

The Hindutva and European fascism – Some comparisons and some lessons

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(1) The rise of the BJP to a dominant role in Indian politics over the last decade has led all sorts of people to look to similarities to both the rise of fascism in Europe in the years between the two world wars and to the revival of fascist parties in countries like France, Belgium, Italy, and Austria today.

But the word “fascism” is often used in a very loose way that does not provide any serious analysis. People often use it simply as a sort of swear word for any government they do not like. It is necessary to delineate clearly what the phenomenon is if we are not to fall into confusion and if we are to learn to fight it using effective methods.

(2) Fascism is not just a set of reactionary racist, communalist or national chauvinist prejudices. Most mainstream capitalist political parties dabble in these in order gain votes and to consolidate their own hold (witness the Conservative Party in Britain, or for that matter Congress in India at various points in the 1980s). Fascism differs from these in that it aims to foment such prejudices so as to establish total political and social domination, in the process obliterating all independent organization of workers, peasants and other oppressed groups.

It usually originates with political adventurers like Mussolini or half deranged figures like Hitler who attempt to build mass extraparliamentary organizations capable of intervening to impose their will in every area of social life. The main social layer that they can use to do this is the petty bourgeoisie – the small businessmen, the shop keepers, the self employed, unemployed university graduates, all those who suffer from the endemic crises of capitalism but who fear and despise the working class below them as much as they suffer from the very rich above them. These groups often feel they suffer from competition from ethnic or religious minorities and the fascists preach national, racial or religious “purity” in an attempt to direct all their bitterness and frustration against these minorities at the same time as developing among them a hatred for working class organizations.

If fascism can build a mass base among these layers, then it can exert an influence among sections of the working class – especially those who do not have traditions of independent class organizations, like those in small workplaces, the long-term unemployed – and among wider layers of the poor.

But its major base has always been among the petty bourgeoisie.

There are usually some capitalists who identify with the fascist message from the beginning. But major sections of capitalism rarely put their faith in fascism at its early stages, since so long as the system does not face some very serious crisis, they feel they can keep control of society through more “peaceful” means – their own mass media, tame parliamentary parties and compliant trade union leaders. They usually fear that a direct push by the fascists for their full programme will detonate big social conflicts which will be costly in terms of profits.

They may see advantages in the existence of a fascist movement as a counterbalance to the left and the workers’ organizations, but they try to ensure the movement keeps in its place. If necessary, they will occasionally use the police to keep the fascists in check – although always much less often than they use the police against movements of the left or the workers and peasants.

But once a powerful fascist movement exists, it provides a weapon capitalism can turn to if it becomes seriously threatened by economic or social crisis. For the mass organizations of fascism are able to penetrate every area of social life and, once working in conjunction with the forces of the state, to destroy working class and popular organizations in a way that cannot be done by any authoritarian government based on the forces of the state alone.

So in Italy from mid 1920 to mid 1922, the ruling class treated the fascists as a counterweight to the left, using them to attack workers and peasants organizations, while keeping in power right wing parliamentary governments. And in the same way, between 1929 and the end of 1932, German big business used the Nazis as a counterweight to the workers organizations, so enabling right wing authoritarian governments to launch piecemeal attacks on workers conditions, while still occasionally taking token actions against the Nazis.

But then, in both cases, a point was reached where key sections of big business and the state decided the only way out of their economic or political and social crisis was to hand full power to the fascists. So the king and the main bourgeois parties handed power to the fascists in Italy in 1922, and the heads of the army and big business agreed with Hitler taking power in January 1933.

Until that point, they saw the petty bourgeois fascist bands as a mad dog that could be used to frighten and intimidate the workers movement. But they did not risk giving power to the mad dog until they saw no other solution to their own problems. And even then, they placed conditions on fascism to try to ensure that its attacks on the workers and other popular organizations did not also involve attacks on the privileges and “freedoms” of the elite in the state and big business.

Fascism, a movement whose mass base was the petty bourgeoisie, could not conquer power without the approval of big business and the state (when Hitler tried in 1923, he suffered a humiliating defeat). Only when faced with a devastating economic or social and political crisis would big business agree to this. Fascism's success depended, then, on the coming together of a petty bourgeois movement built from below and a decision made by the ruling economic class from above. If one of these factors was missing, attempts to establish a fascist state failed.

4. The classic mistake of both social democracy and of the Communist Parties in Italy and Germany was to fail to see the difference between the parliamentary and the fascist form of capitalist rule.

In Italy the Communist leader of the early 1920s, Bordiga, claimed that since fascism and bourgeois democracy were forms of bourgeois rule, it was important not to fight them in different ways. Meanwhile, the right wing of social democracy said the fascists were not a serious threat. Only when Antonio Gramsci, influenced by discussions with Lenin and Trotsky, began to argue differently to Bordiga did the left begin to understand the need for special methods to fight fascism.

