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Communalisms: Changing Forms and Fortunes

Writings on communalism are voluminous. We get a rich variety of conceptual approaches even among writers from the left. And, there is extensive documentation related to virtually every significant event involving communal violence, histories of communal political parties and organizations, communal policies pursued by central as well as state governments, and so on. I have myself written quite extensively on the subject. Here, I do not intend to assemble yet another narrative of successive events, though some facts will come up from time to time. I am more interested in examining some of the ways in which we have ourselves thought of communalism, secularism, nationalism etc.

Let me state, at the very start, my fundamental position in the starkest terms.

Communalism in all its forms is, in my view, not an epiphenomenal disease in an otherwise healthy body politic, a sectional pathology while the nation in general remains secular, or an epidemic of morbid behaviour owed to the machinations of the RSS, Shiv Sena

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and company that can be cured with larger and larger doses of secularism, nationalism etc. I rather believe that the sum of beliefs and practices which we call ‘communal’ have complex historical roots and are by now very deeply ingrained in the very structures of Indian society and our day-to-day politics—so deeply ingrained that much of it passes unnoticed. A critique of ideology is undoubtedly very important, and even more important perhaps is the accumulation of facts and figures regarding communal violence which goes on ruining countless lives endlessly. But we need also to anchor such accounts and critiques in a much more fundamental structural analysis of the society from which communal ideas and practices arise, and in which millions of people find such ideas admirable and such practices not only legitimate but necessary and beneficial. Communalism, in all its forms and practices, strikes me as a useful index for gauging where the Republic has been going for some 65 years, and where it now stands. Narendra Modi is, as of now, a symptom and, I dare say, rather an appropriate symbol for where the nation has been headed for quite a while now—certainly for just over two decades but possibly four decades, as we shall see. If he does become Prime Minister—which is a big IF, of course—we shall have crossed yet another milestone in this journey. The direction itself shall not be radically different, though, because that direction is not new.

There is also another way of saying this. In brief, Rosa Luxemburg was right. Capitalism does not lead necessarily to socialism; it may just as well lead to barbarism. Let me add that Luxemburg’s maxim is all the more applicable to the kind of predatory capitalism India has been embarked upon, because the various forms of communalism can benefit and indeed energize, directly and indirectly, not only the makers of this kind of capitalism but also very great numbers among its victims. Bulk of the storm troopers for any fascism or any religious inflamed violent conflict, and in ethnic cleansing always come from among those victimized masses who have been spiritually destroyed and morally disoriented by the cruelties they suffer in their everyday life.

Clara Zetkin was more precise about her own time. “Fascism,” she said, “is just punishment for our failure to make the revolution.” I shall come later to what we call “communal-fascism.” Let me just say that Zetkin’s assertion helps us grasp two things about own time.

First, the global defeat of the Left has given rise to very powerful forces of the extreme right in most parts of the world, with three sizeable consequences: (1) Marxism and communism command very much narrower global space today than they did before 1989; (2) neoliberalism—or extreme capitalism, as I call it—has registered impressive victories in large parts of the globe without any major counteroffensive from the working classes despite deep recessions in the capitalist core; and (3), in diverse zones of Africa and Asia, nationalism itself has been emptied of anti-imperialist content, re-defined in ethno-religious terms and closely aligned with the global neoliberal regime. Narendra Modi is an iconic figure in this regard. He rose to prominence and regional power as an extremist practitioner of what we call communalism and what he and his colleagues call Hindu nationalism. Now, as he seeks to capture leadership of his party and the nation as a whole, that identity is taken for granted but not reiterated. In stead, he represents himself as a richly dressed man of golf courts, and one who routinely hobnobs with the Ambanis, the Tatas and literally hundreds of Indian-origins CEOs drawn from all corners of the world, even as he receives apologetic emissaries from the US and the United Kingdom. In deed, he looks remarkably like President Morsi of Egypt, a veteran leader from the Muslim Brotherhood.

The second point that arises from Zetkin's observation is that, as regards the internal politics of India, the success of various communalisms is, in the final analysis, an index of the failures of the Left. Because, as I shall be arguing, the real alternative to communalism is communism, or, if you like, socialism—not secularism or nationalism, however much these might help in the ideological domain. Much of the failure of the left in this arena is owed to the larger balance of force in the country as it has evolved over the past quarter century or so. On issues of neoliberalism and foreign policy, there is a complete consensus among all the non-Left parties. I call them 'parties of the ten per cent' meaning that all those parties, whether in UPA or NDA, collectively represent the interests of the top ten per cent in the population, so that the Left faces very great isolation in the entire electoral arena. As regards communal politics, there is not a single non-Left political party of any significance that has not actively cooperated with the BJP—with the exception of

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the Congress of course, but that is so because Congress and BJP are competing parties of rule. For the rest, the Congress can dabble in communal politics just as comfortably and pragmatically as BJP uses this weapon programmatically.

