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Nationalism, Hindutva and the Assault on Thought

Bourgeois nationalism invariably sees the “nation” as distinct from, and standing above, the people, who are required to make “sacrifices” for the “nation” but whose own conditions of life are not supposed to be relevant to the stature of the “nation”. This is true of all phases of capitalism. The “nationalism” that came into vogue in Europe after the Westphalian peace treaties was associated with mercantile capital whose theoretical outlook, mercantilism, saw the wealth of a nation as consisting of the magnitude of gold and silver it possessed. European “nations” therefore vied with one another in spreading out all over the globe in an enormous imperial expansion aimed at augmenting the “nation’s” wealth either directly through loot, plunder and the mining of gold overseas with slave labour, or indirectly through grabbing goods from colonies that could be exchanged for precious metals. But such augmentation of the wealth of “nations” was not supposed to, and did not, contribute to any improvement in the conditions of life of the people. On the contrary, as John Maynard Keynes argued, the inflow of Spanish gold into Europe resulted in inflation which, in countries like Britain and Holland, where money wages did not increase, led to a worsening of the conditions of the working population. In fact Keynes saw this lowering of real wages as the reason for the subsequent development of industrial capitalism in these countries.

Adam Smith, the theorist of the bourgeois order that industrial capitalism was ushering in, and a staunch critic of mercantilism who defined the wealth of a “nation” not in terms of the gold and silver it possessed but in terms of its capital stock, and hence advocated the removal of all fetters on capital accumulation as the means of augmenting the wealth of a “nation”, also did not see such augmentation as improving the standard of life of the working people. True, he believed that real wages in a nation *accumulating capital* would be higher than in one where the capital stock was stagnant; but the size of the stock *per se* did not affect real wages. And the same was true of David Ricardo, the other major theorist of the new order. “Nationalism” oriented towards augmenting the wealth of “nations” saw the “nation” as standing above the people, even in the era of industrial capitalism.

This concept of “nationalism” was even more clearly evident in the era of finance capital. Rudolf Hilferding, whose opus *Das Finanzkapital* was used extensively by Lenin, saw a glorification of the “national idea” as the ideology of finance capital. Financial oligarchies in different countries, each

presiding over a coalescence of industrial and bank capital, were engaged in intense inter-imperialist rivalries and fought wars against one another, in which the workers of the warring countries were required to kill each other across the trenches, but there was never any suggestion, even for ideological propaganda purposes, that such wars were being fought for improving the conditions of life of the workers.

“Nationalism” no doubt has somewhat receded “officially” in the advanced capitalist countries in the recent period, but this has to do with the fact that finance capital itself has become “globalized” and international. This receding however does not negate the fact that bourgeois nationalism in all phases of capitalism has apotheosized the “nation” as standing above the people. Since its interest is not perceived to coincide with the interest of the working people, by implication it is seen as being co-terminus with the interest of capital.

The “nationalism” that developed in countries like India in the course of their anti-colonial struggle was altogether different. Since the theoretical basis of the anti-colonial struggle was derived from the phenomena of “drain” and “deindustrialization” which had impinged on the *people*, and since the intensification of the anti-colonial struggle occurred in the 1930s when the peasantry suffered acute distress (which in turn affected the agricultural labourers as well), owing to the disastrous fall in prices and the terms of trade of their products as a result of the Great Depression, the “nationalism” associated with this struggle necessarily envisaged an improvement in the living conditions of the people. The “nation” in short was not seen as a separate entity standing above the people, but an entity whose interest lay in an improvement in the conditions of the people. Instead of an “aggrandizing” bourgeois nationalism, this nationalism had to be inclusive, encompassing the widest segments of the people, and engaged in developing solidarity with other struggling people in the world rather than seeking hegemony over them. And since any effort to encompass the widest segments of the people must be based on a promise of what the new “nation” would look like, it had to advance a programme, a “social contract” on the basis of which people could unite.

