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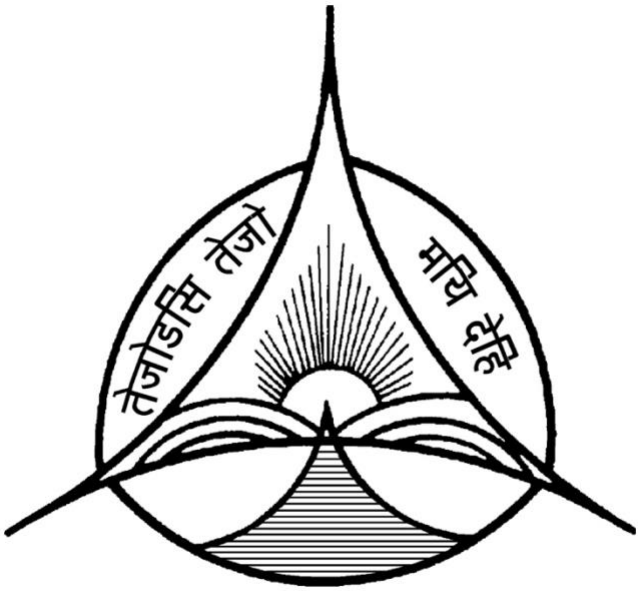

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THE FASCISM DEBATE AND BEYOND: A CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR ACHIN VANAIK[1]

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Introduction: Professor Achin Vanaik is a fellow at Transnational Institute (TNI) and retired Professor of International Relations and Global Politics from the University of Delhi. He is an active member of the Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace (India). He has (co)authored and (co)edited 20 books ranging from studies of India's political economy, issues concerning religion, communalism and secularism, as well as international contemporary politics and nuclear disarmament.

Maya John (MJ): How has fascism been identified in India? Are we witnessing the ushering in of a fascist state in India?

Achin Vanaik (AV): A general opinion among Liberals and much of the Left (I leave aside the question of whether the mainstream Left are really Left) and their attitude towards the rising power of the Bharaitya Janta Party (BJP) and the Sangh Parivar, was that the BJP has an unfortunate communal dimension, but which can be lessened as the responsibility of coming closer to power might emerge. This has also been enforced by many commentators on India — one of them being Bruce Graham—who basically argued that India is so immensely diverse (no other country is as diverse) in social, linguistic, religious terms (you name it), that the only way you can hope to come to power is for parties to move to the Centre. And therefore the perspective that if the BJP backed by the Sangh wanted to become a serious contender for power in India, then it has to decide whether it wants to remain a small party of the Hindu *rassemblement,* or whether it is going to have to moderate its position by moving towards the Centre.

There is some merit to this argument, but what actually happened was that the Babri Masjid movement which had propelled the BJP was not expressive of a shift of the party to the Centre, but was much more a shift very much towards the Right, which pulled the centre of gravity of the polity as whole to the Right. Because it was such a powerful mass movement, perhaps the biggest since Independence, this gave rise on the Left to a big discourse about fascism. The merit of this discourse, unlike that of the Liberals, is that the debate on the Left, no matter what the position was—whether one thought it was fascist or fascistic (like myself)—is that they

[1] The interview was conducted at Professor Vanaik's residence on 20 January 2018.

recognise that the BJP and the Sangh was a far Right force, which is something that Liberals were not prepared to recognise.

Now the question whether this is a far Right force which is *fascist* depends upon one's understanding of fascism and the method one uses to understand it. I have a long chapter in my book. There is a methodological dimension, there is a theoretical dimension, and there is a programmatic dimension. The methodological aspect goes something like this: is there a spectrum of far Right forces? Most people would say yes. If there is a spectrum of far Right forces, are all far Right forces necessarily fascist? Most people would say no; you have far Right forces that are not fascist. So you can have a military dictatorship of the far Right, but that may not be fascist. Now the second question is, are there variants of fascism? Many people would say yes. There are variants of fascism, but in order for you to say that there are variants of fascism, methodologically speaking you could go in the polythetic direction, or a monothetic direction. What does that mean?

A polythetic approach says that there are many different characteristics of what fascism is. Fascism is a movement, fascism is a fascist state, and so on. So a polythetic approach would say that if any particular phenomenon has some of these characteristics, then it is fascist. And another phenomenon which has some of the characteristics but is not the same as this—but is still part of that larger list—that's also fascist. The polythetic approach would claim that there are many more variants of fascism. A monothetic approach would say that before you can call something capitalist or fascist, there have to be certain characteristics that are fundamental to all variants of fascism. This means that it is not just a set of family resemblances and therefore you've got crucial commonalities in all variants; in which case the debate becomes what are the characteristics that are fundamental to fascism. So that's one point.

This means delving into the history of the development of European fascism, or what is recognised as the fascist era, in order to draw out the essential characteristics. There will be debate or dispute about what that is. Is fascism located in the beginning of the spectrum, in the middle, or is fascism an even more extreme form of the far Right forces and therefore must be located towards or at the very end? Here differences emerge in the Liberal approach and the Marxist approach. There are even differences within the Marxists about the question of fascism. There are differences about whether you can have a fascism from above without there being a fascism movement. There are those who say that if there is a fascist movement that is enough to characterise fascism, and there are a number of Marxists saying that; but in that case they're like the Liberals who locate the essential characteristics in the movement character. You also have a few Liberals and many Marxists coming from the anti-Stalinist position, which would argue that you have to understand fascism as a dynamic phenomenon. To cut a long methodological story

short: decide whether you are going to locate fascism at the end of the spectrum. Why at the end of the spectrum? My own answer to this is very clear.