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I shall return to all this. Let me first reflect on the curious ways in which we tend to use three words: Communalism, Secularism, Nationalism. The first thing to be noted is that we use each of these words in a characteristically Indian way, giving them meanings that speakers of English elsewhere— or political thinkers and activists elsewhere, for that matter—may not quite grasp. Only in India does the word “communalism” refer to a malignant ideology and violence-prone practice—even a form of “fascism”—which justifies itself in the name of religious difference; only in India do we have what we call “communal riot.” In Egypt, for instance, attacks on the Christian minority are straightforwardly called Islamist, Jihadi, Salafist or whatever—terms much stronger than “communal.” On the other hand, in most inherited usages, the word “communal” has historically been a close cousin of the word “communist,” related as both words are to other words like ‘common’, ‘commune’ and ‘community’; ‘communal’ property, for instance, was the opposite of private property. There are two further complications here. One is that we have no difficulty in talking about majority community and minority community—more specifically, Hindu community, Muslim community, Sikh community etc—but the people who *in our own view* actually belong to such communities are then required not to have a communal consciousness but to act only as citizens of the Indian state, i.e., as secular nationalists. Religiously defined communal identity is thus affirmed but privatized, debarred from politics, in the name of the secular moralism of the nation-state. Considering that the vast majority of Indians enjoy no rights of citizenship, except the abstract right of universal suffrage, it is all the more likely that most people would feel much less moved by our nationalist discourses and would be more attached to what we ourselves regard as the communities of their actual religious belief, affective relationships and social belonging. Nor is it clear to me how long a religiously

defined community can remain so basic to one's own social and material life without one ever sliding into the bad side of such an identity, which we call communalism. Is it possible to think of oneself as primarily a Muslim and yet forever remain free of communal identification? That may be possible for some heroic ones, but for the most part that does not seem very plausible.

Let me offer two further propositions pertaining to the problem of communalism.

First, the way we frequently speak of 'Hindu community', 'Muslim community' etc strikes me as purely fictional; it is very doubtful that Muslims of Kashmir and Muslims of Kerala share very much more than some religious rituals, a handful of founding texts of Islam, and a common fear of Hindu communalism. And, it is equally hard to believe that Christians of Nagaland and of Kerala are all members of a Pan-Indian Christian community. The idea of there being a Hindu 'community' across regions, castes, occupations etc is so absurd as to deserve no comment. And yet, in all our discourses of politics and policymaking the existence of such homogeneous, pan-Indian religious communities is simply taken for granted as if this was a self-evident fact. This fictive identity has been superimposed upon real society by self-serving politicians, mullahs and mahants, self-serving and cynical politicians, and the state itself which, like the colonial state, much prefers dealing with 'community representatives' than with class politics.

Second, not all religious belief leads to communalism, either in belief or in action, but all communalism, as we understand the phenomenon in India, is rooted in a sense of religious identity and in how these identities, wilfully concocted and politicised, are manipulated for political purpose, material advantage, violent competition and all the rest. Religion *per se* cannot be held responsible. However, certain kinds of religious consciousness— whatever the mechanisms for the creation and popularization of such a religious consciousness may be—is undeniably intertwined with certain kinds of communal behaviour, even motivating communal fantasies. It is perfectly plausible that a Kar Sevak, pulled out of the miseries of the lumpenproletariat and brainwashed with glorious ideas of Hindu heroic duty to liberate Lord Ram's Janmbhoomi, may indeed fancy himself a hanuman in the army of Ram as he climbs up to a dome of

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the babri masjid in order to pull it down. Religion is not responsible but it is not entirely innocent either. The less religion there is in society at large and the more strictly it is separated from all forms of political life, the less violent and persistent communalism would be.

