

ARCHANA PRASAD

Marxism, Nationalism and Identity Politics

Some Notes from Contemporary History

I am privileged to be taking part in a lecture series that commemorates the birth centenary of Eric J. Hobsbawm, one of the best known historians of capitalism of the twentieth century.¹ It is also befitting that the Kerala Sahitya Academy and Janaavikashkara have made the commemoration of the life and work of Hobsbawm a mass event, because Hobsbawm was not merely an ivory tower historian; but a people's historian who advocated and fought for the rights of the working classes throughout the world. Through his economic and political histories, Hobsbawm explored the changes within states, imperialism and movements in the contemporary times. In this lecture, I use the theoretical tools promoted by the works of contemporary Marxists like Hobsbawm to analyse how the contemporary crisis has created the space for diverse forms of social unrest and protest which have taken the form of sub-nationalism and non-class identity politics. Many of these movements have come up in response to majoritarian nationalism that has sought to hegemonise social groups and politically isolate the minorities. Further, its support to corporate capital through neoliberal policies has led to the widening of inequalities that have resulted in a multitude of protests many of which are culturally particularistic in their character. These developments show that culture is political, in that it is located within and expressed through the mobilisation of specific classes. This lecture explores interface between class, nationalism and identity politics in the context of contemporary Marxist understanding of political culture and its relationship with capitalism.

I

The political expressions of culture are intimately related to the social structures within a given society. Marxist theorists like Antonio Gramsci, Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson explained the relationship between changes within capitalism and the cultural expressions used by political movements. For example in his work on 'nations', Hobsbawm especially pointed out how the nature of culture and politics had altered after the October Revolution of 1917 and therefore the cultural expressions of political ambitions could not be considered, merely a bourgeois enterprise.² Of course, such a perspective was grounded in and expanded on earlier perspectives which identified political culture as a contested terrain within the framework of class struggle. In his theory of hegemony and counter-hegemony, Gramsci had already problematised the relationship between culture, power and class.³ Seen in this light, Anderson and Hobsbawm argued that different classes would have different ideas of nationhood and will thus espouse different political cultures.⁴ This argument was embellished with instances where the October Revolution had stopped the expansion of Western capitalism and Russia had supported several anti-imperialist struggles on the basis of the position that all nations had the 'right to self determination' or the political separation

¹ This essay is a revised version of the text of the lecture delivered at Town Hall in Kannur on 12 September 2017 in the Eric Hobsbawm Lecture Series in order to commemorate his birth centenary which was hosted by Janaavishkara and Kerala Sahitya Academy.

² Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1870s*, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

³ Antonio Gramsci, 'Civil Society' in *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (Translated by Hoare and Smith), Elec Books, 1999.

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, 2006 (revised edition) and Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*.

of nations from imperialist countries. They endorsed the Leninist stance that the support to national liberation struggles of weak and oppressed countries was an essential element of the weakening of the united international capital and increasing its contradiction with the international working class.

Such an understanding of nationalism divided capitalism into two phases and explicated these historical phases by identifying Russian Revolution as a watershed in the history of nations. In doing so, these perspectives recognised that 'nations and nationalism' were historically evolved political phenomena and not historically stagnant cultural entities with ancient origins. It went beyond the Leninist perspective and opened and provided conceptual tools to understand how different classes may express different ideas of the nation. While the dominant idea of nationhood may become synonymous with the country, oppressed sections may have their own ways of expressing their version of understanding the concept of the nation. Many a times such a cultural expression took the shape of protests, that have a potentially counter hegemonic character but do not necessarily aspire for nationhood. These have come to be termed as 'identity movements' which too have a diverse character depending on their own social basis. In this sense neither 'nationalism' nor 'identity politics' is homogeneous or inherently a conspiracy of the ruling class.⁵ In the post-October Revolution era, both have the potential to be used for partial struggles by the working classes, in order to prepare the ground for the final confrontation with the bourgeoisie. Thus theoretically speaking, there is a possibility for us to consider the counter hegemonic potential of both sub-nationalism as well as community based politics. However this potential can only be realised within the reality of the larger working class unity as expressed in Stalin's famous work 'Marxism and the Nationality Question'. Within this framework, the ultimate resolution to the nationalities question lay in the transformation of working class consciousness, a work that was to be performed by the Soviets and the leadership of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union.⁶