I see fascism as a unity of three moments or phases: fascism in the movement phase, fascism as it comes to power at the state level, and the phase in between, i.e., the particular context, which Marxist thought considered to be a question of crisis of the capitalist system, which then propels it to power. Since the fascist state, according to Marxists, is the most autonomous of all class states from the ruling classes, it's only an extreme situation of crisis that really creates a space for the ruling bourgeoisie and ruling classes to be prepared to accept the fascist state that itself is most independent from the ruling classes. So the question of crisis becomes very important. What is meant by the unity of three moments is that fascism must have a movement character—we can correctly point to the fascist characteristics of the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign of the RSS kind. But that itself is not enough. It has to come to power and establish a fascist dictatorship. What is a fascist dictatorship? If a fascist dictatorship is propelled to power by a crisis, what is the crisis? A crisis would be—even if it is an economic crisis—one that is connected, as many Marxists have argued, to the crushing of the working class movement.

The situation in India is very unlike the inter-war period; we do not have a fascist dictatorship. This debate started among Leftists in the first half of the 1990s. I was part of that debate and the first book I wrote dealt with that—my current book is a substantial updating of it. The argument made was that if the BJP comes to power, it will not mean establishing a fascist dictatorship. Of course, in the process of coming to power there is a shift in the relationship of forces between capital and labour because it is the power of the labour movement that threatens it. In other words, most Marxists have classically seen fascism as a rescue operation for the bourgeoisie, but nobody can argue that the bourgeoisie was in a crisis in India.

What is interesting is that all those who argued about the fascist character in the first half of the 1990s did not make the prediction I did—which was that this was going to be a longer term problem and that they were underestimating the power and appeal, as compared to the inter-war fascist era, of bourgeois democracy and the absence of a crisis, and so on. So yes, the current situation in India obviously has fascist characteristics but don't make the mistake— like Robert Paxton and others have pointed out—of seeing something called a fascist entity, which will go on to become stronger and stronger. Instead, recognise that we are not talking about the maturation of a fascist entity, but maturation of a fascist situation, which is something very different. There are forces which are potentially fascist, which exhibit certain characteristics, but whether you're going to have fascism as a full-fledged process where you establish a fascist state is something else. These are the basic methodological and theoretical points to note here.

Today a number of Marxists say that the coming to power after 2014 does represent fascism, but given India's diversity, it doesn't mean that they are going to establish a fascist dictatorship.

Another point I've made is with respect to the political, programmatic dimension. The programmatic aspect is that whether you consider it to be fascist or simply to have fascist features, you recognise that it's a fundamental danger—something the entire Left does recognise. The crucial question then is how you fight against it. And there is no simple, straightforward line which you can draw from your theoretical understanding. For example, there are those who say that it's fascism that we're facing so we should make a strategic alliance with the Congress Party. Then there are those who say no, it's not fascist but has fascist characteristics, but we must still make a strategic alliance with the Congress Party. There are others who say that it is fascist, but we must not have a strategic alliance with the Congress Party. There are yet others who say it's not fascist but fascistic, and there is no need for a strategic alliance with the Congress Party.

This debate on whether it is fascist or fascistic clouds the issue of how best to fight it. Programmatic agreement is more important than theoretical agreement.

If Marxists connect fascism to capitalism, Liberals have introduced another term that is becoming more important than fascism—'totalitarianism'. By making totalitarianism the most important term they can then divert attention away from the fact that fascism is a phenomenon of capitalism. That allows Liberals to say that fascism in Germany and Italy, and totalitarianism in the Soviet Union, are both as bad as each other. Of course, capitalism is left off the hook. I would stress here that we be aware of the continuing capacity to fight at the level of existing democracy. A term that I use in my first book (that I wrote in 1991) was authoritarian democracy, which I believe exists in India. And what I see now in the Indian context is the deepening acceleration of authoritarianism, but without the necessary elimination altogether of bourgeois democracy. What you're going to have is inferiorisation, ghettoisation and terrorisation of certain scapegoat communities with monitoring, surveillance, and denuding and frightening Liberals. There will be considerable erosion of the overall democratic system, but not its elimination, and the continuity of important democratic rights, if you like, for a substantial part of the population that is Hindu. Now this is not simply a feature of the Indian context. It's also the feature of the far Right in Europe and elsewhere. They are not really talking about the elimination of bourgeois democracy.

The question is why not? Why the difference from the inter-war period where fascism was put forward as the superior alternative to bourgeois democracy which had been a complete failure? That's because one thing that has come as a surprise to all Marxists is, including Trotsky and others, that: (a) they underestimated the longevity of capitalism; and (b) they greatly underestimated the power and appeal of even bourgeois democracy for all its limitations. Bourgeois democracy is quite deeply rooted and accepted here and everywhere. Therefore you

find that for most revolutions after the socialist revolutions, the centrepiece is not, unfortunately, socialism, but democracy, i.e., liberal democracy.