I shall return to the point. As for the second word under discussion, “secularism,” I want to say right away that re-definition of secularism as “equal respect for all religions” is a peculiarly Indian invention, an attempt to pass off the traditional ethic of Religious Toleration as the modern virtue of Secularism. For the actually believing person there is always something unique about his own religion so that he cannot possibly have “equal respect” for a different religion; for a believing Muslim, Hinduism is intrinsically inferior. More to the point, equal respect for all religions *in the conduct of the affairs of the state* would necessarily lead, especially in the context of the corruptions of liberal democratic politics, to greater respect for the religion of the demographic majority whose votes count for more, whose privileged classes command much more money and power, and among whose middle classes new kinds of religiosity are now rampant. In India, the demographic majority of those defined as Hindus by the state itself is so overwhelming that the state must necessarily favour Hindus in its secularism regardless of which political party is in power; between the Congress and the BJP, there would necessarily be a difference of degree, thanks mainly not to different ideologies but to the differences in the constituency blocs that each wishes to address. On this issue, Perry Anderson has a point: the Indian state, he says, is a Hindu communal state that uses secularism as its legitimating ideology. I would put it differently, though, on two counts. Anderson overlooks the decisive fact that it has not always been so; the implication in his analysis that the difference in the Hinduness of Gandhi, Nehru and the RSS is a matter mainly of degree is preposterous. Moreover, I would say that the Indian state is in large measure a communal state that can accommodate all sorts of communalisms, including notably the Muslim one, but it is predominantly a Hindu communal state simply because Hindu communalists are far more numerous and powerful than all the other communalists combined. Or, to put it differently: the Indian state can live with communalism perfectly happily so long as communal violence is minimized, because such violence, like any other violence in public affairs, creates a law & order

problem. The point about secularism as a legitimating ideology is in any case correct.

Secularity is in my view a *modern* virtue that arises out of no premodern tradition whatsoever and which rests on a single requirement: radical separation between all forms of religion and all forms of state practice—that is to say, eviction of religion from the domain of politics as such. In its origins this is a European virtue. However, before we get too nationalistic in such matters, it is best to recall that Marxism is also in its origins a European virtue. The main thing about such virtues is that they originate in one place, in accordance with historical necessities, but then gradually universalize themselves, also in accordance with historical conditions. If the Indian bourgeoisie turns out to be too un-modern and backward in its own social outlook to insist on real separation of religion from the actual conduct and legitimating processes of its own state, this modern secular virtue will degenerate into a slogan and will get redefined in religious terms.

Let me add that secularism in this basic sense has always been not an achieved fact but something of a horizon for definition of aspirations. Capitalist states have typically acted with liberal duplicity, professing high principle but acting otherwise in accordance with pragmatic convenience. Most of Europe is currently undergoing enormous cultural upheavals because of its incapacity to accommodate non-European immigrants of a different race or religion. It is very doubtful that the United States of today is more secular than the India of today; the US just happens to have an older, more entrenched history of public inhibition and more institutional constraints. The two capitalist states that truly attempted proper secularism in their best days—when their bourgeoisies were youthful—were revolutionary France and Kemalist Turkey. Neither can claim that distinction today. The only states that consistently attempted secular separation of Church and State, and to ensure that the Church had no authority outside strictly private life, were the communist countries—a fact that can be witnessed in the extremely violent backlash from national and international religious authorities before and after the collapse of the Soviet system. “Godless” is the choicest word of abuse that the secular government of the United States always used for communists.

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Finally, the most difficult of the three words: Nationalism! With the exception of the Russian Revolution, all other socialist revolutions, including those in China and Cuba, were made in colonial and semi-colonial countries; movements for socialism were therefore combined with wars of national liberation. Moreover, the more progressive of the bourgeois states in the third world have periodically adopted relatively nationalistic economic policies, as was the case with Nehruvian India, Nasserist Egypt and the Baathist Arab countries in the heyday of the Bandung project and is currently the case in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador. These histories have led to a tendency in contemporary theorizing to identify nationalism straightforwardly with anti-imperialism. This is further complicated by the fact that in the colonized countries, nationalist ideology arose in opposition to colonialism and this anti-colonialism is often misconstrued as an anti-imperialism, even though majority of such nationalisms had no socialist content whatever and were glad to get assimilated quite quickly into the neo-colonial designs of imperialist capital. Africa is replete with histories of such anti-colonial nationalisms, not to speak of Pakistan and Bangladesh, our two neighbours. And, there are other, even more complicated cases, such as that of the Taliban who are certainly fighting against a savage war of imperialist occupation but can hardly be identified as a socially progressive force for their people. Elsewhere, virtually all the serious scholarship of European fascist movements of the 20th century is agreed that one of the key founding moments for the rise of such ideologies is to be found in that anti-democratic French movement of the late 19th century which called itself “Integral Nationalism” and that all fascisms rest ideologically on very virulent forms of rightwing nationalisms. Not to speak of the fact that nationalism in its origins was the classic ideology of the European bourgeoisie during the 19th century, in the period when the nation-state form first arose in Europe. Given all this range of complexities, it seems to me rather implausible that nationalism *per se* can be equated with anti-imperialism.

