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India after the "Great Little Man"

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The global emergence of the far-right has given rise to several seemingly apposite comparisons between the current historical conjuncture and the 1930s (See Gandesha, forthcoming). For example, historian of the Holocaust Christopher R. Browning (2018) has argued that then, as now, we see what he calls the "suffocation of democracy". Yale historian Timothy Snyder (2018) makes a similar, though more interesting, argument, suggesting that the contemporary far-right has reflexively learned the lessons of the 1930's and has adopted them to the age of social media, "alternative facts" and "fake news." Through a propagandist appeal to an exclusionary conception of the "people" combined with the claim to manifesting its will, the executive embodied in a "strong man" seeks to undermine liberal-democracy's system of checks and balances via the autonomy of legislative and, particularly, the judicial branches of government and the rule of law, more generally.

While it is tempting to argue that the present is being haunted by the spectre of the 1930s, there is a crucial difference. The fascisms of the 1920s and 1930s emerged out of a "failed revolution," the revolutionary wave that swept through Europe from Germany and Hungary to Italy in the aftermath of the October Revolution in 1917. The *ex-post* apologies for the National Socialist regime offered by historians such as Ernst Nolte – wrong-headed though they may be – are based, at least in part, on the idea that Nazism served as a bastion against the threat of revolution from the East. This forms the basis for the dangerous equation of fascism and communism under the guise of "extremism" in Europe today. Such an equation is dangerous because, amongst other things, it is designed to isolate and marginalize antifascist organizations that, alone, seem willing and capable of confronting the far-right where it can be most intimidating and influential: in the streets.

Today, however, far from posing a credible threat to the existing neoliberal capitalist order, the revolutionary left is virtually everywhere in retreat and has been for decades. There are several reasons for this, including the dismal

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histories of Stalinism, Maoism, Pol Pot's "killing fields," and the disintegration of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc, as a whole. Added to this is the decomposition of the union movement in the West, as well as in countries such as India where the relative size of the informal sector has grown relative to organized labour. Such decomposition, moreover, corresponds to the global triumph of neoliberalism. In unleashing with particular force what Canadian political theorist, C.B. McPherson (2011), called "possessive individualism"; neoliberalism erodes the basis of class solidarity while reinforcing parochial group identities.

This has become especially clear in the West. The turbulence of the recent decade can be attributed to the collision of two distinct forces. On the one hand, there is the aggressive neo-conservative policy of "regime change" following 9/11, initiated by George W. Bush and continued by the Obama administration. This has contributed massively to *intensifying* rather than *quelling* terrorism in the Middle East, Iraq and Syria, with the precipitous rise of organizations such as ISIS, also known as Daesh. Combined with long-term political intervention in Central America's Northern Triangle, which resulted from the mid-19th century doctrine of Manifest Destiny, US foreign policy has contributed enormously to the global crisis of statelessness.

On the other hand, there are the baleful effects of the neo-liberalization of society entailing privatization, accumulation by dispossession, the up-ward redistribution of wealth, and deregulation (Harvey 2005). It was a combination of these four factors, especially the deregulation of the financial sector, that led to the US sub-prime mortgage-induced near meltdown of the global financial order in 2007–08. So, here we have socio-economic crisis set within a political crisis described (in a kind of self-fulfilling prophesy) by Samuel P. Hungtington (2011) as a "clash of civilizations". It was this constellation that has created the basis for the rise of the far-right in North America and Europe, in which populists are able to appeal to exclusionary conceptions of the people by defining it in relation not to political *opponents* but, rather, existential *foes*. Such a definition inevitably leads in the direction of intolerance, xenophobia and violence.

This constellation bears remarkable similarities with the 1970s in Britain rather than the 1930s on the continent. The 1970s can be seen as the template for the present: a refugee crisis combined with the socio-economic crisis of stagflation (slowing growth rates combined with rising inflation) attendant upon the approaching end of the long cycle of post-war accumulation and transition from Keynesian to monetarist (demand- to supply-side) macroeconomic policy. This transition could only be understood in retrospect as a form of class struggle from above. In the period immediately preceding the Conservative Party's 1979 victory under Thatcher's leadership, there had been a massive up-swing in support for neo-fascist parties, particularly the British Movement and the National Front. Eleven years earlier, Enoch Powell had delivered his infamous "Rivers of Blood Speech," which was symptomatic of the pervasive racist and xenophobic atmosphere in post-colonial Britain at the time. This was hardly

surprising in a former global empire in palpable and irreversible decline. Powell describes the immigration policy of the day in terms of "a nation busily engaged on heaping up its own funeral pyre". The sentiments expressed by Powell were dramatically exacerbated by the 1972 refugee crisis sparked by Idi Amin's expulsion of Ugandan Asians, 60,000 of which were begrudgingly taken in by Britain. This led to the rise in the fortunes of racist, neo-fascist parties that targeted blacks and Asians, often calling for their repatriation. Such calls would come to be echoed more widely by the present-day far-right, including by the French Nouvelle Droit (New Right), the Alt-right, and the 45th President of the United States, Donald J. Trump. Many themes found in the rhetoric of the erstwhile Tory Shadow Defense Secretary anticipate the language of the contemporary far-right in the West, not least the idea that immigration and inter-marriage contributed to what it refers to as "White genocide".[1]