MJ: Thank you for situating yourself in the various debates on fascism and the Indian context. In your earlier work in the early 1990s, you have argued that it was more a decline of the Congress Party that explains the rise of communal Right-wing forces. A corollary to this is the contradiction *within* Indian liberalism which created the space for such a rise in the communal Right-wing. Would you like to elaborate?

AV: I think what you're talking about here is the transformation of the Congress; not just in terms of its decline electorally and politically, but also the decline hegemonically in terms of some of the basic principles which are supposed to represent the official, dominant nationalism of India. This was connected to the nature of the national movement and the whole question of the Congress ideology which was given the name of Nehruvian consensus and which supposedly embodied the key principles of secularism, democracy and socialism; the last named simply meaning capitalist social welfarism of a certain kind. But from the national movement onwards, including within the Congress Party, there has always been the dimension of catering towards Hinduism. Indeed, the very idea of secularism, said to be equal respect for all religions, cannot work because the dominant community is that of Hindus, and in the balance would be the most favoured. So in many different ways the Congress Party paved the way for the rise of the BJP. It's not so much the rise of the BJP that explains the decline of the Congress. It's the decline of the Congress that helped to create a certain vacuum in which the BJP could rise. When we use the term vacuum here, we have to be very careful. When I say that the Congress Party's decline has paved the way for the BJP, I'm not working with an automatic framework in which the decline of the Congress has led to that.

The larger question that emerges is, what are the forces that have helped to erode the Congress Party and changed the situation? There is another dimension, which is, why has the Sangh Parivar succeeded ideologically and politically? We have to take the longer view, and try and understand, beginning from the period of the national movement, the role that the Congress Party has played in facilitating the rise of the BJP. There are specific points to note here: for instance, the crisis the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was facing up to the 1970s and how it was revived as a result of its involvement in the Jayparkash Narayan (JP) movement; how Indira Gandhi tried to give the Emergency a Left-colour by arresting members of the RSS, therefore enhancing its credibility. People forget that the then leader of the RSS, Balasaheb Deoras, was prepared to support Indira Gandhi if RSS prisoners were released.

The Janata Party followed next, and this period was one of enormous flux in Indian politics, starting from the end of one-party dominance as Rajni Kothari has talked about, which came in the late 1960s; the emergence of non-Congress parties at the regional level, etc. Instability led to

the attempt to stabilise the polity via the Emergency, which didn't succeed. The period of flux from the 1977 elections to the 1996 elections was not only reflected in parliamentary instabilities but also in the remarkable parliamentary stabilities. There was a wave that displaced Indira Gandhi and non-Congress centrist parties coming to power for the first time in 1977. Another wave brought Rajiv Gandhi [Congress] to power in 1984. All this indicates the increasing volatility.

But there is something else which is very interesting to note when the BJP comes to power: we had three non-Congress centrist parties that come to power at the Centre (1977, Janata Party; 1989, V.P. Singh; and 1996, United Front (Devi Gowda). It should be noted that these are all centrist-type coalitions that come to power at the centre. They never last the full term. It is only after this experience of ups and downs that the Congress Party comes to power in 1991 for the first time as a minority party, and then engineers deflections to gain stability. Then, in 1996, the BJP is the single largest party but only remains in power for 13 days because no other party will ally with it. By 1998, it has legitimised itself with other parties ready to help it to come to power in coalition form, but only after the whole experience of non-Congress Centrist parties failing. So to the decline of the Congress, we can add the failures of non-Congress bourgeois, centrist-type forces.

MJ: It has been argued by some scholars that the rise of rich peasants and regional bourgeois classes led to the rise of regionalism, which hindered the crystallisation of, let's say, the phenomenon of a pan India-Hindu. How do you factor in region, if not regionalism, as a counter-weight to communalism?

AV: The answer to this is yes and no. At the electoral level, yes. At the deeper, foundational level, i.e., in terms of the general popularity of Hindutva forces, no. When you talk of a pan-Hindu phenomenon, one has to recognise that, historically speaking, Hinduism was for a long time basically a congeries of sects. But as Romila Thapar has pointed out, there has been a long running process of the syndicalisation of Hinduism so that more and more people would come to see themselves as being Hindu in a way that didn't exist before. For example, all the Censuses before Independence did not categorise tribals as Hindus. They were considered to be animistic. It's only in the first Census after Independence that tribals get identified as Hindus. They may not have felt it, but the process since 1947 of syndicalisation of Hinduism—the hard work of the RSS/Vishwa Hindu Parisha (VHP) and other Sangh affiliates—has made more and more tribals see themselves as Hindus.

Regionalism was, of course, the result of the rise of a richer peasantry from middle ranking castes, and it expressed itself electorally and politically in the late 1960s in the form of the rise of non-Congress parties of various kinds. But we must also note the evolution of class struggle in terms of the processes that have taken place in India. The most important political class force in

India has not been the rural bourgeoisie; it has been the industrial bourgeoisie and its different sections. Electorally speaking, the regional bourgeoisie has been particularly important because they have the votes of farmers and so on. But the relationship between the forces of the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie and that of the rural bourgeoisie has also shifted more and more in favour of the industrial/commercial bourgeoisie.