My own view is that nationalism *per se* has no class content, nor a well-defined political agenda. This content is given to any nationalism by the power bloc that takes hold of it and incorporates it in its own class project; Lenin’s great emphasis on the National Question was based on the perception that in conditions prevailing

in the colonies a party of the working class, in alliance with the peasantry, may well be able to establish its hegemony over the national question before the bourgeoisie could take over leadership of anti-colonial nationalism. Acceptance of a leading role for the patriotic sections of the national bourgeoisie in the anti-colonial struggle was always considered a less desirable option an index of the awesomeness of the communist movement. In its fundamentals, nationalist ideology is objectively connected with the nation-state form. So long as the nation-state form exists, nationalism of one kind or another is an objective necessity. There can be the fascist nationalism of Nazi Germany, the imperialist nationalism of the United States, the revolutionary nationalism of communists who led wars of liberation in such diverse countries as Vietnam or Angola; there can be secular Arab nationalism, and there can be clerical nationalism of contemporary Iran. There will always be a nationalism, there will always be contests over the meaning of nationalism, and one kind of nationalism can be defeated and replaced by another kind of nationalism in the life of the same nation-state. These days, it has become very fashionable in many parts of the world for vast numbers of people to declare that a particular religion is the defining characteristic of a particular nation—Judaism here, Islam there, Hinduism here, Catholicism there.

I say all this for a reason. In my view, you have to be already a leftist to believe that only anti-imperialism can be the true content for Indian nationalism. I believe it because I am a Marxist. Unfortunately, Marxism is very much a minority position in this country. I see no reason why an urban, upper caste, middle class, socially conservative Hindu would not be spontaneously oriented toward accepting the Hindutva proposition that what is unique about India, and therefore its defining feature among nations, is that the great majority of its citizens are Hindu, and Hindu culture must therefore be accepted as national culture; those who do not accept this culture as the normative culture of India are really not Indian in the deeper sense. I have said this here about upper caste, middle class, urban people, so as to drive home a point. Given the strength of rightwing domination—not necessarily communal, just rightwing domination—in today's India, I see no reason why a majority of the kinds of people who are interested in the question at all would not

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find at least some version of this identification between Hinduness and India quite plausible and even necessary for the country to remain united and strong. And this belief can go together with ideas of Religious Tolerance, *Sarva Dharma Sambhav*, the belief that Hindus are tolerant, liberal, peace-loving by nature, and that national disunity comes from others who are much too narrow-minded, fundamentalist, socially backward etc. So, when we ask ourselves whether or not communalism could ever become not just a majoritarian ideology but in fact something of a common sense for millions upon millions of people—possibly the majority of Indians—the answer would probably depend on which version of communalism we have in mind.

That was not always so, and the sea-change needs to be seen in terms of a radical re-arrangement of hegemonies. Let me recall a simple fact. Since its inception in 1925 until today, the RSS has a very, very impressive record of incremental growth in its direct membership, year by year, for almost a hundred years. This is a classic case of what Gramsci might have called a war of position and an incipient passive revolution, through an adroit accumulation of changes in the very terrain of struggle over the generations. All this, but with an exception: its membership did not grow and remained stagnant between 1948 and 1962. You will recall that this period of RSS stagnation falls between Gandhi's assassination and Nehru's death. 1962 is in fact a significant year because the India-China war was widely used to discredit Indian communists and organize a rightwing backlash, a manoeuvre that greatly benefited the Congress Right as well as the communal forces more generally. It is often said that RSS stagnated for some years because of its suspected involvement in that assassination. That was quite plausibly a factor. However, the central fact in my view was the kind of over-all hegemony that prevailed at the time. There was of course the enormous political and cultural capital at the command of the government led by Nehru, as inheritor of the anti-colonial struggle, but it is also important to recall that the main opposition to him within Parliament itself came from Communists and Socialists, so that one could say that the whole of the Indian politics—the state itself as the condensation of political society—was dominated by forces opposed to communalism, however powerful the communalist currents in much of society might have been. In other words, not just the dominant element in the ruling

party but (just as importantly) the principal oppositional forces broadly subscribed to the values of what Hobsbawm has called “the Enlightenment Left.”

