

The Modi Years*

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In its attack on civil liberties, its restructuring of the State to effect an acute centralization of power, and its pervasive pervayance of fear, the Modi years resemble Indira Gandhi's Emergency. But the resemblance stops there. In fact the two differ fundamentally in several ways.

First, there were no lynch mobs, and street thugs, terrorizing people and giving them lessons in "nationalism" during the Emergency. It was only the State that repressed people then; but now we also have gangs of Hindutva hoodlums, who force critics of the government to apologize for their "misdemeanor", with the additional threat of arrests still hanging over these intimidated critics. One cannot easily forget the sickening sight of a professor being made to ask for forgiveness on bended knees for a facebook post critical of the government.

Secondly, unlike the Emergency the current repression invokes an ideology, that of "nationalism", interpreted as being synonymous with Hindutva, but cashing in opportunistically on the prestige of India's anti-colonial nationalism, despite having nothing in common with it. As a result, while Indira Gandhi's repression had the effect (no doubt unwanted by her) of making her critics appear honourable, the current repression deliberately portrays them as dishonourable, as "enemies of the people". This vilification is further magnified when State agencies are used to accuse these opponents of "corruption" and "wrongdoings" of various kinds; the idea is to destroy their moral standing before the people.

The third difference is the government's capturing of the media. During the Emergency, the print media was subject to pre-censorship; papers would appear with vast spaces inked out, because of which they actually gained people's respect. Now, the media, barring a few honourable exceptions which too may not remain so for long, are totally in the Hindutva camp; and the task of destroying the moral stature of the opponents is facilitated because of the media's complicity it.

The media's changed role in turn is linked to the fourth difference between then and now: the Modi government is entirely in cahoots with corporate interests, while the Indira Gandhi regime maintained its difference with the corporates and even presented a "progressive" anti-corporate image. Indeed no government in post-independence India has been as close to the corporates as the Modi government, a point exemplified by his travelling to Delhi in Adani's aircraft for being sworn in as Prime Minister. (It is worth recalling by way of contrast that when Jawaharlal Nehru, the Hindutva bête noire, had not had enough funds to visit his wife Kamla when she was dying of tuberculosis in a Swiss sanatorium, and G.D. Birla had offered him financial assistance, he had refused; he had himself somehow managed to raise the money eventually).

The fifth difference is its thrust against the minorities, especially the hapless Muslim minority. Indira Gandhi's repression did not have any specific ethnic or communal or caste target. It was repression pure and simple directed at her opponents and those of her son Sanjay who was notorious for his shenanigans; correspondingly it did not have any grandiose projects of rewriting history, of presenting a narrative vilifying a

particular religious community, and of using State power to thrust this narrative down the throats even of school children, inculcating in them a sense of hatred towards fellow countrymen belonging to a different religion.

The sixth difference, associated necessarily with this project, is a promotion of unreason, a prioritization of faith over rational discourse, a cultivation of disdain for evidence, and even for internal consistency of argumentation. This phenomenon has for long characterized the RSS, but it has now invaded official public discourse, with even the Indian Science Congress not in a position to free itself of this discourse.

The seventh difference is the destruction of institutions that the Modi government has initiated, and this is especially true of public universities and other publicly-funded centres of learning. All these institutions are faced with a “heads I lose- tails you win” situation. If they cave in to the demands of the government to change their ambience and curricula, they become intellectually dead anyway, since intellectual survival requires independent critical thinking. But if they persist with independent critical thinking, then they are starved of funds, and charged with harbouring “anti-national” seditious elements, as has happened to JNU. The fact that some of the finest institutions in the country, from the JNU, to the Hyderabad Central University, to the Pune Film Institute, to the Tata Institute of Social sciences, to the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, have been struggling for breath is symptomatic of our times. Nothing like this had happened before; no government in the past had ever shown such a disdain for thought.

These differences between the Emergency years and the Modi years can be summed up as follows. The Emergency was an authoritarian imposition, by the State, that had got extremely centralized by then, upon society, or upon the people at large; it was no doubt a fall-out of the contradiction between the logic of capitalist development and a democratic polity, but it did not represent direct corporate rule. The Modi years have witnessed not just an authoritarian imposition upon society by the State, that has also got extremely centralized; they have witnessed in addition a setting up of one segment of society against another, and the promotion of a cult of hatred, behind which the State acts directly in corporate interests. The difference in a word is between authoritarianism and fascism. The statistics of repression, such as the number of persons jailed, were worse during the Emergency. But the potential for repression being built up now is much greater, more far-reaching.

Every single one of the characteristics mentioned above as being specific to the Modi years, is in fact a characteristic of fascism: the rampaging mobs, the “fusion of corporate and State power” (supposed to have been Mussolini’s definition of fascism), the targeting of a hapless minority, the promotion of unreason, the destruction of universities, and so on. To say this does not mean that we shall have a re-enactment of the 1930s. We have fascist elements in power but not yet a fascist State; and today’s context being different from the 1930s, we are unlikely even to have one.