Secondly, regional parties that were once strongly allied to the rural bourgeoisie are now no longer solely allied with them.; they're also aligned much more with a regional bourgeoisie that is not rural but based on industry, commerce and finance. Look at the changes that have taken place within the big bourgeoisie in which older corporate houses or business houses have been replaced in the ranking by newer businesses which came up from the regional base and expanded. In other words, even the political representation of class forces in regional parties cannot be seen as simply a direct relationship with regional, rural bourgeoisie. In that sense, in so far as the industrial/commercial/financial bourgeoisie and others also see themselves as operating on a pan-Indian level, and in so far as we're talking of a smaller section of the bourgeoisie that is industrial or semi-industrial in nature, they are also connected to this larger network of the industrial/commercial bourgeoisie—either through supplying of parts, through subcontracting, etc. So India is now a unified economic market. Even if we talk about the regional bourgeoisie, we should not take this as a fixed category

Therefore, what has happened at the regional political representation level is that there are two kinds of parties: those that are happy to remain regional (DMK, AIDMK, Akali Dal, etc); and others that are sectorally based or geographically based, but want to move beyond that. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is sectorally based; the Samajwadi Party (SP) is regionally based. They want to expand their specific locations but have not been that successful. What all these forces have succeeded in doing, because of the diversity in India, is aligning with one national hub. In all these coalitions, therefore we had one particular hub which could claim to be a national hub of sorts: whether it was the Janata Dal in 1977; the VP Singh National Front government of which the BJP was the biggest component (which then broke away); and the Devi Gowda Janata Dal (Secular), which served as a kind of national hub. Later we have coalition governments of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA); United Progressive Alliance-One (UPA-I); and UPA-II. The regional parties bargain with the centre for support to consolidate themselves. I would not say that one should locate the regional parties as representing the un-pan-Indian character of the ruling classes. Much of Indian capital, both rural and industrial, may not be as strong and pan-Indian as the larger ruling class forces, but nonetheless they are connected to an all-India market.

MJ: So in terms of region or regionalism, you do not necessarily think that it helped keep communal, Right-wing forces at bay to a certain extent?

AV: Here the break is between the south and the north. It has much more to do with the fact that the south witnessed anti-Brahmin and lower caste movements in the way the north did not have until much more recently. The caste system in India is far more important than the Hinduism dimension. We had the syndicalisation of Hinduism, and a struggle against the caste movement historically, which has taken two forms. One is the struggle to get out of the caste system (Christianity, Islam, Sikkhism, Bhakti, etc); and the second is to move up the ladder, i.e., corporate caste mobility, and as M.N. Srinivas pointed out, caste is a regional phenomenon in India.

As I said, the south had a strong anti-Brahmin movement. Brahmins are at the top, allowing for a broader unity of all those below, which has been successful because of its relative strength to undermine that. But what you've not had is a movement from below, i.e., of the most oppressed, who want to be rid of the caste system as a whole. In fact, later on we have movements of the lower castes, Dalits in particular (though they too were divided into sub-castes),which have moved in the direction of identity politics where caste assertion has become far more important than caste elimination. Therefore, because the anti-Brahmin movement in the south was much stronger, it has represented an obstacle to the RSS, and all because the only kind of Hindus that can be central to them has to be based on some essentialist notion of Hinduism which is to some considerable extent Brahminised. In so far as the RSS wants to establish a pan-Hindu unity, it can only go about it in two ways. One is to find some principle of unification internal to Hinduism, and the only candidate for that can be a loose and accommodating Brahminism. The other principle of unification is much more effective, and that is to have a principle of unification outside of Hinduism—i.e., a principle outside Hinduism against which you can unify all Hindus: namely, Islam and Muslims. In this loose and accommodating Brahminism they can go so far but not far enough because they cannot repudiate Brahminism and the upper castes.

So, in the five categories of the people that the BJP and the Sangh see as their opponents, four of them are, but one of them poses a problem. The opponents include Muslims and Christians. Christians constitute 2.5 per cent of the population so their problem is the Christian charities and institutions, and conversion. Conversion is of course in the forest belt, not in northeast. They have two constraints with respect to Christians. One is that unlike the only Muslim-majority state, Jammu and Kashmir, which you can try and crush, there are a number of Christian majority states in the northeast that need to be won over. Therefore, they are not going to push the beef question or conversion. The second is the current global context of Islamophobia. Hitting out at Christians is a much greater problem internationally with the West being much more concerned about Christians than they are about Muslims.

The third category of opponents is the liberals. They can't get rid of the liberals and seek to contain them through pressure. There is the Left of course, which, unlike liberals, even if they

become social-democratised like the CPI and the CPM, know that the dominance of Hindutva and the forces of Hindutva spells the end for them. They have been, for all their failings, more consistent than all other political parties against the forces of Hindutva. The problem category [for the Hindutva forces] is Dalits. You want to incorporate them and keep trying to do cleverly with some success, but you can't give up and abandon upper-caste Brahminical support, which creates a constant tension.

Let me just add one point here. It's been a bad year electorally [for the BJP]; politically but not otherwise, in terms of its hegemonic spread. Even its electoral, political opposition has diminished considerably. Remember that in 1996, many did not want to ally with the BJP. By 1998, the BJP had legitimised itself and the regional parties were prepared to ally with it. Now there are a number of regional parties that are worried about what the BJP is doing, but that won't stop them from allying with the BJP when they are strong. So the BJP has approached them in terms of electoral, political support everywhere.