Such a post October Revolution understanding of political culture questions the contemporary ruling class interpretation of nationalism and identity politics. It also questions the understanding that all ideas of nation and identity are products of a hegemonic bourgeoisie enterprise and leaves the door open for the understanding of political consciousness in more complex ways. Both nationalism and identity should not be mistaken for a social or cultural consciousness, but rather the expression of a developing political consciousness whose limits, and cultural forms are determined by the class that constructs the communitarian boundaries for its own ends. Hence, the degree of class consciousness within the toiling masses of particular social groups determines the character of political expressions of nationhood and identities. This has been aptly expressed in the nationalities policy of the Soviet Union at the time of its formation. In this understanding ideas of nationhood and identity are not structured by an understanding that such forms of expression depend on some pre-existing cultural community. Rather the construction of community boundaries is itself a function of class relations within the community. If this is the case, then the social basis of the so called identity or nationhood, (both of which are in fact different levels of expression of political consciousness), becomes crucial in determining the partial rules such politics may play in the furtherance of class struggle. The role of partial struggles and cultural politics cannot be negated altogether in this regard. As Gramsci himself opined, such struggles may not overhaul the class structure or bring about revolution, but they are important in accentuating the contradictions and preparing the ground for the final push.⁷ Following this, it is pertinent to ask whether current expressions of political identity and sub-nationalism of different varieties fulfil this purpose or not? If yes, then how should class based organisations deal with such a phenomenon and what theoretical tools should be used to analyse it?

II

The idea of the modern 'Indian nation' gained birth with the anti-imperialist nationalist movement. Before the advent of Gandhi, the nationalist movement was considered to be confined largely to the intelligentsia. However the

⁵ Archana Prasad, 'Class, Community and Politics of Adivasi in Contemporary India' in Amiya Bagchi and Amita Chatterji, eds., *Marxism: With and Beyond Marx*, Routledge, 2016.

⁶ J.V. Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question*, 1913.

⁷ Antonio Gramsci, 'Civil Society' in *Selections from Prison Notebooks*.

post-Gandhian phase saw the increased participation of the peasantry and workers within the freedom struggle. The presence of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) ensured that the 'idea of India' emerged through a process of negotiation where the working class itself considered political freedom as the first step towards furtherance of class struggle. Quoting from the Manifesto of the CSP, EMS Namboodiripad wrote in *Marxist* on the occasion of the fifty years of the formation of the Congress Socialist Party:

'The immediate task before us is to develop the national movement into a real anti-imperialist movement—a movement aiming at freedom from the foreign power and the native system of exploitation. For this it is necessary away its present bourgeois leadership and to bring them under the leadership of revolutionary socialism'. This task can be accomplished only if there is within the Congress an organised body of Marxian socialists. In other words, our party alone can, in the present conditions, perform this task. The strengthening and clarification of the anti-imperialist forces in the Congress depends largely on the strength and activity of our party. For fulfilling the party's task it will also be necessary to coordinate all other anti-imperialist forces in the country.⁸

Namboodiripad clearly identified the formation of the Congress Socialist Party as a step towards the radicalisation of the Congress and the maintenance of mass politics outside the Congress. The communists, active within the CSP, built trade unions and peasant organisations in order to pressurise the Congress and radicalise its programme. The CSP aimed at 'Complete Independence in the sense of separation from the British Empire and the establishment of socialist society. . . . Inside the Congress, it aimed to secure the acceptance of a socialist programme; outside, it planned to organise the peasants and workers and create a powerful mass movement for independence'.⁹

Another working class perspective of nationhood came from the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association which wrote in its Manifesto 'that the revolution they [the revolutionaries] are constantly working for will not only express itself in the form of armed conflict between foreign governments and its people and supporters, it will also usher a new social order. The revolution will ring the death knell of capitalism and class distinctions and privileges. . . . Above all, it will establish the dictatorship of the proletariat and banish social parasites from the seat of power'.¹⁰ Though the Association expressed its impatience with the CSP and Gandhian tactics, but their presence and the mobilisation of the labouring masses by the Communists kept up the political pressure on the CSP and bourgeois leadership of the Congress to provide political support to anti-imperialist mass movements. These developments also influenced the way in which the constituent assembly was formed and the principles on which the Constitution was structured.