As his voluminous correspondence with Chief Ministers would testify, Nehru was acutely aware of the communalism rampant within the Congress itself. Yet, four things about that moment of Left hegemony need to be said. One, this was the only time in the history of the Republic that those who dominated the state, in government and in Opposition, sought to combat communalism frontally, the machinations of the Congress Right notwithstanding. Second, while the bourgeoisie was greatly pampered through protectionism and the public sector serving the private sector, it was nevertheless virtually the only time that any attempt was made to curb the inordinate greed of this class; even Indira Gandhi’s later nationalizations were more a response to the accumulating crisis of stagnation in the Indian economy. Third, this was the only time the Indian state sought to consistently perform a progressive pedagogical function, trying to inculcate modern, secular, progressive values into the anachronistic social order at large; this can certainly be seen in the new textbooks of the period but also, far more importantly, in incessant political speeches addressed by leaders of government and main opposition alike, to the masses of people who were already highly politicised by the anti-colonial movement. Finally, secularism was not seen as an isolated value in itself but as part of a set of values and lines of collective action: universal suffrage for a society almost ninety per cent illiterate; non-alignment as an assertion of national independence in the domain of foreign relations; protection of the productive economy against imperialist encroachment; leading role of a somewhat reform-minded state and “socialistic development” in economic affairs; and so on. There was much more promise than performance but the promise itself served a political function. That the main opposition came from the left of the Nehruvian state, not from the Right that was effectively contained, was central in the construction of popular consent for the totality of a social vision in which secularist value was embedded. Now that all the rest has been abandoned by the entire spectrum of political actors in the country, with the single exception of the Left, it is difficult to see what there is in the neoliberal, rightwing configuration where secular value can be materially embedded. What

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we have witnessed in many parts of the world—from the US and the enlarged EU to many of the Muslim-majority countries—is that wherever this neoliberal consensus triumphs, the consequent rightwing triumphalism necessarily leads to the eclipse of ecumenical, secular Reason. Can India be an exception?

What have been the main milestones in this churning of hegemonies?

I have published three essays where this issue has come up: “On the Ruins of Ayodhya,” drafted in 1993, and two essays a decade later, in 2003, after the Gujarat carnage. Since then, over the past decade, there had been no significant structural shift in this regard until recently. It is only now that corporate capital has begun to unitedly and openly endorse Modi as Prime Ministerial candidate, laying the basis for full integration between neoliberal authoritarianism of capital in the domain of political economy with communal authoritarianism in ideology and state power. We would do well to recall Mussolini’s description of his own kind of Italian fascism as that form in which corporations and government become one.

In a more recent essay, where the issue of Indian postmodernism comes up, I have suggested that post-Independence history can be broadly conceptualised in terms of three phases. The first lasts from 1947 to 1975, from the inception of the Nehruvian paradigm to its final crisis and dissolution during the Emergency. A second phase lasting roughly the next two decades, begins with the massive ambiguities of the JP movement and the post-Emergency Janata government which serves the function of legitimising the RSS as a respectable force in Indian politics and giving its political front a significant place in government; the prominence of Vajpayee and Advani can be traced back to that watershed in Indian politics. On the whole, that was a phase of relative political crisis of the bourgeois state in India in which the older power bloc, led by the Congress, is no longer capable of stable rule but none other has emerged to replace it either. This phase of crisis ends with the advent of the second Vajpayee government in 1998 which inaugurated a new phase in which a drastically reorganized power bloc, consisting of all the non-Left parties, gives a new stability to bourgeois rule in India regardless of which coalition of those parties wins the elections. The decisive turning points had of course come earlier, nationally and