It [BJP] differs in its strategy everywhere. It will make alliances with Christian parties in the northeast; it has made an inroads into Assam and Manipur, Goa, etc. It can ally with the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), with the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), and at the same time its long-term perspective is to finish them off. Overall, the resistance to the BJP has weakened, although it's not the same as the BJP becoming the dominant force everywhere. But yes, the BJP has geographically expanded its electoral, political base everywhere.

The other aspect we have to recognise is that the regional parties have been supported by a large section of the Hindu population, which is the middle ranking castes, among whom the lower segment has been less important than the upper segment of these middle ranking/intermediate castes in terms of shaping the direction of these parties. Their desire for politically independent representation through their own party is one thing. But they have not hampered the spread of Hindutva ideology and beliefs and loyalties. In many ways, by seeing themselves as part of the wider Hindu fold, they have a sense of cultural uplift, and of course what has the Sangh and BJP have been stressing—that we're all Hindus. So there is a kind of cultural mobility upwards, and the direction that political, electoral mobility upwards has taken represents much less an obstacle now than before.

Furthermore, we can't overlook the fact that the middle castes were active participants in the Ramjanmabhoomi movement, in riots, etc. For the first time we have a leader of the BJP [Narendar Modi] who himself comes from the OBCs. It [BJP] first opposes Mandalisation, and now comes to accept it. Of course there are still tensions. There is, to a certain extent, a Hindutvaisation of OBCs, even a have Hinduisation of tribals and Dalits, although that is more complex.

MJ: Many argue that Hinduism is neutral territory and only its deployment in political form as Hindutva is what is problematic. Connected to this is the understanding that a distinction can be made between good Hinduism, which has a plurality built into it that makes it suited for a multicultural society. On the other hand, the Semitic religions are supposedly more monolithic, monotheistic and resistant to sharing space with other religious communities. Do you agree with these views?

AV: First of all, I don't think you can separate religions like this. In pre-modern times, religions (all religions work with a notion of the transcendent) can be seen on a spectrum of life. At one end are religions that have filled up the 'texture of life', while at the other are religions that have for many merely filled the interstices of life (at marriage, having children, death, etc.). With the emergence of modernity, the power of religion over the whole sway of life diminishes in various ways. In different societies and in the case of different religions, there is a variation in the extent to which it [the power of religion] diminishes. But it diminishes nonetheless. Why do I say that? Economically speaking, where customary law, religion and other traditions were much more important, today, for economic life, religion is far less important. The same thing applies to politics.

With respect to the question of plurality and Hinduism, let's say there are three ways of looking at Hinduism. If you claim Hinduism is highly plural, it means that throughout its existence there has been a certain singularity of Hinduism that cuts across plurality, and therefore it's Hinduism. You are really saying that plurality is really authentic to Hinduism, and you are basically also giving a unified label to something that was never unified. The word, the concept of 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' have actually evolved over a period of time so as to embody the meanings they do today. Please remember, the word Hindu as a self-appellation only emerges in the 14th century, and it is a word that is used conveniently later on to describe a congeries of sects of various kinds.

There is a fundamental distinction between modern and pre-modern notions of tolerance. Pre-modern notions of tolerance basically meant passive co-existence. A modern concept of tolerance is based on the notion of rights and a rights discourse. Even if you believe in the plurality of India in the past when there was an absence of the rights discourse, let's not pretend that somehow this was a very powerful foundation for tolerance and multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is a modern phenomenon, very much connected to the rights discourse. It also has its own problems. Multiculturalism indicates something shared, some attributes shared. One conception of culture is that there is something like a common culture. One of the notions of common culture is shared culture. Second is the notion of something commonly fashioned. Culture is something created.

This of course becomes a question of cultural empowerment, i.e., how do we make people culturally empowered so as to make a contribution to the development of culture. One of the important aspects of empowerment is literacy, which empowers one to do good or bad. In pre-modern times, literacy was concentrated among a small section of elite, which meant that Brahmins had tremendous cultural power. The other dimension was the political elites. Both competed for loyalty. In all pre-modern societies, if they were to be stable, then some kind of arrangement between religious elites and political elites had to be reached. The function of religion was, what I call, cosmization and nomization, the latter being the ordering of society, and cosmization the ordering of the cosmos. The ordering of society is stabilised much more if it gets reinforced by those who talk of the ordering of the cosmos as encompassing and shaping the former. So, all religious systems have their forms of cosmization and nomization. But the interesting thing is that in all these religious forms of cosmization and nomization, the most powerful form was Brahminical Hinduism because it provided the justification for the most extreme form of gradation—that is the caste system. What are the caste system's attributes? Three things: kinship, status hierarchy and endogamy. None of these are specific to India, for they are found everywhere. But why is it that in India we find the most extreme form of gradation? These are all fundamental characteristics of caste and they are all materially rooted. The peculiarity of India, which is the extreme form of status hierarchy, is of course related to Brahminism.

