

## **Against the Assault on Thought: A lesson for the Left\***

**Rohit Azad**

Before the last general elections, two supposedly contrasting images of Narendra Modi were projected by the media: Modi, as the development man and Modi, as the Hindutva crusader. It was argued that he won the elections because of his development agenda, which dominated the Hindutva agenda. A dichotomy was, therefore, created in the minds of even the most liberal of the intellectuals between these two images of Modi. Many of them have argued that the second image of Modi as a Hindutva crusader dominates or comes only to the fore when the first does not deliver. I would like to first dispel this notion of two “contrasting” images because that lies at the core of blunting any resistance to the assault on thought that is being forced upon in India today.

### **Us versus Them**

It is easier to explain how these two images of Modi go together by looking at his pet project, “Make in India,” which was launched in Mumbai on 16 January 2016. This model is premised on India gaining, at the cost of its competitors, a share in the international market. This can only happen if the costs of production in India are made relatively cheaper than its international counterparts like China. This can be done in many ways, some of which India is targeting: suppressing real wages and/or increasing the productivity of labour (labour market reforms); making natural resources available at throwaway prices (land acquisition bill, etc). So, even if such a growth were delivered, it would be invariably exclusivist as it is premised on tilting the distribution of income and wealth against the working people of the country.

Such a development by encroachment of resources from the working people by its very definition creates fertile political grounds for a discourse of “us versus them” which has a transformative potential, the best example of which was the 99% (working people) versus 1% (ruling elite) slogan of the Occupy movement in the United States (US). But what is transformative for the working people, for the same reason, is disruptive for the ruling elite. Therefore, the latter looks for an alternative category of us versus them based on religion, caste, colour, race, country, which can be employed to divide the working people and rule. The creation of a Hindutva crusader is essential for such a development man.

While these two images go together, from time to time one of them might dominate the other, for example, the Hindutva crusader becomes more dominant, especially if the development man does not deliver. And it seems to be the case not just for the first two years of his term but for the rest as well, since the international markets remain elusive as the global crisis continues unabated. Such a possibility increases the need of the state, which cannot even hide behind a facade of “national” performance, to nip the transformative discourse in the bud. Hence, the assault becomes even more pronounced. This is what is happening today in India.

With the lack of a facade of high growth, a false symbol of pride needs to be resurrected, which in this case is jingoism, parading as nationalism. Such jingoism never ends well. In history it has either ended in fascism or a war or both and the

scary thing is that both are possible in the case of India. If this situation continues, which is what it is headed towards, for getting a second term, this government can even orchestrate a war against its neighbours. Such a political discourse might get further strengthened, if the politics in the US moves even more to the right with a Donald Trump coming to power against odds, so that the political discourse is not set on these lines; it is imperative on the progressive-minded people to challenge this us versus them with our own us versus them.

### **From Lal Salaam to Jai Bhim Lal Salaam**

This can only be done when we get over some of our ideological baggages, one of which is giving primacy to a self-declared principal contradiction based on just the issues of class. There are many contradictions in the political system we live in, as they have existed earlier, and the need of the hour is to give them all equal primacy because no one's contradiction with its solution necessarily solves the others. Let us take the case of caste or gender or religious- or other identity-based contradictions. Would they disappear or even get muted if the class contradiction is resolved? Many erstwhile socialist countries are a living testimony to the fact that this was not necessarily the case. In fact, by making such an argument about a principal versus non-principal contradiction, we undermine the transformative possibilities that our us versus them might throw up.

If the “them” can be aptly captured in various combinations of an image of a Brahmin upper-class male, the “us” should surely be a combination of a Dalit, an Other Backward Class, a non-Hindu, a female and the working class and “not-them” segregated along these categories. And I think it is primarily a theoretical lacuna because all political praxis after all flows from a particular theoretical construct. Let the political opposition both in theory and praxis be a genuine and an organic combination of these theoretical constructs which has the potential of producing a powerful resistance. I saw this with my own experience in the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). The slogan of lal salam of our days has been transformed into Jai Bhim lal salam, which has a huge potential for the progressive movement in general.

But I think, so far this opposition, at least in its intellectual discourse, seems more like a common minimum programme rather than a genuine amalgamation of ideas flowing from these different strands of thinking, some of which are Marxist or subaltern or feminist in nature. A common minimum programme has taken us thus far but no more. With time and engagement, it has the potential of becoming an intersecting unity as opposed to an alliance. The job of the opposition is to creatively engage with these debates, and instead of seeing them as fissures in the advance of their respective movements, see them as having a transformative potential even for their own respective agenda. The ruling establishment realises that, so, they want to nip it in the bud, something that became amply clear in JNU earlier and Hyderabad Central University (HCU) now. It is time that those who stood with JNU should stand with HCU as well if they want this political project to materialise.

\* [This commentary was originally published in the Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 51, Issue no. 17, 23 April, 2016.](#)