

## **A Tale of Two Discourses\***

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The Hindutva bubble has clearly burst. Not that efforts will not be made to form another bubble before the 2019 elections, but the one that had formed in the run-up to the 2014 elections and had carried the BJP to power is over.

In the last few days, there have been mass demonstrations by peasants, traders, doctors, teachers, students and even school children. What is striking about these demonstrations is not just that the fear that had gripped people in the recent years is over and that they are willing to take to the streets to express their anger, but also, above all, the fact that they are concerned with the practical issues of life, with the “this-sidedness” of things as Marx would have put it. Let me explain.

All fascism, and that includes our own “communal-fascism”, to borrow Amartya Sen’s phrase, is based on creating a binary between “us” and the “other” (whose identity may change depending on the context). Each is seen not just in an empirical or factual sense but as a totalized metaphysical category; and “us” are depicted as being victimized by the “other” but immensely superior to it.

The growth of fascism thus necessarily presupposes a shift of discourse, from the quotidian issues of material life that normally occupy people and find occasional articulation through peasant rallies, workers’ strikes, and student protests, to one that constructs these metaphysical totalities, obliterating all distinctions within each and positing an essential and immutable conflict between them.

This is because fascism has little to offer towards a resolution of the material problems of life facing the people. Its *raison d’être* lies in this vision of conflict between “us” and the “other”; and it appeals to “us” on the grounds that it would vanquish the “other”. All fascism therefore strives to bring about a discourse shift, as a condition for its ascendancy.

To be sure, there are specific material conditions that facilitate such a discourse shift away from the issues of material life. These have been much discussed and need not detain us here (see for instance my piece in *The Telegraph*, October 17, 2017). But the point is that this discourse shift is always away from the material issues of life.

In India this discourse shift began with L.K.Advani’s rath yatra demanding the construction of a Ram temple at the site where the Babri Masjid had stood. It also marked the beginning of the ascendancy of the BJP in the nation’s political life. The demolition of the Babri Masjid would not have made an iota of difference to anyone’s material condition of life; it would not have paid anyone’s grocery bill. But it did bring about a change of discourse, buttressed cynically by the carnage that followed, which brought the BJP to power at the Centre for the first time in independent India.

The wave generated by this discourse shift was not strong enough to give it exclusive power; nor was it strong enough to sustain it in power (which it lost in 2004). But it left a residue. India could not go back to the old discourse that had engaged the Congress and the Left, about poverty, hunger, unemployment, income distribution,

monopoly power, economic self-reliance, and such like, all of which related to material issues, not metaphysical ones like Hindutva.

It was clear however that communal-fascism required some additional prop. It could not just ignore the practical-material world; it had to have some agenda relating to it, to supplement its metaphysical Hindutva appeal. This was necessary not just for its revival but for its appeal to be strong enough to give it exclusive power.

That is where Modi came in, with his slogan of “development”. His links to the corporate-financial oligarchy of the country, which had been forged during his days as the Chief Minister of Gujarat, lent a degree of credibility to his promise of “development”. And this promise, which cashed in on UPA-II’s lacklustre economic performance, was magnified by a large chunk of the corporate-owned media.

But lacking any vision (of the sort that Jawaharlal Nehru, or Indira Gandhi, for a while at least thanks to her advisors, had), or any straightforward sympathy for the poor (like MGR had), or any minimal acquaintance with economics (that would have prevented disastrous measures like demonetization), Modi’s utter incapacity to cope with the material-practical reality soon stood exposed.

Metaphysical appeals however have a peculiar limitation. Already insufficient as a means of garnering exclusive power, they also need to be continuously stoked even for retaining their existing strength. The practical material reality, of peasant indebtedness, youth unemployment, and dalit exclusion, has a habit of always intruding upon the metaphysical narrative of Hindutva. Classical fascism built upon its metaphysical appeal by carrying it forward to a climax of war and insane destruction; and a by-product of that process in the practical-material realm, at least for a while, was higher employment and the overcoming of the Great Depression.

But communal-fascism today cannot obviously carry its metaphysics forward in that horrendous fashion. Nor can it capitalize on any act of provocation by its supposed “other”, above all the Muslim community. In fact this community has shown a remarkable stoicism and an exemplary forbearance, of which the Asansol Imam’s call for peace, despite losing his son to a communal riot, is a moving example. This has actually thwarted the escalation of the metaphysical discourse.

It is this combination of an inability to escalate the Hindutva discourse on the one hand, and the inherent incapacity to cope even temporarily with the quotidian problems of the material-practical world, which has made the latter world intrude strongly upon the Hindutva discourse. It has shifted the discourse back to issues of indebtedness, exclusion, and unemployment from those of temple-building and mosque destroying.

We are thus witnessing a reverse discourse shift. Just as the BJP had come to power on the basis of a discourse shift, from material to metaphysical issues, it is now caught in the throes of a reverse discourse shift, from the metaphysics of Hindutva to material-practical issues. Its electoral setbacks in the country’s heartland reflect this discourse shift.

All this must not be taken to mean some glib forecast about 2019 elections. As noted earlier, a new bubble will be sought to be created before that date. Besides, a shift of discourse does not automatically translate itself into a change in political fortunes.

There is also a danger of the Left basking in the congeniality of the discourse shift, deriving satisfaction, no doubt deservedly, from the impressive peasant mobilization it carried out in Maharashtra, and underestimating in the process the paramount need for a political struggle, with appropriate strategy and tactics, against the hegemony of communal-fascism. That eventuality, were it to occur, would amount alas to a withdrawal from Communist politics to a kind of economism.

But while these pitfalls exist, for me and no doubt many others, the fact that the Indian political discourse is again acquiring a resemblance to what it had been in the pre-Modi years, is a source of great satisfaction. It feels as if some sanity has been restored to the political discourse.

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