Even if you allow for plurality, i.e., passive coexistence, its relationship to social tolerance is mediated by a host of other factors. All that one can say about religions is that the distinctive character of different religions provides a stimulus towards the development of certain social behavior; but, it's only a stimulus because what actually emerges depends on a whole set of other factors. We can say, for example, that unlike the Semitic religions, Hinduism does not have a propositional truth, which means that it is not a stimulus or conducive to the determination to convert because you are bringing the truth to others. However, in so far as plurality of beliefs and rituals and practices is concerned—which is also hierarchical—this is a strong stimulus for something like the caste system for which there is a hierarchy of gods and goddesses. Incidentally, Hinduism has also converted in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

At the same time, the Semitic religions, in so far as they follow the principle of one god under which all are equal as believers, have a certain stimulus for a principle of social equality. But it is not a guarantee that it is going to move towards that. So we cannot draw straightforward lines between religion and the nature of Indian society. This kind of exaggeration is something I definitely disagree with. What one can say is that religion acts as a stimulus.

If you look at the spread of Islam, the spread of Christianity, it has much more to do with the spread of political power than it has to do with the inherent character of those religions. In India,

the Muslim-majority areas of Kashmir, Mopplah region, and parts of Bengal, were all outside the Mughal Empire. The conversion process in Southeast Asia took place in a different form than in the case of jihads and crusades. So while we don't have jihads and crusades in the case of Hinduism, there is the brutality of the caste system. And these religions have been patriarchal in two respects. The great religious geniuses of Vedic Hinduism, of Islam, of Christianity, of Buddhism, were all men. None of them were from the lower segments of society. Christ came from a carpenter background, but not from a helot or a slave background. Buddha was a prince; Shankaracharya too was from a higher social background. They are reflections of the society that they emerge from, and they reflect prevailing biases.

One thing that strikes me is, why is it only in Christianity that we find the emergence of a liberation theology, which has taken the direction that the most important divide is not between believers and non-believers but between oppressors and oppressed. In modern times, it is only liberation theology that has provided this particular orientation within Christianity. Some influence of Marxism on Islamic beliefs during the Iranian Revolution can be seen, but it is weak. In Hinduism it does not exist at all.

So let us not confuse pluralism with tolerance [emphasis added] even if you are prepared to talk about doctrinal pluralism as a form of religious tolerance; and, don't make a straightforward connection between religious tolerance and social tolerance. There are too many mediations, and at best one can say there is a certain kind of stimulus, not an assurance by any means or guarantee. All the religions have negatives and positives, even in terms of their stimulus.

MJ: In the period of the 20th century in India, in the period of the post-Partition carnage of the late 1940s, communal hatred was at a peak, but the Jan Sangh was still able to get only three seats in the first general election. This indicates that it is not only communal hatred that drives successful consolidation of the Hindu Right. Given this, what is the role of the frustration and alienation within the lower middle class in the consolidation of the Hindu Right?

AV: The post-Partition carnage was two-sided, so it becomes very difficult to describe the carnage as one in which one community was the victimiser and the other community was the victim. This is also the reason why we don't have an honest dealing with that period. The other point is of course is that the Jan Sangh was never part of the national movement. Third, we must consider that hatred has to be constructed. Take, for instance, the Babri Masjid campaign in which Hindus living in the diaspora are supporting it, which is extraordinary. A temple was supposedly destroyed (whether real or mythical), but in so far as some temple did exist in the past, or temples in general that have come to exist, we must remember they were temples of particular sects, communities or castes, which others could not go to. There were only a few areas where some people had the capacity to go on pilgrimages. In other words, at the time when it was supposed to have been destroyed, there would have been less widespread hostility than

what took place 500 years later when forms of communication create a much deeper and greater anger against something that supposedly happened much earlier. So anger is constructed. And when you are talking of anger and hatred that are constructed, which is central to the process in which the communalised politics of the BJP and Sangh succeeded, then it does have to do with contemporary realities of alienation, etc. It includes the different insecurities felt, including the insecurities of the Hindu diaspora abroad.

This then brings in the material aspect and the question of capitalism. Take note that immediately after decolonisation in India, the perspective, or the perspective of leaders of newly independent countries, was one of optimism. They felt they could forge a new prosperous future. There was a period in which there was mass optimism; an optimism that life was going to be better. This was optimism about material life, with a sense of dignity, of being independent, and so on. This was encapsulated in the question of these countries wanting to move in the direction of a developmental state.

The rise of the Sangh in India really begins in the 1970s and onwards. This is actually a universal phenomenon. In advanced countries we saw the end of Keynesianism, and apart from a few countries like South Korea, there was the failure of developmentalism. From the late 1970s, there was the emergence of what is called the politics of cultural exclusivism which takes different forms. I'm talking about broad global trends. Cultural exclusivism is pivoted on ethnicity, religion and nation; either separately or together in some combination. When they combine, nationalism was most important. The appeal of nationalism is even more powerful than the appeal of religion. The move away from Keynesianism to neoliberal capitalism and neoliberal globalisation created its own frustrations. But that's a broad trend everywhere, in spite of some time lag here and there to when it starts. There was the abandonment of socialism which, in many of the newly developing countries (apart from the communist bloc), never meant more than a social welfare capitalist development in which the state would play a bigger role in developmentalism. There was a period of failures which creates the ground in terms of alienation, frustration, etc. which allowed the politics of cultural exclusivism to emerge. That is a general phenomenon.

