganda has been taken to ridiculous heights even as India is getting tightly tied up into the US military web. While the 'India as a world power' balloon is blown up by the RSS with Modi as poster-boy, the risk of the Indian people getting dragged into US instigated conflicts has greatly heightened.

The RSS is trying its best to draw the Dalit, intermediary castes and Adivasis into its folds. Through this it tries to address two separate, yet interrelated, challenges. One of them is of an ideological nature. It is that of papering over the inevitable sharpening of social divisions that accompany the promotion of aggressive Brahmanism. The blatant attempt to appropriate Ambedkar is an example. The other challenge is born of immediate electoral compulsions, i.e. the need to form broad caste-based alliances. It needs this to offset the threat posed by caste-based parties like the BSP or SP. The Congress too had its caste, communal, electoral alliance, mostly Savarna-Dalit-Muslim. In the case of the RSS, it has the burden of squaring its

alliances with its aggressive brand of Brahmanism, normally repulsive to these castes. It has sought to do this by playing on intra-Dalit, intra-intermediary caste contradictions. Much more than the successful appeal of a 'common' Hinduness standing above caste divisions or the 'chemistry' of Modi, its success in building a broad alliance, pulling in the smaller Dalit and intermediary castes, secured it greater vote shares and seats in states like UP and Bihar. To give the example of UP, these castes remain relatively disadvantaged vis a vis those like the Jatav or Yadav, dominant among the Dalits and intermediary castes of that state. A combination of the Savarnas, non-Yadav intermediary castes and non-Jatav Dalits easily outstrips the Jatav, Yadav and Muslims, who collectively come to only forty per cent. This was the basic arithmetic at work – the one of caste.

Apart from the shrewdness of such electoral tactics, what is of more interest in the long run is the material grounds that allow their successful deployment. An elite has emerged within the oppressed castes. They are getting Brahmanised in direct proportion to the growth of their exploitative interests. On their own, they have been 'sanitising' their struggling pasts and leaders to suit them to their current interests and supposedly improved social status. Hence, there is much that is complementary between the dynamics governing these elites and the RSS' appropriation strategy. Any attempt to counter the RSS' electoral tactics with exclusively caste-based alliances thus inevitably runs into an inherent obstacle.

In India, the parliamentary system remains the preferred form of governance due to certain particularities of the country. The first of these is its extreme social fragmentation with its abundance of castes, communal groupings, nationalities, ethnicities and regional identities. The second one is the absence of a dominant nationality or cohesive social group that could be made the social base of the state. Neither the 'Hindi belt', nor the Savarna Hindus, or even the Hindus as a whole can satisfy this need. Each of them is riven with divisions. Greater doses of Brahmanism only go to harden them, even as they join up against the 'other', the Muslims.

These are the unique conditions of our society which make the parliamentary system eminently suitable for the ruling classes. It allows some distribution of governmental power and opportunity to corner a share of the spoils of exploitation. It has the potential to accommodate various echelons of the exploitative classes, even some layers of the middle classes, and of course, varying patterns of caste representation. All this can be done while maintaining and exercising the overall hegemony of the ruling classes. The functioning of the parliamentary system surely does generate a lot of centrifugal pulls and complicates Central governance. Therefore, the resolution of the legitimacy crisis may finally end up with a more centralised presidential system with an elected president enjoying executive powers and a curtailment of fundamental rights. Even then, the parliamentary system with its layers of

governmental and administrative potential for co-option will most likely be retained along with it.

Buoyed up by their sweeping victory, BJP leaders boast that this is now going to be repeated for several coming elections. That is a baseless claim. If not for Pulawama and the Balakot air strike the outcome of the recent elections would not have been so favourable to it. Given the dim global economic scene, further complicated by aggressive protectionism and the growing contention among the big imperialist powers, the prospects of an economic upturn in India are rather bleak. The huge majority the BJP has won is not going to change this material reality, just as it did not during its last term. A slew of anti-people, anti-labour legislation, more sell off of public assets, and greater easing of conditions for the penetration of imperialist capital, all packaged as 'bold reforms' is already on its way. Coupled to this is the promotion of rabid jingoism and communal Muslim-baiting. However, given the above scene, they are unlikely to be of much use in terms of triggering of 'growth' (for whatever that is worth). The only outcome one can reliably predict is that these measures will surely call up larger sections of the masses into struggle. As a result of all this, the electoral prospects of the BJP may well get reversed as its present term progresses. The larger question would still remain – how can the promotion of explicit, aggressive Brahmanism be countered and reversed? Can a revival of the Congress and its allies assure this?