internationally, during those momentous three years from 1989 to 1992. Internationally, those years witnessed the historic demise of the communist system in the Soviet Union and southeastern Europe, and the consequent rise of the US as a global hegemon with no rival; the whole of the Indian ruling class and its state structures could now openly unite behind this new imperialist power with no internal friction at all. Inside the country, those years witnessed the onset of the neoliberal regime with the so-called Rao-Manmohan reforms, and that decisive turn in the institutionalization of communalism in structures of the Indian state which begins with the tacit agreement between the Congress and the VHP at the time of Shila Nyas in 1989 and even more dramatically during the destruction of the Babri Masjid. This phase of crisis ends in 1998 when a new and stable power bloc of the Indian Right arises with the BJP-led government. At the heart of this new consensus in the Indian ruling class is close alliance with imperialism externally and the imposition of neoliberal order domestically; this neoliberal order is what I call extreme capitalism. The Congress serves as the formally secular face of this class consensus while BJP serves as its communal face, even though BJP is also quite willing to have the more provocative aspects of its programme suspended so that it may remain at the apex of power in a broad coalition. Significantly, Modi is now basing his Prime Ministerial bid not on the hindutava plank but on exactly that rhetoric of “growth” that has served Manmohan Singh so well. As for the communal issue, the main point in the political domain is that there is no longer a significant political party in the country, with the exception of the Left, that has not colluded with the BJP at one point or another since 1998. Increasing communalization of popular consciousness can now proceed from two sides. There is of course that mass work by the RSS and its affiliates which have gained more and more adherents over some eighty years, in what Gramsci called the quotidian, molecular movements in the very quality of mass perceptions at the very base of society. But now, for many years, these same shifts can also come from the side of the state, its political parties, educational enterprises, repressive apparatuses, often even the judicial branch. As India increasingly becomes a national security state, the bases for an aggressive, masculinist rightwing nationalism are bound to go deeper into society at large.

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Our analyses of communalism tend to concentrate on the Sangh Parivar because it is the largest, best organized communal force in the country. But it is obviously not the only one. For illustrative purposes I should like to consider two other phenomena as well, namely Muslim communalism and the Shiv Sena respectively.

A remarkable fact about Indian Muslims in their generality is that no Pan-Indian party of Muslims has emerged during the entire period since Independence and Partition, even though local and state level political groupings and parties of this communal kind are aplenty. In national politics, and mostly in state-level politics as well, majority of Muslims have punctually sought a secular electoral alternative, not because they are particularly secular in their own outlook but because they expect greater security for themselves in a secular dispensation. Secularism for the majority of them is thus not so much an expression of social modernization or a political outlook or an ideological orientation but an expedient community interest. For the most part, Muslim communal leaders, clerical religious zealots and socially conservative forces more generally command immense power among them. All indices tend to suggest that the gap between them and their counterparts among caste Hindus has widened in post-Independence India as regards incomes, educational standards, recruitment in state agencies such as police and the armed forces, professional participation and advancement in the private sector as much as in civilian public service. Communalization of the state agencies on the ground, as well as the periodic and well organized violence against them, serves to create among them a fear psychosis and a sense of being under permanent siege.

The use of state terror in Kashmir, not only against Jehadi terror but also against popular protests and uprisings further accentuates their sense of alienation, and a broadly held view that a Muslim majority state with its own aspirations for autonomy is somehow unpalatable for this formally secular Republic. Except for a rather prominent Muslim elite which receives much state largesse, most urban Muslims feel excluded and herded into separate social, cultural and residential spheres—which in turn strengthens a ghetto mentality and a need, so to speak, for ingathering of the tribe. All this then gets combined with an internally corrosive social conservatism and underdevelopment, lending itself all the more easily to the rhetorics

and zealotries of the clergy, its mosques and medressas, as well as other retrograde elements within Muslim society itself. One of the consequences is an alarming growth of religious piety among these strata, on a scale quite comparable to, and possibly surpassing the growth of religiosity among caste Hindus, leading to a national landscape studded with competitive religiosities. Communal forces organize these competitive religiosities and benefit from them; communally organized religious piety then feeds into communal forms of politics as well as into communal structures of violence. Since Babri Masjid and then especially after Gujarat, there is now a growing fringe among urban Muslim youth that dreams of organizing Muslim jehadi terror against Hindu communal terror, and this fringe gains much inspiration from the rise of sundry jehadi groupings across a number of Muslim majority states, notably Pakistan and Bangladesh.

A remarkable feature of this vortex is that although there are numerous, very visible secular currents in Indian Muslim society, there persists a remarkable lack of political organization that could give independent expression to these currents, not so much in the shape of a political party of secular Muslims but, more importantly, as a force that would articulate a progressive Muslim agenda in civil society as a whole while also contesting the hegemonic space within Muslim society that is currently occupied by a variety of conservative forces. The result is that Muslims *qua* Muslims rarely get organized on progressive platforms. For the great majority among those who think about such matters at all, the issue of Palestine remains a conflict between Muslims and Jews, not an instance of the most savage form of settler colonialism; and the invasion of Afghanistan or Iraq atr often seen as genocidal acts of the Christian West against Muslims of the East, not as chapters in the history of modern imperialism. More recently, we have witnessed impressive demonstrations by cross-sections of Indian Muslims in support of the Bangladesh Muslim League but none in favour of the Shah Bagh agitation. In Pakistan as well as Bangladesh, there are now very well demarcated killing fields where the impious get killed by the pious, the Shia by the Sunni, the liberal woman by the illiberal jehadi. From among the generality of Indian Muslims there are no meaningful acts of solidarity with the victims. If the upper layers of Muslim communalism often take an oppositional or critical stance toward various policies of the state in