The Karachi Congress resolution of 1931 was in the nature of such a “social contract”, and together with the promise of land reforms that the Congress campaign for the 1937 elections put forward, had a decisive impact on the outcome of those elections. The Karachi Resolution put forward a programme that included, among others, universal adult suffrage; equality before law irrespective of gender, caste, ethnic and class differences; a separation of the State from religion; a set of fundamental rights; a minimum standard of life for every Indian; free and compulsory primary education; and abolition of the death penalty. Programmes like the Karachi Resolution in India also came up in the course of struggles by other

oppressed people of the third world, a notable example being the Freedom Charter of South Africa.

The question obviously arises: if bourgeois nationalism is of the "aggrandizing" variety which puts forward the metaphysical concept of a "nation" standing above the people, then how do we explain the very different conceptual nature of anti-colonial nationalism *in class terms*? The answer lies in the fact that even though in India the bourgeoisie was in the position of leadership of the anti-colonial struggle, the struggle itself was not a *bourgeois struggle* but a multi-class struggle, which included within its ambit the workers and peasants, and over which the bourgeoisie could not assert its own specific agenda.

To be sure, the bourgeoisie's being a part of the multi-class anti-colonial struggle and even playing a leadership role in it, entailed that on many occasions elements of an aggrandizing bourgeois nationalism also crept into the inclusive nationalism we have been talking about, which is why one must not idealize the political practice carried out in the name of such nationalism. Besides, this inclusive nationalism associated with the anti-colonial struggle would in any case get undermined by the process of capitalist development that has occurred in the country after independence, but this fact, discussed below, does not affect the *conceptual difference* between the two kinds of nationalism.

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In the period after independence while the political part of the agenda, such as universal adult suffrage, formal equality before law, separation of the State from religion (at least in the sense of the State having no religion), and a set of fundamental rights, was fulfilled by being enshrined in the Constitution, there was serious renegeing in other spheres, the most significant instance of which related to land reforms. No doubt some very large landlords, and those landlords unwilling to turn towards capitalist farming had to give up their land, which was distributed among the richer segment of the peasantry, but land concentration as such was not broken. Put differently, the proportion of land owned by, say, the top 15 percent of owners did not decline; what happened was some change in the composition of this top 15 percent. And this change facilitated a tendency towards the development of capitalism in Indian agriculture, consisting of an admixture of both landlord and peasant capitalism.

The fact that capitalism with its inherently inequalizing tendency would undermine the political equality promised by the concept of "citizenship" enshrined in the Constitution, was scarcely in doubt; and the possibility of such undermining was even drawn attention to by Ambedkar in his closing remarks to the Constituent Assembly. But it came to be believed by the political leadership that under the *dirigiste* economic *regime* that was

erected after independence, the controls and regulations imposed on private capital would enable the country to get the best of both worlds: to enlist the support of the private sector for economic development, even while keeping within limits the inequality engendered by such a move.

This of course was unrealistic and the growing inequality in income and wealth was already serious enough for Nehru to set up the Mahalanobis Committee in 1960 to investigate the matter. In any case, however, even such restraints as had been placed on the growth of inequality during the *dirigiste regime* were removed with the pursuit of neo-liberal policies after 1991. The shift to a neo-liberal economic regime meant that the "spontaneous tendencies" of capitalism, including the tendency towards primitive accumulation of capital at the expense of petty producers and peasant agriculture, and towards rampant commoditization of every sphere (involving *inter alia* the privatization of services like education and health) were allowed full play; they were no longer subject to any restraint, no matter how inadequate the earlier restraint might have been.

The pursuit of neo-liberalism already entailed a shift, even in official pronouncements, from the inclusive nationalism which had till then been subscribed to, towards a bourgeois nationalism of the conventional aggrandizing kind. The very apotheosis of GDP growth, irrespective of what was happening to the conditions of life of the working population, a dichotomy reminiscent of both mercantilism and classical political economy, was an indicator of this. But there was also a common refrain about India becoming an "economic superpower", and almost every problem began to be seen with reference to this goal. Indeed a senior cabinet minister of the UPA once even stated that "corruption" had to be fought because it prevented India from becoming an "economic superpower"!