In a broad sense, it is possible to state that though the basic philosophy of the Constitution was permeated by a liberal democratic bourgeois notion of the nationhood, its basic character was not one of cultural nationalism. Rather over the years it has exhibited a cosmopolitan character, and also given some instruments of struggle to the working classes, especially through its directive principles as well as its recognition of the rights of collective bargaining, abolition of landlordism and the recognition of diversity in cultural rights. At the same time the absence of a significant Communist presence within the Constituent Assembly also gave the document a decidedly pro-bourgeois tilt, though the veneration of social democratic ideas continued to dominate the public discourse. This was largely possible because of the capacity of the Indian Communists to organise and mobilise the working masses through big mass movements that raised substantive issues in the transition years. This was done through collective bargaining and negotiation between different sections and was largely responsible for the marginalisation of culturally exclusive and majoritarian views of nationhood that had begun to emerge under the leadership of the Hindu Mahasabha and Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh.

But the impact of such a process was uneven because the non-incorporation of several sectional interests laid the basis of protests that took the form of cultural expressions or identities. These cultural expressions were potent

⁸ E.M.S. Namboodiripad, 'The Congress Socialist Party and the Communists' *Marxist*, January 1984.

⁹ Sonal Shah, 'Indian Socialists and their Legacy', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume 68, No 43, October 2016.

¹⁰ Bhagwati Charan Vohra and Chandrasekhar Azad, *Philosophy of the Bomb*, 1929, pp. 1-2.

forces in the mobilisation of several sections of dalits, adivasis and other sectional interests that emerged in their earliest modern forms in the first quarter of the twentieth century.¹¹ Thereafter they developed into more formed political identities that opposed hegemonic politics especially in cases where majoritarian identities tried to incorporate them. This was particularly true after the decade of the 1970s when the Hindutva nationalists revived their political organisation through agitations in Bihar and Gujarat. Identity politics, particularly in Central India, constituted itself against majoritarian articulations of culture and the attempt to co-opt elites of marginalised communities within their own fold. One can recall that the Jharkhand agitations amongst the adivasis and the formation of the Dalit Panthers party were a reaction to the growing inequities of the society and the incorporation of the elites of these social groups into the dominant power structure.

The diversity of identity notwithstanding, political consciousness around sectional interests was being reproduced through the ways in which the bourgeois state was reacting to the demands of different sections of the working classes. A case in point has been the systems of affirmative action that have been set up in response to the struggles of marginalised social groups since their inception. These led to the reproduction of identity politics through the actions of the State. In the long term, large sections of oppressed social group were integrated into the lower end of the power structure and at different levels of the capitalist system. This process also influenced the changes within communities and their non-class politics. While identities emerged through the institutionalisation of affirmative and protective measures, such hegemonic measures also created their own opposition in the form of the politics of 'adivasi and dalit identity' which has been led by a stratum of educated elite. Such politics, though oppositional in character was not counter hegemonic in its content. Essentially it was non-class in its orientation and has romantic neo-traditional influences and critiques all forms modernity. Hence it is not surprising that non-Marxist analysis of dalit and adivasi identity is unable to address the issues of inequality and growing differentiation within these sections. Hence it is obvious that these identities have not been able to address the issues of dalit and adivasi working classes which have continued to expand as a part of larger 'labour reserves' under contemporary capitalism.¹² In this sense non-class identity politics may take care of the interests of a small section of the historically oppressed social groups, but does not aim to build and foster political and social consciousness that influences fundamental social changes.

Further, such identities can also not be treated as a 'primitive' phenomenon that represents an 'egalitarian' pre-class society. Rather it is a social and cultural manifestation of capitalism itself which Left and democratic movements have had to take note of in contemporary times. Since such measures were implemented after long years of struggle by different sections of deprived social groups, all Left and democratic movements had to take positive note of them. Equality of opportunity in education and employment for different historically oppressed social groups also became an important demand of Left and democratic class based struggles.