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order eventually to strengthen their bargaining position within the lucrative clientalist relationship that these layers enjoy with that self-same state, the lower levels of that same Muslim communalism display the same lumpenization that is characteristic of the Shiv Sena or the mass organizations of the Sangh parivar, even though they are much less likely to go on that same rampage of violence because they expect great hostility from the police and other security agencies, not the kind of support that those same agencies give to their Hindu counterparts.

This feature of widespread lumpenization brings me then briefly to the Shiv Sena which always reminds me of Mussolini's description of fascists as "super-relativists." What they pursue, in other words, is brute power, and they choose their tactics, their enemies and their violences purely in the light of that basic pursuit: storm troopers against communists and trade unionists in one phase, anti-Tamil goons, in another phase, Hindutva votaries when it serves the purpose, perfectly willing to combine this Hindutva identity with the creation of an anti-Bihari mass hysteria with no distinction between a Hindu Bihari and a Muslim Bihari—and so on. This is not the space for any extended analysis of the Sena. A few points can be made in any case. One is that the only consistent element in Thakeray's ideology has been his hatred of the communists and of the left more generally. For the rest, all the cynical pursuit of power that the RSS camouflages through elevated rhetoric of Hindu culture, tradition and nationalism comes out naked in the case of the Sena. Founded in 1966, it came fully into the Hindutva ideological matrix only in the 1980s, well after members of the Jan Sangh, the parliamentary face of the RSS at the time, had made great strides in electoral politics during the tenure of post-Emergency Janata government. At one point, Thakeray had even supported the Emergency, to the chagrin of many of his supporters. The case of Shiv Sena also illustrates how easily a communalism can move back and forth between the religio-fascist form of Hindutva and the sub-national, ethno-regional posture of Marathi exclusivity. The recent campaigns against North Indians has been waged without any differentiation between Hindus and non-Hindus, all of them getting treated just as outsiders whose presence in Bombay was said to be responsible for Marathi deprivation: a classic case of the immigrants—most of them poor and underpaid—being

blamed for the miseries produced by predatory capitalism in the very belly of its financial centre. Moreover, the strong-arm, lumpenized violence successively against Tamils, Muslims, Biharis and even Bengalis who get stigmatised as Bangladeshis becomes a mechanism for the mobs that are organized for the perpetration of this violence to gain materially through looting, shakedowns, takeover of petty businesses etc and for transfer of wealth directly into the coffers of the party and the deep pockets of its leaders. Thakeray started his career as a petty bourgeois journalist and cartoonist but his net worth was rumoured to be 30,000 crores by the time he died. Be that as it may. The point is that communal violence as well as ethno-regional identitarian violence emerge as forms of organized crime and, especially in the context of Bombay, merge with other kinds of organized crime syndicates. This is a punctual feature of communalism in general. Shiv Sena is just more blatant and its storm troopers, drawn largely from among the lumpenproletariat and the lumpenized sections of the petty bourgeoisie, seem to enjoy widespread support and admiration among the middle and lower middle class as well as sections of the urban poor who are all caught in the coils of a predatory capitalism and whose anxieties and resentments those storm troopers come to represent.

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I will not try to offer any formal conclusion summarizing the argument as a whole but will just close with a very few points of special emphasis.

First of all, it is extremely important to understand that storm troopers drawn overwhelmingly from the lumpenproletariat and the lumpenized petty bourgeoisie play such a significant role in the entire structure of Indian communalism— be it that of the Sangh, the Muslims or the Sena—because that *is* the structural feature of Indian capitalism, especially in its neoliberal phase. The army of the unemployed is far greater than that of the workers who get any stable employment, and that creates a situation in which, among other such morbid symptoms, the wage is so depressed that a proper proletarian culture is hard to sustain and many from inside the proletariat itself tend to get lumpenized: living partly by labour and wage within the capitalist system, but also supplementing it often with earnings