While the emergence of bourgeois nationalism from the inclusive nationalism of the anti-colonial era, breaking through the crust of the latter as it were, as the big bourgeoisie became increasingly globalized and the hiatus between it and the other classes widened dramatically through a rupture of the anti-imperialist bloc, is understandable, the question will arise: why should there at all be *any* emergence of bourgeois nationalism when the bourgeoisie itself is becoming globalized? If the bourgeoisie's going beyond nationalism appears to be the hallmark of advanced capitalist countries in the era of globalized capital, why should there be an exaggerated emphasis on aggrandizing bourgeois nationalism at the same time in a country like ours? This after all is what we are seeing today being championed by the *Hindutva* forces, who place the "nation" as some metaphysical concept above the people. Why should any scope for it arise, not *in opposition to* globalization *but within the agenda of the very forces supporting globalization*?

The answer lies in the difference between the situations of the advanced capitalist countries and of countries like India. This difference

arises for at least three reasons: first, the relative size of the labour reserves here (using the term to include open unemployment, casual employment, intermittent employment, underemployment, and disguised unemployment) is, to start with, much greater than in the advanced countries, because of which the tension between having democratic institutions based on universal adult suffrage on the one hand and the continued exclusion of vast masses of the people who remain trapped in abysmal living conditions, is much greater. Secondly, when high growth occurs, the fact that it does not generate adequate employment to create any tightness in the labour market and thereby improve the bargaining strength of the workers, implies that the share of surplus in output increases rapidly and inequalities get sharply accentuated. This occurs to a far greater extent in countries like India than in the advanced capitalist countries because the latter have not seen such high growth. Thirdly, the operation of neo-liberalism has a far more profound impact in countries like India, by imposing primary accumulation of capital on the vast mass of petty producers, both in flow terms (by squeezing their incomes) and in stock terms (by dispossessing them of their assets "for a song").

Because of this difference between the two situations, political support for a neo-liberal regime within a framework of democratic institutions is threatened in countries like India to a far greater extent than in the advanced capitalist countries (though there too the threat exists and gets exacerbated in a crisis like the present one). Neo-liberalism however has its own "spontaneous" ways of coping with this problem. One obvious way is the following.

Since the adoption of policies disliked by international finance capital threatens the economy with capital flight as long as it remains trapped within the vortex of globalized financial flows, most political formations, lacking the will to de-link from globalized financial flows which is an integral part of the process of globalization, continue with more or less the same policies, viz. the ones demanded by globalized capital. In other words, even if one political formation gets voted out and another gets voted in, the economic policies remain more or less the same. This tendency is further buttressed by the fact that the financial bureaucracy, typically recruited from the World Bank, the IMF and other such institutions, also remains unchanged even when the government changes.

But this way of insulating neo-liberalism from democratic politics, which amounts in effect to a curbing of democratic politics, may not always suffice. The corporate-financial oligarchy therefore seeks other, additional, ways of ensuring that the country's thralldom to neo-liberal capitalism continues and does not get jeopardized by any democratic assertion by the people.

The need for these other ways becomes particularly strong when the neo-liberal regime faces an economic crisis, as it is doing now under the impact of the world capitalist crisis. Here we should remember an important

asymmetry: economic inequalities which widen during the high-growth period do not come down in the period of crisis. Likewise, while primary accumulation of capital at the expense of petty producers occurs in a period of high growth, it does not get reversed in a period of crisis; on the contrary it gets even further accentuated. Similarly, if employment does not expand during the high growth period, thereby causing an increase in the relative size of the labour reserves, this fact, far from getting reversed, becomes even more acute during the crisis; and what is more, even the urban upper middle class which had been a votary of neo-liberalism, because of being a beneficiary from it, begins to get disillusioned and restive when the employment opportunities even in sectors like IT-related services begin to shrink in the crisis.

The enlisting of the support of the communal forces which generate divisions among the people, which mobilize people on the basis of communal propaganda *but carry on the neo-liberal agenda*, becomes important for the corporate-financial oligarchy *especially in the period of crisis*. A corporate-communal alliance comes into being, and it vigorously propagates an ideology of aggrandizing nationalism, an ideology that puts the "nation" as a metaphysical entity above the people, demanding "sacrifices" from them, *including of their democratic rights*, in the name of the "nation". (When Arun Jaitley says that "freedom of expression cannot be at the expense of the nation", he is doing precisely this: he is demanding in effect that people should "sacrifice" their freedom of expression, which is their fundamental right, for the sake of this metaphysical concept of a "nation").