III

In the light of this complex politics, mass agitations by the Left and their ascendancy to power in different states has forced the Communist movement to reconsider the interface between community led and class based struggles. The best examples of this are seen from contemporary Communist history where such questions were confronted in the revolts which occurred in the post Second World War period and were carried on well into the 1950s and 1960s. The most famous of these revolts were the Telengana, Tebhaga and the Warli struggles. Of these the development of the Warli and the Tripura organisations in the post-independence period are especially interesting as they help to analyse the relationship between class and community structures. This relationship was mediated by the understanding that the organisation of dalit and adivasi people would help in building a common understanding and strengthening the alliance between peasants and workers.¹³ Hence the incorporation of sectional interests within

¹¹ Archana Prasad, 'Adivasis and the Trajectories of Political Mobilisation in Contemporary India' in Meena Radhakrishna (ed.), *First Citizens: Studies of Adivasis, Tribals and Indigenous People in India*, Oxford University Press, 2016.

¹² Archana Prasad, 'Inequality and the 'Class Divide' in Dalit Politics', *People's Democracy*, 17 April 2016, and Archana Prasad, 'Structural Transformations in Adivasi Societies, 99-11', *Yojana*, January 2014.

¹³ Archana Prasad, *The Red Flag of the Warlis: History of an Ongoing Struggle*, LeftWord, 2017, and Archana Prasad, 'Class, Community and

the larger strategy of class struggle became an essential component of the Left led peasant movements. Thus the Communist movement's struggles against the historical deprivation of adivasis from the early 1970s onwards were aimed at building a democratic adivasi consciousness. This work has been based on the assumption that a traditional communitarian consciousness has to be transformed into a modern political movement which is non-exclusivist in character. Some examples of this are the Gana Mukti Parishad's militant movement for the implementation of the sixth schedule which was based on the principle of the unity between the Bengalis and the adivasis. Similarly the Adivasi Pragoti Mandal in Thane does constructive work, and runs educational institutions in order to socialise the neighbourhood adivasis into modern and progressive thinking. The similarity of perspective and method in both these organisations is based on the strategic understanding that such sectional platforms and organisations would be rooted in broad based mass fronts of the basic classes. dialectical relationship between these two would serve a twofold purpose. First it would sensitise larger class based organisations to sectional interests and second it would socialise the historically deprived social groups into a class based perspective. Thus the Adivasi Pragoti Mandal is conceived as a trust whose trustees largely belonged to the Kisan Sabha in Thane and whose main struggles have been launched through the Sabha. Its membership is non-exclusivist in character but open to non adivasis. But despite successful economic struggles in Thane, the problem of bridging the gap between the peasant consciousness and tribal consciousness remains as the Kisan Sabha competes with other adivasi organisations like the Kashtkari Sangathana. In Tripura too, the consciousness fostered by the Ganamukti Parishad is not confined to adivasi social groups but is also representative of the non-tribals who were engaged in organising these struggles. This was particularly true in the context of Tripura where the 1970s and 1980s were a direct contest between the Left supported Ganamukti Parishad and the Tripura Upjati Juba Samiti which was supported and practiced an exclusivist tribal identity through the support for a separate tribal state. In contrast the Parishad advocated the development of a tribal consciousness which was largely based on the idea of tribal-Bengali unity which was to be based on the democratisation of tribal consciousness.¹⁴

From the 1980s, separate unions of agricultural workers recognised dalits and adivasis as a rural proletariat displaying a more complex understanding of the worker-peasant alliance. The policy statement of the Agricultural Workers Union stated in 1982 that 'The agricultural workers constitute the most important part of the agrarian movement in the country. They form a link between the urban working class and peasantry. They are the worst exploited socially, economically and politically. A big chunk of them come from the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes who still continue to be the victims of social oppression at the hands of the caste-Hindu vested interests'.¹⁵ Since the agricultural workers were a separate class they would have to be 'organised separately' for higher wages in agricultural work and social security for agricultural workers.¹⁶ The unity of the dalit and adivasi agricultural worker with the peasant was to be achieved through land struggles, demands for land reforms and universal social security for all rural and urban workers.

IV

The aggressive rise of Hindu cultural nationalism in the last two decades can be seen as a major challenge to this communist project through the construction of a dominant and hegemonic ruling class conception of nationhood. Such a conception is based on certain false and ahistorical claims. First, the concept of the Hindu Rashtra is a historically evolved cultural notion. Historians have contested this claim through well researched historical evidence which shows that there was no one homogeneous Hindu society or Hindu way of life since the pre Mauryan empire days. This is particularly seen in the fact that the rulers of successive regimes extracted surplus grain, money tribute, military service and other forms of slave labour from the mass of working people in the name of religion. In this

Politics of Adivasi'.