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generated by wit and, at times, even crime. Worse still, the army of the unemployed is so vast, so permanent, that an innumerable number of them just stop seeking that kind of work, fall out of the capitalist system properly speaking, partaking of no labour that creates surplus value, falling into the underbelly of a pseudo-economy that runs parallel to the real economy and is governed by no rules, not even of exploitation, and where one can earn anything from a daily living to a fortune to a sudden death simply by going from one wager to another, often taking wit and/or crime in one's stride. A stable life of productive labour gives one pride, or at least a grounding, in what one does but lack of that productivity, that sense of who one is, robs one of pride in oneself; that pride must somehow be regained, even if it is by harming others, be it by way of crime or by that purported non-crime that is communalism itself, with all its violences. The life of value-producing labour is lived in a community of others who do the same, the life of the lumpenproletariat is by its nature one that creates no community out of any shared conditions of labour but must always work within collectivities that are tentative, transitional and forever in need of getting re-invented out of the emergencies that individuals in this quasi-class face all the time. Bereft of class belonging, they are prone to temptations of community-belonging to caste, religion or whatever—a kind of belonging far more abstract than the concrete belonging to a community of labour. Getting recruited into communal politics often gives them that much needed sense, though a fictive sense, of belonging to a real community. In the process, the aggressivity of posture that is so important for sheer survival in lumpen life can get easily transferred to communal/ fascist kinds of organized violence.

More broadly, communalism in all its forms and manifestations is connected directly with what is generally called neoliberalism and which I simply call extreme capitalism, i.e., capitalism in its openly rapacious, predatory form. I use these other formulations in order to emphasize that capitalism itself is far older than neoliberalism, that all capitalism is predatory to a lesser or greater extent and that this capitalist tendency has always been rather pronounced in India thanks to our caste structures and communal conflicts. Such tendencies were under some controls before the onset of neoliberal extremism; now most such controls have been abandoned and the state intervenes, more or less grudgingly, only when there is communal violence which

is seen essentially as a law and order problem. This is a logical consequence of the great transformation that has taken place in the nature of the state itself. In the first, post-Independence phase, the state, although a bourgeois-landlord state, nevertheless attempted to largely protect the Indian economy against the full blast of imperialist pressures. As Indian capitalism became stronger and more predatory, it became more and more open to collusion with imperialist predation, transferred more and more public property into private ownership, opened up more and more of the Indian economy for foreign ownership, and adopted strategies of accumulation in which few among the propertyless and the immiserated could find secure employment while the numbers of the unemployed have kept rising. In the process, the role of the state changed drastically. At home, it came to represent not the Indian people as a whole but almost exclusively the capitalist class, in deed the corporate core of this class. In its relations with the global economy, this state no longer represents the Indian people and their interests to the world; the principal task that the neoliberal state in India has assigned to itself is that of transmitting the interests and orders of international finance capital *to the Indian people*. And this is so despite the surviving but utterly hollowed out institutions of representative electoral democracy. In this situation, the state must in practice abandon the kind of secular nationalism that had been the basis of our anti-colonial movements, and a powerful rightwing gets into high gear to redefine Indian nationalism in religious, obscurantist, High Brahminical terms which offer no resistance to imperialism. Even the unity of the Indian people is sought to be greatly undermined through heightened ethnic, regional and religious conflicts. As we saw in the case of Shiv Sena, there is a deep genetic connection between communal violence and ethno-regional violence.

This neoliberal order is not only a vast system of brutal exploitation and a low wage regime to break the spirit of the working class; it also refuses to provide or protect employment for increasingly larger numbers of people. Thus, it is a system not only of exploitation but of social uprooting and social disorientation. The phenomenon of lumpenization is much wider than the lumpenproletariat *per se*, reaching into substantial sections of the middle classes. This, I believe, is one of the most important challenges the left faces today with respect

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to communalism, namely that the social decomposition caused by this extreme capitalism contaminates and poisons the consciousness of countless among the pauperized masses and even sections of the working class itself.

All forms of struggle against communalism are of course necessary but there must be no illusion about how long and arduous the struggle is going to be. If communalism is not just an ideological, superstructural, epiphenomenal force and if the totality of the communal forces are structurally rooted in this predatory capitalism, then it necessarily follows that the struggle against communalism is not only a matter of an ideological struggle on behalf of secularism but part of a struggle against capitalism itself. That is, in short, what I meant when I suggested earlier that the real, enduring alternative to communalism is communism as such. I will go so far as to say that in India, secularism is no longer a bourgeois virtue, as it once was for the Enlightenment bourgeoisie in Europe and among many during our anti-colonial struggle. Today, in the context of the extremely wide dissemination of communal consciousness in the country at large, secularism has emerged as a specifically communist virtue.