Such an ideology of aggrandizing nationalism is obviously in the interests of the corporate-financial oligarchy. Since this metaphysical concept of a "nation" is supposed to be served by having a high GDP growth rate, for which it is taken for granted that boosting the "state of confidence" of the corporate capitalists, both domestic and foreign, is essential, it follows that "nationalism" itself demands concessions for corporate capital. This logic entails in other words that to make the "nation" stronger, the capitalists must be made richer (which after all is what the "Make in India" campaign is suggesting). The corporate-financial oligarchy thus turns the tables on its potential opponents very neatly: instead of being threatened by democratic institutions in a period of crisis, it actually legitimizes its hegemony, obtains still greater concessions, and even demands "sacrifices" of people's democratic rights, *in the name of the "nation"*.

Such a notion of "nationalism" is also in the interests of the communal elements, the *Hindutva* forces. Their entire agenda after all is centered around the concept of a *Hindu Rashtra*. But, Hinduism, unlike the semitic religions, has neither a "book" nor a "church"; indeed according to historian Romila Thapar, foreign accounts used to refer till not long ago to the "Hindu group of religions". The *Hindu Rashtra* therefore means not just a theocratic State but an authoritarian State where a small and arbitrarily-chosen coterie

determines State policy. The inclusive nationalism of the anti-colonial struggle therefore is anathema for the *Hindutva* forces, because of which it is not at all surprising that *they had nothing to do with the anti-colonial struggle*. Rolling back such inclusive nationalism, and propagating an aggrandizing metaphysical nationalism that puts the "nation" above the people and therefore the coterie that speaks in the name of the "nation" above democratic institutions, is thus an integral part of their agenda.

There is a further point here. The caste-system, as historian Suvira Jaiswal has argued, is central to *institutionalized* Hinduism, and hence to the *Hindutva* agenda. The inclusive nationalism with its egalitarian thrust was associated with a remarkable change in the country's socio-political life, so remarkable indeed that it would be no exaggeration to call it "India's long revolution". The fact that those who endured millennia of institutionalized inequality and caste oppression are now Constitutionally-ordained to be equal citizens of the republic, is no small matter. Likewise the fact that a region like Kerala which had witnessed not just "untouchability" but even "unseability" at the beginning of the twentieth century, is now applauded across the world for its Human Development indices, which necessarily presuppose a degree of egalitarianism, is no small matter.

The *Hindutva* forces stand for a "counter-revolution" against this "Long Revolution". Rolling back inclusive nationalism, negating the democratic vision of a "fraternity of equal citizens", re-fashioning the world in a manner that brings back the old hierarchies, constitute their objective. Propagating an aggrandizing nationalism suits their purpose.

In short both the corporate and the communal elements have a joint interest in promoting in a virulent manner an aggrandizing nationalism that privileges the "nation" over the "people". The "nationalism" that is being propagated by the NDA government is not the inclusive nationalism of the anti-colonial struggle (though it duplicitously lays claim to the prestige of the latter in the minds of the people by pretending to be synonymous with it); on the contrary it represents a negation of this inclusive nationalism. It constitutes an ideological weapon in the hands of the corporate-communal alliance to insulate the neo-liberal regime, and hence the hegemony of the corporate-financial oligarchy, against any challenge that democratic institutions may throw up, by enfeebling these institutions themselves. The virulent propagation of this "nationalism" is associated with a shift occurring in the nature of the State, whereby the neo-liberal state is consolidating itself by turning authoritarian, not by declaring an "Emergency" or mobilizing troops etc., but by mobilizing a bunch of communal and fascistic storm-troopers.