¹⁴ Text of this paragraph is summarised from Archana Prasad, 'Trajectories of Mobilisation and Politics of the Adivasi'.

¹⁵ Indian News Network. 2008. 25 Years of All India Agricultural Workers Union posted on <http://www.pragoti.in/node/2524> (accessed 21 May 2013).

¹⁶ Mollah, Hannan. 2007. AIAWU to celebrate its 25th Anniversary, *People's Democracy*, 4 November 2007.

situation they did not need to use force as they justified their exploitative and oppressive practices by using religion as a ideological and material force in the society. By refusing to acknowledge the use of religion as an important ideological apparatus of the State, Hindutva ideologues in fact misrepresent and misuse history for their own narrow political ends.¹⁷

The second important aspect of the Hindu nationalist argument is the repeated claim to spiritual democracy and inclusiveness. Since the 1980s the Hindutva nationalists have realised that their dream to establish hegemony is not possible if they do not expand their social base. In order to do this Sangh Parivar affiliates began to do constructive work amongst adivasis and dalits. This has enabled the penetration of the RSS in caste and tribal institutions. For example in the case of the dalits of North India, the first step is to build a base and carry out reconversions for re-integrating dalits within the mainstream of the village. But in recent years the RSS has gone one step ahead and decided to form local level committees to end caste discrimination in 2015. For the first time the RSS held district level meetings of volunteers in about 75,000 villages of India, and much of this was concentrated in the states of Punjab and Uttar Pradesh where elections have been held. Reports from the organisation suggests that the committees started holding dialogues in order to persuade higher castes to take up their programme of 'one village, one well, one crematorium' and in doing so projected themselves as an anti-caste force. In order to justify this programme the Sangh ideologues reinterpreted Ambedkar and projected him as both anti-Communist and anti-Muslim. In its 125th year commemoration of Ambedkar, the *Organiser* effectively proclaimed reinterpreted Ambedkar as icon of social harmony and unified Hindu society in order to counter the dalit movement which has always held that social structures under Hinduism are the root cause of untouchability. But instead of targeting these structures, which in fact form the core social support of the BJP and the Sangh Parivar, the RSS impressed upon its volunteers the need to explain the political necessity of the social harmony project. Thereby it emphasised both voluntarism and adjustment with its upper caste base and propelled them into taking up programmes of health, education and the implementation of schemes by pressurising the local administration. It assured its upper caste base that the dalits would be integrated into the mainstream Hindu society on the terms set by the upper caste; i.e., they would have to follow the practices and morality which the Hindutva cadres prescribed. To this end the RSS called a high level meeting of 40 affiliates (including the Dharm Jagran Sangh and VHP) in 2016 in order to coordinate a well thought out political and social campaign that targeted the non-jatav base of the Bahujan Samaj Party, the results of which were seen in the 2016 Uttar Pradesh elections.¹⁸

Similar processes have also been seen in the context of the Sangh response to the politics of adivasi identity. The RSS work in the tribal areas can be divided into three broad phases; each laying the basis and the foundation for the 'next step'. The current phenomenon is characterised by a right wing radicalisation of tribal politics and identities through selective appropriation and moulding of tribal institutions and structures by RSS affiliated organisations. The earliest work of Hindu nationalist organisations in tribal areas can be traced to the early 1940s in Madhya Pradesh. By the late 1930s many Princely States had already passed the anti-conversion laws under the influence of the Hindu Mahasabha and in the mid-1940s the political right, both inside and outside the Congress, raised the issue of 'conversions' by Christian missionaries. The resultant Report of the Niyogi Committee banned the work of the Christian Missionaries in the fifth schedule areas. This formed the entry point and the basis for the formation and work of the RSS affiliated Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad in Central India by the early 1950s.¹⁹ This mode of operation created the foundation for the second phase of the RSS work which started with the 'ghar vapasi' campaign in the 1970s and 1980s. This campaign wanted to give an image of an inclusive political Hindu nationalism that would unite all castes and tribes under a broad umbrella. The inclusion of Dalit, adivasi and OBC leaders and the expansion of the political base of the BJP was reflective of this. The main idea was that cross caste and community alliances would create a broad spectrum that would counter all movements of resistance by democratic forces. Such a

¹⁷ Archana Prasad, 'Ruling Class Nationalism and Religion: A Counter to Rakesh Sinha' *People's Democracy*, 30 April 2017.

