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The 'Right'ward Shift and the Death of Dissent

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Agitating students of University of Hyderabad, march in protest to the Vice Chancellor's lounge as part of the the All India Universities protest called by the Joint Action Committee for social justice in Hyderabad on January 27, 2016. Photo: K.V.S. Giri

*As politics in several parts of the world tilts towards the right, attacks on freedom of speech and expression, proliferation of skewed notions, heightened mass conformism, appropriation of symbols and idioms, and the gradual but successful take-over of the media are evidently on the rise. These lead to the question: do they signal the 'death of dissent'? **Roshni Sengupta** looks at the recent attacks on students in some of the leading Indian educational institutions, and the growing hold of neo-conservatism in policy-making by the Union government, which incidentally won on the electoral plank of 'development'.*

The expansive majority that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) enjoys in the Lok Sabha, India's lower house of Parliament, forecloses any opportunity for opposition, constructive or otherwise. As a result, Hindu nationalists seem to be systematically targeting probable enclaves of possible dissent and opposition, outside the Lok Sabha but within the political superstructure. Beginning with non-governmental organisations – by the end of April 2015 the licenses of about 9,000 foreign-funded non-government organisations (NGOs) were cancelled citing tax violations¹ – the axe now hangs precariously over universities, their student bodies that remain inherently democratic, journalists, human right advocates, writers, artists and activists².

While the scenario in India changes dramatically on a daily basis, strikingly similar developments in other parts of the globe brings on a sense of foreboding. This article attempts to synthesise the implications of the rise of right-wing movements and political parties in other parts of the world such as countries in Europe and North America and find comparative paradigms for the Indian situation.

I

Dissent – long before it became a measure of patriotism and nationalism – has been described as the 'ability to question individuals, states and providence to see their true significance'³. In 1843, Karl Marx wrote in his letter to Arnold Ruge:

“if constructing the future and settling everything for all times are not our affair, it is all the more clear what we have to accomplish at present: I am referring to ruthless criticism of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be”.⁴

The criticality of dissent remains a fundamental element of the ultimate destruction of the capitalist class structure. Marx underlines the state as an instrument in a capitalist system which is routinely used to repress dangerous dissent and expand surplus value⁵. The capitalist state uses institutions of force, such as the police and the army, to enforce an ideology that enables the mass public to believe unquestionably in the *status quo*, so that even the possibility of expecting a better, more equitable system becomes unclear. As a result, a collection of partial, distorted, one-sided and uncritical notions are popularised through various media facilitating the people to follow what the capitalist-controlled state proposes or disposes.

The picture outlined by Marx (and Engels) appears to resonate with uncanny precision with recent events in India, as also in several other parts of the world. An increasingly powerful right wing in several countries in Europe, now propelled further as a result of the migrant crisis, heralds a stark reminder to the horrors of World War II. Recent election results reflect a disturbing trend – the meteoric rise of populist, right-wing parties across Europe, particularly Finland, Denmark, Austria, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Poland⁶.

Right-wing parties with anti-migrant agendas seem to be basking in election glories hoisted on public fears of altering societies, dwindling jobs and, more recently, particularly after the Hamburg and Cologne incidents, also the safety and security of local populations. Seven years since the worst financial crisis comparable only to the Great Depression, it seems hard to explain the conservative right-wing upsurge – instead of the left as might be predicted – across Europe and the Anglosphere. Across 39 countries in Europe, ideological conservatives are in power in 26 of them. In Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States, right-wing parties control the legislatures in 30 of the 43 countries⁷. Commentators argue the propensity of the conservative political formations

to build their campaigns on the myth of greater competence in handling the economy after a financial meltdown, even though studies have shown that centre-left parties are actually better performers in low-strung economies.

The other, more immutable reason for the right-wing surge hinges on their success in turning the voters into defensive, insular entities, rallying against immigration as they play into inherent and likely resurgent fears of losing their livelihoods to the 'outsiders'. Populist parties have also projected themselves as the upholders of the principles of a welfare state against liberal immigration policies. The failure of the left to represent those negatively affected by globalization and the resultant financial downslide has made matters worse. Political scientists have also attributed the recent swell in the fortunes of the right to proportional representation which makes right-wing majorities and the formation of coalitions an easier task. The growth of individualism since the 1970s could also be seen as a possible bulwark for the predicament of the left.