In Germany, the social democrats claimed that because conditions were different to those in Italy, fascism could not come to power – and even after Hitler was running the government claimed he would abide by the constitution. The Communist, under the dictates of Stalin in Moscow, saw fascism as a menace – but claimed that menace took social democratic as well as Hitlerite forms. So instead of seeing the rise of the Nazis as central, they called the government prior to the Nazi takeover “fascist”, and so made it more difficult to win workers to fight that takeover.

Against that a number of critics, of whom the most important and most perceptive was the exiled Leon Trotsky, argued for the central difference between “normal” forms of bourgeois rule and fascism. Because fascism is based on a mass petty bourgeois base that influences workers and peasants, once it works alongside the forces of the state it can eradicate all resistance in a way that a normal government cannot.

From this he drew the conclusion that to fight fascism, the most militant section of the working class, organized at the time in the Communist Party, had to appeal for united action to the leaders of the political and trade union leaders of the less militant section of workers – organized in Germany by reformist social democracy.

Unfortunately, the long influence of Stalinist ideas in India means that most of Trotsky's texts on this question are unknown here.

(5) In neither western Europe nor in India today is the situation yet as catastrophic as it was in interwar Europe.

The economic crisis is not so severe that capitalists see the only way out as through all out fascism. Nor is the mass of the petty bourgeois “driven mad” (Trotsky’s words) by impoverishment, so making them willing to risk their lives in street battles.

Nevertheless, in Europe fascist organizations have made major advances in recent years, gaining electoral support from people disillusioned by the failure of the old capitalist and social democratic parties to improve their situation. As unemployment and insecurity grow, the fascists are persuading sections of the petty bourgeois and significant groups of workers that black and Asian people, immigrants, refugees or Muslims are to blame.

In doing so the fascists are provoking attacks on ethnic and religious minorities, are encouraging governments to adopt increasingly discriminatory policies over immigration, and are laying the ground for their own organization to expand rapidly in size and influence if the next economic crisis does create mass impoverishment among wide sections of society.

For that reason these organizations are a menace and have to be fought.

It is not necessary to believe they are about to take power in order to fight them. In fact, it is as disastrous to overestimate their power as to underestimate it. Overestimation leads to pessimism about the possibility of fighting back. Underestimation leads to not seeing the need to fight back.

In countries like Britain and France the liberal media swing from one position to the other, without ever seeing a fight back as necessary or possible.

Yet a fight back is possible. Fascism as a movement depends on its continual forward momentum to make its members forget economic and social interests which might lead them to engage in struggles alongside workers and minorities for a better world. As Hitler once said, ‘the little man feels like a worm, but we involve him in a movement that makes him feel part of great dragon’. But it is very difficult to keep a movement going with this momentum if it is kept a long way from power for a long period of time. Splits begin to arise between those tempted to accept the fruits of normal parliamentary influence and those impatient for direct confrontation.

These problems beset Mussolini and Hitler in the relatively short periods of time they had to sustain movements without taking power. They are correspondingly greater for today’s new fascists.

So, for instance, Jean Marie Le Pen’s fascists in France have faced two major setbacks in recent years. When there were huge strikes and street protests in 1995, half

Le Pen's followers opposed them and half supported them. Soon after his organization split between himself on the one hand and another leader who sought parliamentary respectability. And then two years ago, after Le Pen's greatest electoral success so far, with 20 per cent of the vote, two million people took to the streets and showed how weak in real terms Le Pen's active forces were.

There is a special situation in Italy which has some similarities with that in India. A big political crisis in the early 1990s, caused by the disintegration of the historic party of Italian capitalism, the Christian Democrats, provided the long established fascist MSI party the chance to share in governmental power. Italian capitalism welcomed it into power as a counterweight to the strength of still powerful trade unions and working class based parties. But the great majority of the capitalists did not want street fighting and political unrest right across Italy. So in order to get to take part in the governmental coalition the fascist leader Fini disavowed his own past, claimed he was a "post fascist" and accepted democracy. Whether this was true or not, it caused deep unrest inside his own party, with some of the hard core fascists, including Mussolini's granddaughter, to leave.

That does not mean that the MSI is not a threat. Its presence has encouraged the government to move to the right, to adopt repressive measures and to clamp down on immigrants. It also provides the base from which more serious fascist forces can launch themselves if economic crisis does cause a huge radicalization of the petty bourgeois. But, and this is an important point, the presence of "post fascist" ministers does not make Italy into a fascist state of the classic sort.

The basic organizations of the working class and other oppressed groups remain intact, and able to operate openly and legally, and are able to maintain their struggle against the government with hope of success.

(6) India today shows two differences with Italy. The Hindutva retains, in the RSS, a mass extra-parliamentary wing, and with the HVP a big ideological apparatus. And the BJP is the major force in the NDA government, not a junior partner.