Thatcher and those around her were cannily able to draw upon the racist and xenophobic elements of the far-right while only slightly moderating its extremism in the form of an "authoritarian populism" that capitalized on both the manufactured fear of the "enemy alien" (Ugandan Asians) and that around crime from the "enemy within" (Afro-Caribbeans of the Windrush Generation) (cf. Hall et al. 1978, and Hall 2017). So, in the late 1970s, the epicentre of the origins and consolidation of neoliberalism (outside of Chile, of course) entailed a distinctive socio-economic crisis of Keynesianism combined with a "refugee crisis," one for which Britain and Israel were, in part, responsible insofar as they supported Amin's coup d'etat in 1971. This is a pattern that would be repeated: aggressive neocolonial policies in the Global South produce displaced persons, migrants and refugees that, then, become transformed into the "enemy" targeted by the far-right. Echoing Powell, Jean Raspail's *Camp of the Saints* (1994) was originally published only one year after the Ugandan refugee crisis and depicts boat loads of fornicating, defecating Indians, symbolizing the displaced masses of the Third World, "invading" and "replacing" Whites in their "safe European home". Perhaps the best way to understand the position of the far-right today is in the following way: in 1979, Thatcher *was emboldened by* a rising neo-fascism in the U.K.; in 2016, Donald J. Trump *has emboldened* a rising neo-fascism in the U.S.

This early prehistory of neoliberalism in the U.K. is the context within which I situate Ajay Gudavarthy's terrifically insightful book, *India After Modi*. The book is divided broadly into four main sections: the first refers to the larger trends within India, notably the emergence of right-wing or authoritarian populism in the guise of Narendra Modi's BJP; the second provides a more fine-grained view of the regional dimensions of the BJP's rule, for example, recent developments in New Delhi, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Telangana; the third section addresses Dalit-Muslim alliances; and, the fourth and final section assesses the future prospects for opposition to Modi. My focus will be on the problem of authoritarianism and the role of the "strong man," which crystallizes the contradictions, alluded to above, between a neoliberalizing economy that Modi

unleashes (the so-called "Gujarat Model"), on the one hand, and the invocations of collective (Hindu) identity, which the Prime Minister claims to embody, on the other.

The context for Gudavarthy's assessment of Modi's impact on India is formed out of discussions of three over-lapping – at times reinforcing and at times contradictory – developments: the advent of neoliberalism, the "populist" or what we might term "illiberal" turn in democracy, and transformation of socio-economic into cultural grievances. The crux of *India After Modi*'s argument – one that invites significant comparison with contemporary developments outside of India – is that Hindutva discourse represents a modernization project via neoliberal reforms *combined with* an embrace and deepening of traditionalist interpretations of Hindu identity. It is a version of "reactionary modernism", a term that has been used to describe Nazism to indicate a synthesis of a fetishization of technology, on the one hand, and rejection of the Enlightenment and liberal-democratic values, on the other (Herf, 1986). The parallels with the historical experience of Thatcher's "authoritarian populism" are clear, and at the same time, so is its contrast to British identity geared to the symbolism of the Monarchy and memory of Imperial domination, through which the White working class could be incorporated (in a subordinate and dependent way) – such a unified Hindu identity is extremely difficult to achieve. This has to do with internal divisions within the Varna system, with the complications that arise with traditional upper castes, for example, Brahmins, who have seen their socio-economic condition deteriorate over the past decades, as well as the position of Other Backward Classes (OBC's) and Dalits. Of course, there is a deep historical connection between these twin logics of unity and multiplicity: the British Raj was, itself, quite masterful in applying the old Roman tactic of *divide et impera*, which culminated in the catastrophe of partition. The irony, of course, is that unity at the *centre* was purchased at the cost of division in the *periphery*. Such division, then, becomes the fundamental challenge faced by Modi's Hindutva project.