The propagation of this ideology of aggrandizing nationalism, where the “nation” stands above the people, where what constitutes “national” is defined by a small coterie of *Hindutva* elements around the ruling Party, and where, as a natural extension, criticism of the ruling government comes to be characterized as “anti-national”, requires that thought should be substituted by “pebbles” in the minds precisely of those who are seriously engaged in intellectual practice. This requires an assault on thought, and that too precisely in those institutions, which would necessarily be the front-ranking institutions of the country, where intellectual activity thrives.

An assault on thought has been going on for some time anyway under the neo-liberal dispensation through the process of commoditization of education. In institutions where education is sold as a commodity, those buying education use it as an input that goes into the production of themselves as a commodity. And since a commodity is not a use-value for the seller, but represents pure exchange value, i.e. command over a certain sum of money, the concerns of those buying education centre around how much money it would enable them to get on the market when they themselves appear as commodities. In this commoditized world, education that comes in the form of a capsule, a neatly-packaged product, is prized, while any education that seeks to raise questions, that stimulates its recipients to think, is frowned upon. Commoditization of education is thus destructive of thought anyway.

But in public educational institutions where this destructive impact of commoditization has not yet been felt, intellectual practice still includes thinking. And this is particularly the case since in these institutions, students from socially and economically excluded groups still enroll in large numbers because of the policy of affirmative action and also because of the manageable fees charged. The tendency on their part to raise basic issues of exclusion, oppression and exploitation is much stronger than among those who come from more privileged backgrounds (though the existence of the former group also raises the social sensitivity of the latter in these institutions). Several public educational institutions therefore have emerged as leading centres of thought, spaces for intense intellectual and political activism on the part of the students, and sites for the expression of creativity and originality. The assault on thought launched by the *Hindutva* elements targets these very sites.

The fact that some of the finest institutions of the country, like Jawaharlal Nehru University, University of Hyderabad, Pune Film Institute, and the Fine Arts department of M.S. University, Baroda, are being systematically attacked by the *Hindutva* elements is no accident. It illustrates these elements’ hostility to thought, which they perceive as standing in the way of their project of attenuating democracy in the name of an aggrandizing nationalism.

These elements would have no problems with these institutions if they simply churned out, as numerous private education-selling institutions do, non-thinking and socially-insensitive individuals who are exclusively concerned with becoming commodities. Indeed they demand it implicitly when they say that students should just “study” and not engage in “politics”. (Several Union cabinet Ministers have actually voiced this demand). But politics basically involves presenting before society alternative views about itself. Since students constitute the segment of society that is most intensely engaged in thinking, and hence in holding, presenting and debating alternative views of society, to demand that they should not engage in politics, amounts in effect to saying that they should abjure thinking. Their “study” in other words should be devoid of thinking; it should consist rather in what those who are in the process of transforming themselves into commodities are engaged in doing, namely, imbibing capsules called “knowledge” during the teaching hours, and regurgitating them during examinations, or at the most acquiring some *skills* while eschewing all *thought*.

The attack on the premier academic institutions of the country to ensure that they are no longer sites where thought is practiced, proceeds according to a certain script. First of all, RSS-loyalists with no claim to distinction in any of the disciplines studied in the institution in question, are appointed to head the institution, their sole “mandate” being to rid the institution of “anti-national”, i.e. thinking, elements. (The most brazen example of this is the Pune Film Institute, where students even went on a prolonged strike to oppose the appointment of a Director who knew little about films). Second, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, the student wing of the RSS, which earlier used to operate more or less like other student organizations, but with a Right-wing outlook, is now converted into a *vigilante* group, reporting so-called “anti-national” activities on the campuses to these RSS-appointed “authorities”. Third, the students accused of such activities are then made to face disciplinary action, and in certain instances like in Jawaharlal Nehru University, even charged with “sedition” under an old colonial law (in complete defiance of Supreme Court guidelines on what may constitute “sedition”); they are put in jail in such “sedition” cases for varying periods and, even when granted bail, face both court-room trial as well as disciplinary action by the institution “authorities”. Fourth, corporate media channels play up this “anti-nationalism” to defame teachers and students of these institutions. Fifth, fascistic mobs, supposedly “incensed” by all this “anti-nationalism”, are unleashed on the students of these institutions, threatening to lynch them.