¹⁸ The empirical material for this paragraph is taken from Archana Prasad, 'The 'RSS Factor' in Dalit Politics', *People's Democracy*, 26 March 2017.

¹⁹ Archana Prasad, *Against Ecological Romanticism: Verrier Elwin and the Making of an Anti-Modern Tribal Identity*, Chapter 3, Three Essays, 2011.

widening of social base has put the RSS in a position to penetrate caste and tribal institutions and thus affect polarisation within tribal and caste groups which characterises the current phase of the RSS work in tribal areas. The first signs of this were seen in the Kandamal riots of 2008 when the Sangh mobilised the Kondh Samaj against converted Christian tribals and argued that only non-Christians should get benefits under the Scheduled Tribe category. The next major signal of this polarisation was the riots in Kokrajhar in 2012 when the Bodo militants attacked 'Bangladeshi Muslim refugees'. This adaptation of the RSS to the political challenges in tribal regions has allowed it to change and mould the character of tribal identity in a way that brings about religious polarisation within tribal groups. Thus a non-Christian tribal identity is preferred over one that is influenced by the Christians, so that their leaders can ultimately be incorporated into the RSS fold. Hence the conception of an inclusive Hindu nationhood has been pitted against divisive 'Muslim' and 'Christian' politics of 'separatism' and identity politics has been moulded to suit this conception.²⁰

Such a conception is repeatedly used by ruling classes and corporate backed Hindu nationalists to justify and build an oppressive nationalism which would fit into both Benedict Anderson's and Hobsbawm's analysis of mainstream 'capitalist nationalism'. After all the first phase of the nationalism in Western Europe was led by nation-states in order to protect the interests of the capitalists; and the concept of the national bourgeoisie as the we know it now came into operation only after the October Revolution. Further the modularity of the formation of new states in the post-independence period, as Benedict Anderson showed, was one where the national bourgeoisie replicated the western model of the nation-state. Though Anderson's own work stops with the structuring of neo-liberal models within newly independent states it is possible to argue that the post-Soviet models of neo-liberal states also follow a certain type of modularity.²¹ With the existence of the Soviet Union the model of a worker controlled state inspired working class movements to argue for a socialist alternative. The birth of state capitalism with an agenda of social reform was considered a compromise solution by a liberal democratic political leadership. Such a leadership was prevalent in almost all continents and non-aligned countries. But by with the end of the Soviet experience, and the capitulation of China to the market economy, the only models available to the national capitalists were in North America and Western Europe. These predatory models of the nation-state matured into expression of a socially conservative political culture across the globe. The trend of the massive pace of expansion of Hindutva nationalism is also part of this modular reproduction of socially conservative regimes which are essentially based on support from corporate capital. The principle from which such ruling class nation-states derived their legitimacy was the idea of 'tradition' which militated against any type of social reform to which the negotiated idea of a liberal democratic state has been wedded to. This worldwide trend is evident in America, Central Europe, Europe and many other countries, India being no exception. Hence, the recent obvious process of redefining the nation in India is part of the larger trend of the consolidation of the right in the contemporary world and is closely aligned with the emerging partnership between trans-national and national bourgeoisie who were largely responsible for the spread of right wing nationalism as shown by Hobsbawm in his famous work *Age of Extremes*.²²

v

The consolidation of capital described above and its support for neo-conservative agenda has underlined the upsurge in the dominance of Hindutva cultural nationalism. The impact of such nationalism on working class politics has been immense. The fragmentation of the working class through greater informalisation of the workforce poses a challenge to traditional trade unionism. At the same time it also creates space for fragmented identity politics. Not all of this identity politics is led by the ruling classes. The difficulties of forging working class unity in fragmented workspaces have also made space for political expressions that challenge the dominant forms of nationhood, but do not have the ability to challenge the class relations that structure such ideologies of nationhood. Hence current class based movements will be forced to find alternative strategies that will forge working class unity and provide a

²⁰ Archana Prasad, 'RSS and The Politics of Tribal Identity', *People's Democracy* 10 March 2018.

²¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

²² Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes, 1914-1991*, Little Brown Book Group, 1995.

culturally pluralistic space to resistance that finds its expression in multiple form of political identities. This process can also generate alternative conceptions of nationhood that are embedded within the larger socialist movement.

One may lay down certain principles of what such nationalism may entail. The development of scientific temper or a rational method of knowing the presently unknowable world is central to the idea of nationhood and nation building. The Indian nation is described in terms of its past traditions, a continuous adaptation of old ideas to the present situation, representing a continuity that defies sharp cultural breaks in history and thereby creates a spirit of tolerance and flexible mind. For Gandhi, Nehru, Ambedkar and Bhagat Singh, the relationship between science and religion will change, but only through a process of social reform. All of them believed that the past has two elements: the forms that have become hierarchical and cultural exclusivity of the caste system on the one hand, and the traditional freedom of thought and tolerance on the other hand. Science, scientific enterprise and the efforts to cultivate scientific temper are embedded in social relations of production.

The Communist idea, as it has been articulated in independent India, has two core ideas: anti-imperialism and socio-economic reform for equity through a process of reconstruction. Thus writing his last message to young political activists (February 2, 1931) Bhagat Singh clearly says that there can be no 'economic liberty for workers and peasants without political freedom'. For Bhagat Singh political freedom meant more than the 'transfer of State from British to Indian'. It implied the rule of the country by those Indians who would 'proceed in right earnest to organise the whole society on a socialist basis'. The HSRA itself described the task of the proletariat as a twofold one in its manifesto of 1925. The first was to oppose the emergence of the Indian capitalist class and its potential of the alliance with the foreign capitalists and the State. The second was to organise the workers to oppose State power in the hands of a few privileged people and to bring about a social reconstruction. Thus socialism was to be a path where 'swaraj' was the freedom of '98 per cent of the Indians' and declared that 'the freedom of India would ultimately be the freedom of all slave nations'. This internationalist conception of nationhood was thus based on the premise that there could be no 'free nation' if injustice prevailed in the country itself, or in the nation as a whole. Thus freedom required the establishment of worker ruled state as well as a multi-national state where the cultures and rights were respected and ensured for all. In its own manifesto, the Naujawan Bharat Sabha declared communal hatred and religious politics as a way of sabotaging the revolution. In 1926, the manifesto states that the 'conservatism and orthodoxy of Hindus' and the 'fanaticism of the Mohommedans are being exploited by the foreign enemy'. In the present situation this could well be applied to Narendra Modi and other right wing religious fundamentalists who themselves are the agents of political and economic imperialism. Their divisive politics is disrupting the unity of Hindus and Muslims. The division of Hindus and Muslims will only benefit economic and political imperialism.²³

The Communist project of building working class unities through social engineering can only be based on building an inclusive agenda of universal rights for the working classes which is sensitive to discrimination and oppression faced by historically oppressed social groups. One of the recent examples of this has been the struggle waged by the All India Kisan Sabha in Maharashtra where the adivasi people see themselves as an integral part of the peasantry. On the other hand the Kisan Sabha has also focused of some of the sectional interests of the adivasi peasants in their struggles. The unity forced by these struggles was seen in the much acclaimed Long March that concluded recently and whose success can partly be attributed to the building of a democratic consciousness amongst deprived social groups.²⁴ Contextualised in these recent struggles, the socialist vision of nationhood is not only internationalist in character, but is based on the fight for a truly democratic state where freedom from exploitation is holistic within the nation. This means that rightwing bourgeois nationalism (in which conservative identity politics is embedded) can only be fought by a programme of social and economic reconstruction which involves and cares for the workers and peasants irrespective of their religion and caste. Given two polar opposite visions (of rightwing and socialist conceptions of nationhood), present day communists face the twin challenge of reclaiming the idea of non-capitalistic, secular and socialist alternative that can fire the imagination of all the exploited masses to join its ranks and resist the rise of fascistic forces.

²³ *Manifesto of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha, 1926.*

²⁴ Archana Prasad, *Red Flag of the Warlis*, and Ashok Dhawale, 'Kisan Long March Ends in a Resounding Victory', *People's Democracy*, 18 March 2017.