It is precisely the complications arising out of this need to constitute a horizonal or egalitarian conception of the people out of the vertical or hierarchical constitution of Hindu identity that necessitates a particularly intensified definition of the "enemy" against which the people is defined. This is what Ernesto Laclau (2005, 74) aptly calls the "antagonistic frontier". It is as if the brutal structural violence of caste becomes displaced against the outsider who is also an insider, the historical *subaltern* who is identified – through an act of projection – as the *aggressor*. Gathering additional strength and force from the rising tides of post-911 Islamophobia, particularly in the US, Canada, and Europe, this enemy is doubled: the Muslim (from within) and the Pakistani state (from without) are both understood, in a paranoid way, as working in secret and deadly complicity. Of course, there is also the matter of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. This is why the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution is so consequential and lends further credence to the view of the Indian state as

settler-colonial in nature. The parallels with Israel are not insignificant and the close relationship between it and India is hardly surprising. While the colliding effects of US neoconservatism and neoliberalism, which have so deeply pockmarked the political landscape of the West, can be discerned clearly in neither the Latin American nor South Asian context, we do see a certain variation of the logic here. This is that the nature of neoliberal capitalism's "liquidity," its ability to transform all wealth into money, its tendency to melt "all that is solid," produces the conditions for the possibility of a redoubled traditionalism designed to reassemble, reconstruct, and ultimately *reimagine* the deeply fragmented Hindu community. At times, the "enemy" is defined as the "anti-national" that enables this floating signifier to also subsume the left against which a carefully choreographed strategy of panic was pursued in the run-up to the election under the guise of rooting out an apparent "Urban-Naxal" conspiracy to assassinate the Prime Minister.

Gudavarthy shows how Modi's authoritarian populist agenda was made possible by the erosion of the Congress's own project, which sought to hold together both secularism and social welfarism. With the neoliberal reforms of the 1990's, it relinquished its commitment to welfarism and, as a result, its commitment to secularism began to wane. This, then, opened the door to Modi's suturing together a Hindutva agenda with "developmentalism" (the components of the "Gujurat model") that replaced Congress's twin-pronged strategy. In fact, according to Gudavarthy, populism in India can be traced back to Indira Gandhi's slogan *Garibi Hatao*! (Abolish Poverty!), although with Modi it begins to profoundly and systematically impact public policy. The Hindutva project of Modi goes well beyond sloganeering and focuses on the following four areas: an assertion of majoritarian will over minority rights (Hindus comprise 80% of the population, Muslims 15%); a crack-down on universities, particularly JNU, which the regime takes to be a hotbed of "subversion"; demonetization (elimination of the 500 and 1000 rupee bank notes) linked to an anti-corruption campaign and a "war on terror"; and, finally, the political capitalization on Upper Caste protests against affirmative action schemes for "Other Backward Classes" (3).

A major contribution of the book is precisely that it locates the shift in Indian politics not simply in the BJP but in prior transformations of the Indian state under the Congress Party. This markedly contrasts, for example, with parallel analyses of many US liberals who are unable to see the way in which ground was cleared for the Trump presidency by the Obama and George W. Bush administrations (for such blindness see Norris and Inglehart, 2019). An additional strength of Gudavarthy's book is that it refuses to moralistically denounce populism, viewing it, instead, as a legitimate opening for marginalized groups to enter the political field and one that the left must, therefore, seriously come to terms with. What Gudavarthy means by the "after" in the book's title, *India after Modi*, is that the Indian Prime Minister, like other populists, has not simply won political power (now twice – the second time, surprisingly, by an even

greater margin) within the existing rules of politics. Rather, what he has done is *changed* those very rules.

From its inception as a secular, socialist state, politics in India were grounded in a certain separation of public and private spheres and were premised upon a distinct liberal account of public reason. This form of reason entailed that citizens made calculated choices and decisions based on a certain self-understanding of their own interests. These decisions were guided by a set of institutions oriented towards limiting executive power: for example, free and fair elections, the separation of the judicial and legislative branches of government, a free press, universities oriented by the principle of academic freedom, constitutionalism, due process, and the rule of law. In such a model, religious belief was a matter of private conscience and, in principle, had a marginal role in public life. Moreover, if reason carried the day within the realm of public life, emotion and affect was relegated to the realm of the *oikos* or the domestic sphere.