The objective of this entire project is to thrust down the throats of the students the *weltanschauung* of the *Hindutva* elements (which also suits corporate capital), by terrorizing and punishing all those who oppose it, i.e. all those who persist with the practice of thought. “Anti-nationalism” is

identified with non-conformism to this *weltanschauung*, a claim amply borne out by the Human Resource Development Minister's pointing to the celebration of Mahishasur by some sections of JNU as proof of its harbouring "anti-national" elements!

Such an assault on thought is extremely dangerous for a number of reasons. First, since no society can exist without thought, any society that abjures thought becomes in effect parasitical on others for its ideas. It asks in effect to be intellectually hegemonized by other societies, notably by the advanced capitalist societies. The capsules called "knowledge" which the students are being exhorted to imbibe when they are asked merely to "study" and to shun "politics", are necessarily those manufactured abroad in the advanced capitalist countries.

Intellectual hegemony however is the precursor to other forms of hegemony, just as the struggle against intellectual hegemony is a condition for the struggle against other forms of hegemony. The current assault on thought therefore clears the ground for the country's being hegemonized by advanced capitalist countries, not just intellectually but in other spheres too.

It is ironical that this assault on thought which threatens to undermine the independence of the nation is being justified in the name of "nationalism", but this should come as no surprise. This aggrandizing "nationalism" after all has the backing, as we have seen, of the corporate-financial oligarchy, which is integrated with international finance capital and hence complicit with imperialism in opposing any threat to such capital.

Secondly, and quite obviously, the assault on thought not only undermines anti-imperialism, not only promotes parasitism on ideas borrowed from imperialism, but also helps to thwart all progressive social change. Karl Marx had once famously said that while bees could create structures that would put many an architect to shame, the difference between the worst architect and the bee consisted in the fact that the architect first created the structure in the mind before creating it in reality. The same is true of any progressive social change, which requires first of all a conceptual transcendence of the given situation, the creation in the mind of an alternative, more humane, society which is then sought to be translated into reality. The assault on thought prevents any such conceptual transcendence.

But those who derive satisfaction from this fact, and hence are launching the assault in the hope of achieving such a *denouement* are living in a fool's paradise. Putting the clock back on whatever social and political change we have had in this country, essaying a social counter-revolution, employing terror against anyone who dreams of a better society, using sedition laws against those who speak of social injustice, all these cannot in any sense lead to a social equilibrium, to a state of rest where society will finally settle down.

If progressive social change of a thought-out and productive kind is thwarted by such measures, then resistance against the existing iniquitous order will take all kinds of unproductive, and violent forms. These in turn would be used by the ruling Party to justify further encroachments on freedom of expression, further assaults on thought, further repression by the State machinery and by fascistic groups, and further diminution of democracy. A dangerous dialectic, with no end in sight and no progressive potential, would then ensue, which would only make India join the ranks of the so-called "failed States" that dot the third world landscape. Extricating the country from that dialectic by opposing the Hindutva elements' assault on thought and on democratic institutions in the name of an aggrandizing "nationalism", becomes essential.

Students in major public institutions across the country are rising against these elements. But there are obvious limits to what student activism alone can achieve. The political Left has to take the lead in fighting back the *Hindutva* assault. In doing so however it will have to mobilize large segments of the people: the progressive and liberal intelligentsia that is opposed to the assault on thought; the numerous social groups and civil society organizations that are opposed to the throttling of freedom of expression and to the unleashing of a "social counter-revolution"; and political parties that are willing to stand in defence of democratic institutions.

The Left, obviously, cannot insist that all the forces it mobilizes against the assault on thought, against the intellectual and social retrogression being unleashed by the *Hindutva* elements in the name of "nationalism", should subscribe to a Left agenda. Doing so will weaken the struggle against the hegemony of the *Hindutva* elements, which will be a tragedy for the people of the country, and hence for the Left itself. As the most *consistent* force in the defence of democracy and an anti-imperialist, inclusive, nationalism, the Left owes it to the people of the country to bring together all the forces that can be marshalled in this struggle against the *Hindutva* assault.