Right now the Congress finds itself in a rather unfavourable situation. The two ends holding up its traditional vote alliance, the Savarnas and Dalits, have pulled away, damning it to crash down. Though varying from state to state its Muslim vote base is on the whole holding up. But that won't be of much help by itself. Even though it is hanging on to the Gandhi-Nehru legacy, this is more in appearance than substance. It is no less explicit in its Brahmanism or aggressive in advocacy of the globalisation agenda. Given its class nature it cannot but be so. Besides, since 'globalisation with a human face' is now part of the imperialist agenda, there is not much it can offer by way of social welfare that cannot be met in equal measure by the BJP. As for foreign policy, the tilt towards the US and willingness to get entangled in its military web, was initiated by the Congress itself. Here too it cannot offer anything new other than some fine calibration. Despite all of this the Congress is not going to be wiped out of existence. Modi is not going to be granted his wish of a 'Congress-mukt' India. The ruling classes still need it as an all-India counterpoint; a role no state party can fulfil.

The chances of the Congress making a comeback by gaining a majority on its own are extremely remote. But it can hope to regain power as part of a coalition. As was proven by the UPA-1 and 2, a coalition with the Congress as its anchor is quite acceptable and workable for the ruling classes and imperialism. Moreover, a functioning Congress is necessary for them for a more fundamental reason. A

parliamentary system can remain meaningful only so long as the possibility of switching parties from government to opposition benches and vice versa is retained. As noted earlier, the parliamentary system remains the preferred form of governance in India due to certain particularities of the country. Since the promotion of explicit Brahmanism is not something simply limited to Hinduvadi outfits like the RSS, it would be futile to seek weapons against it in the Congress or other parliamentary parties. Neither will they come from the Gandhi-Nehru arsenal.

The task is to confront and undermine the ruling classes hegemonic consensus being forged with explicit, aggressive, Brahmanism at its core. That cannot be fulfilled by seeking refuge in the benign Brahmanism of the Gandhi-Nehru type. Moreover, democracy has no obligation to defend this legacy against the Hinduvadis. The liberalism it displayed, the democracy it professed, was superficial. It avoided the basic issues of democratisation in our context, even those of a bourgeois nature. This Savarna stream of democracy was satisfied with modifications in caste-feudalism and the reworking of Brahmanism to suit the modern needs of the exploiters, new and old. It must not be confused or equated with the democratic values generated by the masses through their struggles or the rights they have gained through them. At various levels, and in varying degrees, these dealt with the basic issues of democratisation. They dealt with its political, social, economic and cultural dimensions. Not the Savarna stream of democracy but this Avarna stream, with its roots going all the way back to the anti-Brahmanist Bhakti movements, must be made the basis for any meaningful struggle against the Brahmanist fascist agenda of the RSS and its cohorts. However, a mere recall of those values and teachings will not suffice.

All of those movements had emerged from, and responded to, then existing conditions. They cannot be simply stretched out to suit our times. The material conditions that have given rise to Brahmanist Hindu fascism within the recasting of the ruling classes' hegemonic consensus are a complex ensemble. Not just the interests of the ruling classes, those of contemporary imperialism too are enmeshed in it. Present day Brahmanism is not the old one. It is neither that of the colonial period, nor even of the early decades after the transfer of power in 1947. For example, it is conscious of the heightened awareness seen among various oppressed social sections. New tools and stratagems to co-opt their leaders and subvert them are being developed by it. Moreover, class division is very much present and growing among the Savarnas too. Among the peasants murdered by government policies and misguidedly recorded as 'suicides', a good number come from these castes. So too are a large share among the impoverished labourers in urban centres. The concerns of all oppressed sections, including these, should be addressed, while drawing on the people's traditions of anti-Brahmanist struggles. This cannot be done through caste,

religious community alliances, no matter how representative they are. It cannot be done through the parliamentary system. What is needed are grass roots movements. Movements that address class, caste, gender, ethnic, religious minority, nationality, regional and environmental issues need to be promoted. A broad, radical democratic, platform and a counter-consensus must be given shape to through them. This is what is needed to build a powerful, consistent struggle against the RSS and the fascist cohorts within the broader, radical, perspective of confronting the ruling classes.