With the exception of elections, Modi directly challenges and undermines most liberal-democratic assumptions and commitments. Democracy is reduced to pure electoralism, beyond which any attempt to hold the government to account between elections is denounced as seditious or, as in the oft-used slogan, "anti-national". Emotional appeals have supplanted or displaced reasoned debates and argumentation and, moreover, in what Gudavarthy calls "performative dialectics," the Hindutva project cannily appropriates certain post-colonial tropes with a certain emphasis on particularism and moral relativism. "The conservative political being of the Right today 'feels like a subaltern and thinks like the elite" (xiv). For example, BJP President, Amit Shah, claims that Western notions of human rights have no place in India. In other words, the articulation of what often amounts to a radical form of particularism in opposition to universalism is pressed in the service of exclusionary communal and authoritarian political ends. The abrogation of liberal-democratic norms and values is undertaken in the name of the people whose will is said to be embodied in the person of a strong leader. Gudavarthy provides a fascinating discussion of the elective affinities between Hindutva and fascist discourse, and it becomes especially clear that after the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, guaranteeing the right of Jammu and Kashmir to self-determination is ever more pressing.

The danger of fascism today, as the great late Egyptian political economist, Samir Amin (2014), has suggested, is precisely the destruction of liberal-democratic institutions and the public reason that underlies it in the name of an overarching collective identity: "Fascism is a particular political response to the challenges with which the management of capitalist society may be confronted in specific circumstances". Amin goes on to suggest that it is comprised of two features. The first is that, underlying several of its direct diatribes against "capitalism" or "plutocracies," fascism represents a response to capitalist crises. And, in a much stronger formulation of Browning's "suffocation of democracy" thesis, Amin argues that the second feature of fascism is that this

particular response implies a "*categorical* rejection of democracy" (emphasis added). He argues: "Fascism always replaces the general principles on which the theories and practices of modern democracies are based – recognition of a diversity of opinions, recourse to electoral procedures to determine a majority, guaranty of the rights of the minority, etc. – with the opposed values of the submission to the requirements of collective discipline and the authority of the supreme leader and his main agents".

In a post-Modi India, the country reaches the point of no return; that is, in such an India, there is simply no returning to the *status quo ante*. Troublingly, though, while discerning some hopeful signs of a green-blue-red alliance comprised of Muslim, Dalit, and left formations, Gudavarthy shows the opposition to be deeply divided against itself. It seems that while benefitting the right, the politics of identity seem to doom the left to failure not just in India but globally (see Haider, 2018).

As with the contradictions that revealed themselves in the 1970s, the contemporary horizon simply makes explicit the underlying tensions within capitalist modernity itself, which are immeasurably compounded by neo-liberal reforms. This has to do with the fact that, unlike what Max Weber called the "authority of the 'eternal yesterday'" or tradition (1946, 78), modernity must draw its own normative legitimacy from its very own resources in the form of legal-rational authority grounded in correct procedures. Implicit in the modern form of life, however, is the egalitarian principle that each citizen should be able to determine their own fate – the two are brought together in the idea of constitutionally-limited democracy. At the same time, given that such modernity takes an inherently *capitalist* form, i.e. based on the private ownership and control of the means of production, citizens' ability to determine their fate is seriously compromised. This creates an unbearable social and psychological tension and means that authoritarianism – as a solution to such tension – is not a *contingent*, transitory feature of capitalist modernity. Rather, it is permanent, awaiting the appropriate conjuncture in which to spring from potentiality to actuality.

Gudavarthy points out how the middle class in the West came into its own in a period of relative stability and security in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. As a consequence, it was able to play a moderating role between working class demands from below, on the one hand, and the bourgeois drive to an infinite accumulation of capital as an end in itself regardless of the costs and consequences, on the other. This was the age of "social citizenship". The Indian middle class, in contrast, arose precisely under conditions of insecurity in which the social bond was replaced by precarious contractual or transactional relationships (what Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* referred to as the "callous cash payment") and which could, therefore, be broken off at any point. Such pervasive and constitutive insecurity makes the Indian middle class uniquely susceptible to the attractions of Hindu communalism, which is, nonetheless, articulated in a way that makes it uniquely attractive to this class. As Gudavarthy argues: "The Right has encroached on the discourse of

equality, dignity, recognition, and representation, and sutured them to the ideas of unity, nationalism, loyalty, and order" (xiv).

One of the most scintillating aspects of the book is that it is written at several distinct levels. The first is an immediate diagnosis of contemporary Indian politics; many of the chapters stem from shorter articles written for the larger public. It is, therefore, a model of public intellectual engagement, which is so rare because it is increasingly fraught and dangerous in this era of digital populism. It is also written in a way that shows its awareness of the crucial 2019 elections looming on the horizon, with a particular emphasis on the possibility of a steadfast opposition to the BJP coalescing around a much vaunted Dalit-Muslim alliance that had shown a younger, more energetic face in the previous year. This manifested itself in two high profile protests led by the then-President of the JNU Students' Union, Kanhaiya Kumar. The first was over the "institutional murder" of Dalit student Rohith Vermula in 2015; the second was in relation to the fate of Mohammed Afzal Guru, the Kashmiri militant who was executed in 2013 after being convicted for playing a role in the 2001 Lok Sabha attacks (reinforcing the idea of the complicity of the "enemy" within and "the enemy" from without).

