

Fascistic Hostility to Evidence*

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All fascistic outfits have one common characteristic: they reject outright all evidence that goes against the narrative they spin; and the Hindutva elements in power in India are no exception. Their narrative presents India as the fastest growing economy in the world where the people never had it so good; but if evidence collected by international agencies or even by the government's own agencies shows otherwise, then that evidence must be wrong. The credo of India's fascistic Hindutva outfit is simple: the reality is what Modi says, if evidence shows otherwise then it must be wrong, and, most likely, the product of a nefarious terrorist conspiracy.

There is a fundamental difference between an outright rejection and a critique. If the Hindutva elements critiqued the evidence, then that would be a perfectly worthwhile activity, since all critique is intellectually productive: it leads either to a refinement of the method of collecting evidence, or to a different interpretation of the available evidence from the one commonly read into it, or to a redirection of focus to an altogether different body of evidence; it leads in short to a deepening of understanding. But engaging in any such intellectual activity, such as a critique of the evidence, is beyond the capacity of the Hindutva elements; they can only reject outright any evidence contrary to their spin, without ever explaining why a particular piece of evidence should not be taken into account for assessing the validity of their claims.

I shall illustrate my point with reference to three such episodes of rejection of evidence by the Modi government. The first relates to the 2017-18 National Sample Survey on consumer expenditure. These surveys, it may be recalled, had been designed by Professor P C Mahalanobis the distinguished statistician of the country way back in the 1950s; every five years there was a large sample survey which in fact was the largest regular periodic sample survey in the world, and which, notwithstanding all its limitations that are bound to exist in any such exercise, provided valuable material for generations of researchers in India and abroad.

The 2017-18 quinquennial survey, however, reportedly showed a dismal picture with regard to poverty in the country, because of which the Modi government not only prevented the findings of the survey from becoming public, but ended these surveys altogether. From what had "leaked out" before the suppression occurred, the real per capita rural consumer expenditure had declined by as much as 9 per cent between 2011-12 and 2017-18, on the basis of which the proportion of rural population unable to access 2200 calories per person per day (the original official benchmark for defining rural poverty) was estimated to have increased from 68 per cent in 2011-12 to 78.5 per cent in 2017-18.

Instead of being alarmed by this evidence, or even testing its verisimilitude by conducting a fresh survey (as the UPA government had done in 2011-12 because of the high levels of poverty shown by the original quinquennial survey of 2009-10), or setting up a committee of experts to examine the implications of the survey and the possible remedial measures that could be adopted, the NDA government just

suppressed the findings and abandoned all future surveys! This is the typical fascist response to evidence contrary to their claims.

My second example relates to the National Family Health Survey 5 which was conducted over the period 2019-21. This showed that compared to the previous NFHS 4 which was carried out in 2015-16, the incidence of anaemia in both children and women, which was already very high, had registered an alarming increase. While 59 per cent of children between the ages of 6 months and 59 months were anaemic in 2015-16, the figure for 2019-21 had risen to 67 per cent. What is more, the incidence of moderate to severe anaemia had risen from 30.6 per cent to 38.1 per cent between these two dates, while the incidence of mild anaemia had remained unchanged at 28.4 and 28.9 per cent respectively. Likewise among women (up to age of 49 years) there had been an increase in the incidence of anaemia between these two periods from 53 per cent to 57 per cent; the increase in moderate to severe anaemia was from 28.4 per cent to 31.4 per cent. Even among men up to the age of 49 years, where the incidence of anaemia was much lower and rose by a smaller margin, from 23 per cent to 25 per cent, the incidence of moderate to severe anaemia rose from 5 per cent to 8 per cent. Rural children and adults showed a higher incidence of anaemia than the average, and children of anaemic mothers were at a higher risk of being anaemic.

What was the government's response to these findings? Instead of showing any concern over these alarming findings, calling experts to discuss their veracity and implications and also the urgent steps to be taken to reverse the trend, which any government with an iota of concern for the people would have done, it simply suspended on a trumped-up charge the director of the institution, the International Institute of Population Studies, that had carried out the NFHS. (The trumped-up nature of the charge is evident from the fact that the suspension was lifted when the director resigned). That again was the typical fascist response.

My third example relates to the Global Hunger Index. The Index for 2023 shows India occupying the 111th rank among a total of 125 countries for whom it is compiled (it is not compiled for countries with low levels of hunger); what is more, India's rank is lower than that of our immediate neighbours, Pakistan (102nd), Bangladesh (81st), Sri Lanka (60th) and Nepal (69th), and has been falling over time.

Again, what was the government's response to these extremely disturbing findings? Not an iota of shock, not an iota of concern, but simple outright rejection, with one cabinet minister even making utterly ill-informed and facetious remarks about them. The Global Hunger Index is calculated from four parameters: undernourishment, under-five mortality rate, child stunting (height compared to age) and child wasting (weight compared to height). Even if one accepts for a moment the government's claim that these parameters are heavily influenced by the state of children rather than of adults, the index still shows that the state of children is abysmal in India compared to the rest of the world; this in other words does not constitute any ground for ignoring the finding of the GHI.

The minister had facetiously claimed that she too was hungry because she was travelling the whole day and would have said so if telephoned to inquire about her state of nutrition; the under-nutrition information going into the construction of the GHI, which was based on polling 3000 respondents in India, was therefore suspect, warranting a rejection of the GHI as a whole.

Three points however need to be made in this context: first, under-nutrition is only one of four parameters entering the GHI; second, even for assessing under-nutrition the GHI relies not just on polling respondents but also on food balance sheets of each country, derived from official data themselves; and third, the reason for polling respondents lies precisely in the discontinuation of the consumer expenditure surveys that the BJP government itself has ordered.

It should be remembered that India's rank in the GHI, though sliding over time, has been abysmally low for quite a while, even before the consumer expenditure surveys were discontinued by the BJP government and the method of polling respondents was perforce resorted to. The coexistence of acute and growing hunger, together with high rates of GDP growth, has in other words been a perennial feature of the neo-liberal regime, even before the fascistic elements had come to power; they have only continued and accentuated the trend. The claim that polling respondents to assess hunger is responsible for showing India in a poor light is therefore additionally flawed, in addition to the above-mentioned reasons, for two further reasons: first, this method is used for all countries, not just for India, since other countries do not have the elaborate sample surveys that India used to have; and second, India's low rank is not caused by the polling respondents method, for it predates the use of this method.

The fact that so many different indices prepared by so many different agencies, each using different sources, point to a state of acute and growing nutritional deprivation in India, even when GDP growth has apparently been occurring at a high rate, is a matter to be taken seriously. The fact that the fascistic government of the country, instead of showing any concern, simply rejects this evidence, shows its true colours. At this rate it will only destroy the entire statistical infrastructure of the country that had been erected with such great care.

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