To this one has to add one more thing—unlike all other far Right forces in the world, in India one is talking of a far Right force that has been in continuous existence for over 90 years, i.e., the RSS. It is a far Right force which is implanted in the pores of civil society, unlike any other force in the world. Only for a very brief period of time and in certain spaces, could one say that the Left had that kind of implantation through its cadres. The far Right cadre force, through its multiple affiliations, has been rooted in the pores of civil society. And one of the most important reasons for its successes is not simply its ability to address cultural and alienating factors, but

because it has been able to address fundamental secular needs of people—Hamas being one example.

In the case of Partition, the continuing support among the lower middle class and middle class is also related to the issue of refugees and the RSS's work in Delhi and elsewhere after the Partition. There were dedicated cadres of the RSS within the lower middle class. The organisation has consciously provided for places of recreation, material support in various ways, all of which are indicative of the fact that you have a basis for a long-term transformation. It was shaken in the early 1970s because it wasn't succeeding; but two things have also happened in the RSS. Historically, the RSS has been suspicious of state power that would be corrupting and it sought to bring about transformation through work in civil society and society at large over a long period. From the Janata period onwards, the RSS realised the importance of state power in order to achieve its larger transformative goal, and of course, this was so even later after the BJP came to power in 1998, and even now. This has meant a shift in the relationship of power between the RSS and the BJP. Its greatest strength today is its rootedness in civil society like no other groups. Of course there are changes in the way the RSS operates now and organises itself. [Laughing] It has, for example, brought in trousers. It no longer has full time *pracharaks* because the old-time *pracharaks* had to be ascetic bachelors, and now who wants to be an ascetic bachelor? So now the trend is to become a full-timer for three years, and when you get married and have to get a job, you stop being a full-timer for the RSS. Plus, you will because of your loyalty, you will be helped in various ways. Therefore, it is the Sangh's implantation in civil society that is very crucial.

MJ: Was there anything else you wanted to specify about the changes in the material conditions in India and the connection between these changes and the rise of the Right wing?

AV: Namely that India has failed to have a developmental state, which means that the economy has been the weak spot of all governments. What it also means is that this is a guarantee of frustration in the run up to 2019. The problem, however, is that the direction that frustration takes will depend upon living politics. These frustrations express themselves in different ways. In Gujarat, Hardik Patel, Alpesh and Jignesh (Jignesh is of course a different category) have come together to express their discontent. Let's remember that this particular government has done three things. No other government since 1947 has had the same systematic, detailed determination and capacity, not to eliminate democracy, but to take over and control as much as possible. This is triggered through control of the various institutions of democracy—not just parliament, not just Rajya Sabha, the President, the Election Commission, the Judiciary, but on the capacity of its foot-soldiers to achieve hegemony based on force and consent.

Consent can be of three types: active (i.e., we really believe in this); passive (i.e., I am not going to fight it), and bought (i.e., I support you but what are you giving me in return). Part of passive

consent is fear of force. Today, unlike communal riots, lynchings are a routinisation of violence on a small scale, at the micro-level, which is actually creating greater fear among Muslims than ever before. But what about non-Muslims who are opposing you? They are harassed through the legal process where the process itself becomes a punishment, and this is the reason why there are attempts to sabotage the independence of the judiciary and create a more pliant judiciary at all levels. This is the most systematic, detailed campaign ever done by any political entity. Modi is constantly talking about simultaneous election for states and at the national level. This is not about eliminating elections; it is about controlling elections because he feels he won't be favoured by that. Second, you let your foot-soldiers loose to create fear, and use the BJP-ruled states as laboratories for pushing ahead. Third, they are constantly testing the waters to see the extent to which they can amend the Constitution with respect to the use of the term *secular*, etc. In other words, changing the terms of the public discourse does two things: it means controlling the spectrum of acceptable public discourse and narrowing it; and making the unspeakable acceptable or normalised. They are actively doing this.

MJ: In the recent elections in Gujarat we saw a triarchy—i.e., Jignesh-Alpesh-Hardik—emerge, which is being used to explain the apparently dismal performance of the BJP. Although there were obvious material reasons behind the emergence of this trio, this triarchy has been based on the politics of identity. Do you see this as a model which will replicate itself? Is there actually a resistance inherent in this model?

AV: No it's not a model. The best thing is Jignesh Mewani wanting to link the question of breaking from the anti-reservation issue and wanting to link the Dalit struggle to economic issues and rights. But he is going to face challenges from other Dalit leaders who pursue identity politics. In the case of Hardik Patel and Alpesh, it's much more specific. Don't exaggerate the nature of the defeat electorally for the BJP. Both, in all regions and across all social categories, they did better than before, electorally speaking. In all social categories, even in Saurashtra, they did better than they did before. Their increase in votes was slightly more than the increase in votes for the Congress, but it was still an increase in votes overall and across all social categories—among Dalits, among tribals—and in all regions they did better. The peculiarity this time is that they got a big margin of votes in the urban areas, which was wasted because of the first past the post system.

Let me also put it this way. There are two aspects to the struggle against the BJP: one, the incoming short-term issue of electoral opposition to it, and the long-term issue of how you defeat the far Right forces. Even if the BJP does not repeat its single majority rule in 2018 or 2019; even if it comes to power in a coalition; or even if it does not come to power, it doesn't mean that the far Right dilemma is over. It simply means that there will be different degrees of breathing space, depending on the outcome. We want that breathing space, but it's just a breathing space.