However, it faces many of the same tensions as Italy's "post fascists". In order to come to office and stay in office it has been forced to moderate the stance of many of its most active supporters. This is not because it has somehow been won over to parliamentary democracy, but because Indian capitalism does not want to risk the immense social conflicts which would be necessary at present to enforce the full blooded RSS programme, involving as it would clashes with other social movements through the length and breadth of the country.

Indian capitalism can accept without qualms horrific communalist killing in Mumbai or Gujarat every decade or so. But it does not want the whole subcontinent

to be in flames. And it knows there are still forms of popular organization capable of putting up massive resistance if their backs are forced against the wall. So when trade unions organize powerful strikes, it does not yet employ the RSS or Shiv Sena as open strikebreakers.

Eleven years ago, the BJP-RSS-HVP made their big push for political influence with the Ayodhya Babri Masjid agitation. They proved they could dominate in street politics across major parts of the country, and in the aftermath their Shiv Sena ally proved it could unleash murderous violence against Muslims in one of the most important cities. Yet this did not bring the BJP to power. For that to happen, the BJP leaders had to court other parties to form a coalition, which downplayed some of the communalist rhetoric. This does not mean the BJP leaders have changed their spots. The Gujarat pogrom of two years ago showed that they will unleash their street thugs when it serves their purposes to do so.

The point is, that Indian capitalism today does not want the BJP to cause mayhem everywhere by unleashing its thugs. So the BJP leaders tell the mass ranks of the RSS and the VHP that they have to wait. And the ranks are increasingly frustrated at having to wait.

The tensions are made worse by the parliamentary and other perks that go to the top leaders and to selected cadres, while the mass membership suffer along with other people from India's lower classes from the effects of neo liberalism and jobless economic growth.

The BJP wants to fill the role that Congress once filled, of integrating all of Indian society behind the big capitalists. And it wants to do so while enthusing about neoliberalism and telling the rich to enrich themselves in ever more ostentatious ways. Congress used to try to reconcile the poor to capitalism by using the language of socialism and "fighting poverty". The BJP wants to do the same by communalist agitation which sets one sections of the poor against another. But it cannot avoid running into repeated clashes within its own ranks as it tries at the same time to prevent the agitation resulting in the widespread disorder that big business does not want at present.

The BJP will try to reduce the tension in its own ranks by taking certain measures that seem to move to fulfillment of its programme – the censoring of some books, the rewriting of text books, the replacement from their jobs of some leftists or Congress appointees by its own people, the unleashing of occasional localized but bloody pogroms. But it will not be able to prevent disenchantment leading to political passivity among many of his followers, and even to open revolt within the Hindutva ranks.

7. This situation provides numerous opportunities for the left in India to fight back against the rise of the BJP and communalism.

But this can only happen if the left reacts in the right way.

First, the left has to be clear the BJP is a real threat. It will not be stopped by parliamentary tricks or by coalitions between various corrupt political parties for electoral reasons. In some ways, life would be easier for the BJP if it were forced into a short period of opposition by such a coalition. For then it would be able to mobilize its petty bourgeois mass base against corruption, “the old parties’ and even some products of globalization, just as it did last time it was in opposition, but this time from a more powerful position.

So even if the BJP is beaten in the election, its threat will not go away.

It can only be beaten if its opponents learn to undertake mass struggle against it. This means learning to carry the arguments against it to the very base of society. It is necessary to learn to convince Hindu workers and peasants that the BJP-RSS-VHP are opposed to their own interests, that their actions hurt Hindu workers and peasants as well as Muslims and Christians.

This is what the left has been forced to do faced with the growth of the new fascism in countries like France and Britain. We have been forced to go into the very areas where the fascists claim they are strong to counter their arguments. We have been forced to learn how to use elements of modern mass culture (in Britain and France the musical forms of rock and hiphop) to win white working class youth to identify with black and Asian youth in fighting the Nazis. We have had to establish united fronts against the fascists with reformists inside the working class movement who disagree with us on most issues, but see the Nazis are a threat to their position as well as to ours.

At the same time there is something else we are learning to do which the Indian left used to be able to do but has often forgotten how. This is to link up all the small struggles against petty oppressions and frustrations that abound in any society undergoing neoliberal economic treatment. The RSS is sending its trained groups into some of the poorest groups in society in order to win them to its communalist and national chauvinist agitation. The left has to learn to target its arguments to these groups, to stop thinking propaganda can be made simply by reprinting speeches of general secretaries and to see that what is needed is to relate to the needs of the mass of people in terms of their own struggles and their own words.

We are in a period worldwide in which neoliberal measures are leading to growing bitterness among the mass of people. The fascist right seeks to profit from this

bitterness by directing it against scapegoats. The left has to relate to the bitterness and help direct it into struggles that unite all the oppressed and exploited.

There will be plenty of opportunities to do this. But it requires the left in India, as elsewhere in the world, to change its old ways of operating, to see that the situation is serious, and to react accordingly.