While Gudavarthy suggests that the fortunes of the BJP-RSS project were on the wane, the 2019 election was one in which, by all accounts, Modi vastly exceeded all expectations. This could be seen as a major weakness of the book. However, the election result, to the contrary, reinforces its insights. The conceptual elements of understanding Modi's triumph in the 2019 elections are all there in the book. For example, Katherine Adeney, Professor of Politics and Director of the South Asia Research Institute at the University of Nottingham, puts Modi's victory down to four factors: 1. Security; 2. The weakness of the opposition; 3. Democratic majoritarianism against minority rights; and 4. Modi's own appeal (2019). In each case, Gudavarthy's book has much to say and, in fact, these elements could be understood as synthesized in what Gudavarthy calls "strong man" politics (16–21).

If, as alluded to above, the return of authoritarian politics is about the return of the leaders who purport to embody, in muscular fashion, the will of the people – in the US in the figure of Donald Trump, in the U.K. in the figure of Boris Johnson to Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil – then such a return leaves no doubt, if any indeed existed, about Mr. Modi's authoritarian credentials. Modi is a quintessentially "strong man" figure who symbolizes the regained pride of a nation that imagines itself as historically downtrodden and hard done by the hands of successive oppressors. The claim to victimhood is one that the Nazi's zealously embraced, particularly in relation to Versailles, and finds a contemporary echo in a figure such as Trump (Snyder, 2018). As I argue elsewhere, drawing upon the work of Theodor W. Adorno, contemporary authoritarian leaders can be regarded as "great little men" in which authoritarian personalities are able to identify enlarged mirror images of themselves (Gandesha, 2020, 120–41). As the contradiction between democratic equality and liberal freedom deepens and individuals find it increasingly difficult

to live up to their ego-ideals (for example, men find it increasingly difficult to provide for their families), they look to such punitive father figures, who function as enlarged versions of themselves, as a way of addressing this gap or shortcoming and of dealing with the frustration, fear, and anger that comes with it. As Gudavarthy writes:

> Although from a humble background, Prime Minister Modi now leads a life of power and ostentatiousness, which prompted Rahul Gandhi to refer to Mr Modi's rule as the 'suit-boot ki sarkar'. Modi claims the legacy of the poor and the marginalized based on his past and the power of the rich and the corporate based on his current stature. This symbolizes the journey of a self-made man, and at another level, justifies aggressive corporate growth and lifestyle. He attempts to forge continuity, not a dichotomy between the two (xix).

Mr. Modi fits this description perfectly insofar as, on the one hand, he cultivates the populist image of a member of the OBC's that conveniently, as Gudavarthy indicates, insulates himself from the charge that he is insufficiently refined for the position of P.M. On the other hand, much is made of his supposedly 56" chest (*The Hindu*, 2019). Modi is what Adorno calls the "composite of a suburban barber and King Kong". Gudavarthy writes:

> However, he is also a chaiwala, a dass (servant), and a chowkidar who is working against the establishment representing the interests of 'the people'. This idea of the 'people' however, is selective, sectarian, and refers to an authentic core that stands with and not against the leader. Outside the fold of this authentic constituency, the leader is not expected to extend similar humility, but contrarily, is understood to be strong, intolerant, and ruthless (xx).

This composite character mirrors exactly the inherent contradiction of capitalism, manifestly exacerbated in its accelerated neoliberal form. It is for this reason that, at this historical moment, with the consolidation of neoliberalism across the globe after some two decades, we see the strong man phenomenon as ubiquitous. It results from the very same contradiction that Gudavarthy puts his finger on, and in light of which Modi's re-election in 2019 was not, in retrospect, particularly surprising: "This unique historical moment has been one where the formal reach of the political discourse of equality, dignity, recognition, and representation has spread to all quarters and sections of human society, while the conditions to realize them have become cumulatively contained and dissipated" (xii).

Notes

[1] Renaud Camus reiterates this thesis in his book *The Great Replacement*, which has proven to be a considerable inspiration for the contemporary far-right. Camus went on to publish a book with the not insignificant title of *You Will Not Replace Us!* (Paris: Chez Autre, 2018). This has

become a paranoid trope in the discourse of the BJP-RSS. For example, when I visited India in October 2018, I was told by a BJP Party functionary that Muslims (remember at 15% of the population) posed a demographic threat to Hindus (80%) because of the exponential rate at which they were reproducing.

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