So, separate the short-term question of how to defeat the BJP from the longer-term question of how to defeat the Sangh as a far Right fascistic force.

MJ: What should be then the strategy for overcoming this moment? How would you factor in the Left, the Congress, workers' struggles and the Dalit movement?

AV: Let's take the issue of the shorter-term. There has often been an attack on the Left for not coming into an alliance with the Congress. My own view is that too much is being made of this. Why is it that? The Left is only a regional force. Are you going to tell the Left that it should have an alliance with the Congress in Kerala? Nonsense! Are you going to tell the Left to have an alliance in West Bengal with the Congress, or to have an alliance with the TMC against the Congress and BJP? Nonsense! Are you going to tell the Left in Tripura to go for an alliance with the Congress to defeat the BJP? You're not. So then what are you telling the Left? Where there are regional parties, are you going to tell the regional parties to have an alliance with the Congress? What are they going to say? They're going to say that the Congress is so weak, we're stronger; will this alliance benefit us or not benefit us. Look at what happened with the SP and the Congress in Uttar Pradesh. So what should they do?

My own perspective is that the electoral slogan that Leftists and radicals should use is very simple: recognise the difference between the Sangh Parivar and the BJP and all other parties in India. Therefore, instead of saying vote for Congress or ally with the Congress, say vote against the BJP. *Vote against, that's your slogan*. Leave open the question of the kind of flexibilities that others have. So rather than put yourself in a position that is unrealistic, just work with the slogan—vote against—and hope that the opposition forces will be able to make some connections and defeat the BJP. In the struggle to bring about a longer term transformation that is genuinely radical and beyond the capacities of existing bourgeois parties during election times, don't try to win over people who are further away from you. So your programme, apart from the electoral slogan, should be first aimed at getting the people already more sympathetic to you to come closer to you.

You have to fight on the terrain of nationalism even when recognising the limitations of nationalism, but in terms of a different understanding of nationalism. I would say that the way to talk about secularism is not so much to talk about secularism, but to talk about democracy. It means, for example, that you could talk about two ways of nationalism. One of course is the organic nationalist, the essentialist nationalist. Their message is that we must make India strong and that this is the way to make India strong. Your message is that the way to make India strong is to recognise that there are different ways of being Indian and of feeling Indian. The strength of India does not come from any one way that everyone must accept. It is from different ways of feeling Indian that can make it stronger. However, because talk of the 'secular' has now come to be widely seen as talking of appeasement, to bring in the question of secularism requires talking

of democracy. Democracy is the common thread; and that the Right is the big danger to it. You cannot ignore the terrain of nationalism, but you have to fight it in terms of a different kind of nationalism.

About the working class. India has only India has only a 3 per cent unionised workforce. In the country only 7 per cent constitute formalised labour while the overwhelming 93 per cent is informal labour. And this is not changing. A lot of people talk about unionising the informal sector labour. I would suggest that even as one tries to do that, one is still limited.

I often wonder why the Left parties and others don't raise the issue that an agreement reached by the organised workforce in a particular industry or sector should apply to the firms in the whole industry or sector. If you are able to do that, then you automatically attract so many other struggles and it becomes a very powerful force. I strongly emphasise that this is something Left unions should do because the unionized workforce which is connected to political parties has a disproportionate strength, even though it is small relative to the total workforce. It's no longer enough to have a one day strike. They have to think creatively about their struggles. Today, with contract labour infiltrating, casual labour increasing, declining unionising rates, etc., one has to think creatively. How are you going to unionize 93 per cent? Has this idea I mentioned been taken up? I don't mean just in terms of a national minimum wage. I'm talking about pushing this idea in different sectors where there is an organised workforce. You'll have to push for that and let the parties push for that. That is one thing that I would suggest.

It's a long-term struggle. I personally feel that we don't defeat the far Right until there is, in the long term, such a significant shift in the relationship of forces against the Right that it would, in fact, not just be against the far Right but would pose the question of a break from capitalism in the agenda. That is the nature of the shift of forces that is required. Don't forget that there is a corporate sector that is quite happy to go along with them. They don't want a too polarised situation in which there is turmoil which might come from a dictatorship. They are very happy if there can be some alternative to the BJP, which can also take care of their interests. They don't want pogroms because that stops business. They also operate internationally. So if you have a class perspective on fascism, then remember what I said earlier.

On the question of struggles, even in the working class, by the Left and progressives, it is a question of cadres. You have to have people who are ideologically committed and they have to have ideological training. The only political force that is doing some kind of ideological training in its own vicious and terrible way is they [the far Right]. For all my criticism of post-colonialism, post-modernism, etc., we have to find ways to work together, be it the Liberals and so on. But, of course, we also need to strengthen the Left.

My perspective is that you have to unify the Left. We need a new kind of Left. I don't think it will happen except through splits and fusions. That's the core in a certain sense. Around it has to be progressive movements of various kinds, which you have to link towards a third category or circle which comprises even other political parties and those who are prepared to fight against the far Right. This is all a long-term perspective, and the key to its success is a younger generation which is prepared to become cadres and activists and committed for their lifetime or a very great part of their lifetime.

MJ: Thank you Professor Vanaik for a very important interview.