To be sure, as in the 1930s, the current tendency towards fascism, which is not just an Indian phenomenon but a global one, arises from the crisis afflicting capitalism. Such a crisis brings with it a threat to the hegemony of the corporate-financial oligarchy, which therefore looks for an additional prop to retain its hegemony, one that can shift the popular discourse away from the flaws of the system to the danger supposedly

posed by the “other”, some hapless minority that can be made the focus of anger. Corporate capital in such situations picks up some “supremacist” fringe group (such groups spewing hatred against a minority exist in most modern societies) and pushes it centre-stage through massive financial backing: what Michal Kalecki the renowned Polish economist had called a “partnership of big business with fascist upstarts” comes into being.

This is what has happened in India too, with the promise of neo-liberal capitalism waning because of the prolonged stagnation that the world economy has entered into after 2008; Modi has been instrumental in effecting this “partnership” between big business and the Hindutva crowd, whence his current political importance

There is however a basic difference between the 1930s and now, which consists in the fact that the corporate-financial oligarchy in the capitalist countries then was nation-based, and engaged in acute rivalry with similar oligarchies of other nations; the apotheosis of militarism which is necessarily associated with fascism inevitably led to war in that situation.

This had two implications: one was that military spending in preparation for war, financed mainly by government borrowing, got the fascist countries quickly out of the Great Depression and its associated mass unemployment (Japan was the first to recover, in 1931, followed by Germany, in 1933); there was even a brief interregnum therefore between the recovery from Depression and the devastation unleashed by war, when the fascist governments had actually become quite popular for having overcome unemployment. The second implication was that fascism also burned itself in the process, through the war. The cost extracted for this extinction was no doubt terrible; but it did mean the extinction of fascism.

Today by contrast we do not rival corporate-financial oligarchies engaged in intense rivalry. All of them are integrated into a structure of globalized capital, which does not want the world broken up into separate “economic territories” through war; it would rather have a world that remains open for capital, especially financial, flows. This does not rule out wars; but wars today are directed by leading powers against those States which are either not under the hegemony of globalized finance capital, or are challenging it.

Likewise since finance capital dislikes fiscal deficits, and since the writ of globalized finance capital must run against any nation-State (otherwise it would quit that country’s shores en masse causing an acute financial crisis), increased government spending, even military spending, cannot be financed by a fiscal deficit. Nor can it be financed by taxes on capitalists which finance capital would obviously oppose. But these are the only means of financing government expenditure that can lead to an increase in employment (for government spending financed by taxes on workers who consume most of their incomes anyway does not add to aggregate demand). Contemporary fascism therefore is incapable of making any difference to the state of unemployment under neo-liberal capitalism. And being corporate-financed it cannot challenge neo-liberal capitalism either.

This means both that it cannot acquire political legitimacy by improving the material conditions of life of the working people; and at the same time it is not going to extinguish itself through war as fascism in the earlier era had done. It cannot also do

away altogether with the institution of parliamentary elections, because of the precious legitimacy which such elections provide to the hegemony of globalized finance. (It is significant that the coups we are witnessing these days against progressive regimes in Latin America that have dared to break away from neo-liberal policies are parliamentary coups, which are undertaken in the name of preserving democracy, unlike the CIA-sponsored coups of an earlier era, such those which toppled Iran's Mossadegh or Guatemala's Arbenz or Chile's Allende).

It is in this context that the following denouement becomes a distinct possibility. Notwithstanding unwarranted interference with the electoral process, notwithstanding the discourse shift away from issues of material life to jingoistic nationalism which occasional terrorist actions make possible (there is a dialectic here between terrorism and the fascist elements in State power, each, objectively, serving to strengthen the other), the Modi government could lose the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections. But the government that follows, if it does not break away from the neo-liberal paradigm to provide succor to the peasantry and other segments of the working people, will also lose its popular support after sometime, which will once again enable the fascist elements to come back to power in a subsequent election.

We may thus have oscillations with regard to government formation, with the fascist elements never getting extinguished, but on the contrary enforcing a gradual fascification of the society and the polity through such oscillations. The way for instance that the Congress government that has succeeded the BJP in Madhya Pradesh is emulating that Party in cashing in on the appeal of Hindutva is a pointer to this phenomenon, of a gradual fascification of society through oscillations with regard to government formation.

We could in short witness a fascification of society over time, under pressure from the fascist elements who continue to remain strong, whether or not they are actually in power. This would be a case of fascification, without a fascist State actually being imposed on society in the classical fashion of the 1930s, a case of "permanent fascism" unless the conjuncture that gives rise to fascism is itself eliminated.

This conjuncture is one of neo-liberalism in crisis. To counter fascification effectively in India it is necessary to go beyond the current regime of neo-liberal capitalism that has reached a dead-end and has enveloped the world in a crisis, from which even Donald Trump sees no way out for the U.S.A. except by imposing trade protection (which amounts to a certain negation of neo-liberalism). A step towards such a transcendence of the current neo-liberal capitalism would be the formulation of a programme of action that brings about an immediate improvement in the material conditions of life of the working people.

To say all this is not to underestimate the importance of ensuring the defeat of the Hindutva forces in the coming elections and of unity among all the secular forces to achieve this. But while that is a first step, rolling back the fascification of our society and polity would require a lot more than that; it would require above all a programme that provides relief to the people from the depredations of neo-liberal capitalism. Only if such relief is provided (and appropriate measures to sustain it are made to follow), can we succeed in overcoming the fascistic legacy of the Modi years.

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