Germany's anti-Islam Pegida Movement rallied thousands on its first anniversary; Hungary – ruled by a right-wing party since 2010 – sealed its borders to waves of Syrian refugees; and France's Marine Le Pen and her far right National Front came within a whisker of winning control in large swathes of the country ⁸. Meanwhile, Denmark and Finland are currently witnessing increasing trends in the popularity of the Danish People's Party – riding on a wave of populism given its rhetoric against multiculturalism – and the Finn's Party that actively campaigns against immigration and in favour of Eurocentric economic policies⁹.

"Sweden has been known for its open door policy towards refugees. Lately though, a few 'grassroots' organisations have been jeopardising that position," explains Bylgja Sif Mia Baldursdóttir, doctoral scholar at Leiden University and a keen observer of Scandinavian politics. Facts bear out her statement. Anti-immigrant Sweden Democrats is the third biggest party in Swedish politics; from a mere four per cent in 2008, they now have 20 per cent of the support and under pressure from growing conservative voices, the Swedish government has introduced ID checks at borders and trains from Denmark ¹⁰.

The migrant question has metamorphosed into a rallying cry for the far right in Iceland – a country isolated geographically and hence thought to be immune to the crisis affecting the rest of Europe. "The right-wing parties moved into national focus after the financial meltdown in 2008. Yet again, the point of departure and what brought them into national limelight was their refusal to allow refugees into Iceland," says Baldursdóttir, also adding that since Iceland is not part of the European Union and, therefore, not bound by any rules or treaties, it remains the prerogative of the government to make and unmake policies.

Across the Atlantic in Canada, even though a centre-left party is incumbent, rising tides of conservatism have left scholars and commentators worried. "Increasingly, Canadianness is being articulated as a moral/cultural entity in opposition most often to Islam and its accompanying habitus(es). This argument is much more difficult to put forward in Canada, vis-a-vis its continued commitment to multiculturalism and the realities of actually existing diversity across the country, yet it is becoming prominent in public discourse," comments Priya Swamy, a Canadian doctoral scholar at Leiden University. A recent study has found that right-wing extremists are on the upswing in Canada, much more alarmingly so than initially believed ¹¹. Islamophobic markers of the electoral campaign in the country ranged from the threat of 'the veiled Muslim woman' to 'reclaiming heritage'. According to Swamy, during the campaign the issue of 'veiled' Muslim women became hugely controversial, as the conservative party interpreted the idea of veiling in order to cause mistrust and fear among voters.

South of Canada, the surge in popularity of presidential hopeful Donald Trump in America across demographic lines – education, income, age, even religiosity – despite his lack of political experience and often outrightly

outlandish views has scholars and media watchers perplexed ¹² . Florida Republican Marco Rubio has blamed the media for almost playing the role of a ‘cheerleader’ for Trump ¹³ , a fact that would resonate with the television circus that ensued before and after the triumph of Narendra Modi, followed more recently by the spread of unverified information by a section of television news channels portraying some student activists of the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) as ‘anti-nationals’.

The current climate of repression of all views except the majoritarian view and the assault on democratic structures, educational institutions and civil society organisations has raised fears of American McCarthyism sweeping the Indian bodypolitik ¹⁴ . Noted television anchor and personality, Prannoy Roy, compared the current situation in India to that of the U.S. in the 1950s, when “Americans saw red under every bed” with “seditious and anti-nationals” being conjured out of thin air! ¹⁵ Not surprisingly, the Hindus4Trump group is going all out to ensure that Trump secures his presidential nomination – even to the extent of portraying him as Vishnu! ¹⁶ British author Matt Haig, in an exquisitely worded Facebook post, recently took down the American real-estate mogul for “allowing the international league of closet racists to step out of their little wardrobes of hate ¹⁷ .”

II

Surging crowds professing support for L. K. Advani and his *rath yatra* in the early 1990s in India foretold a fast-paced turn towards disturbing majoritarianism, fuelled by diminishing employment opportunities, a volatile economy and rising social inequalities. At the same time, a burgeoning media landscape and the influx of private players almost completely decimated state broadcasting, beaming into households programming that mirrored Saraswati Shishu Mandir (RSS-run schools) classrooms. Riding on the grand success of *Ramayana* on television (Doordarshan, incidentally) ¹⁸ , the BJP – RSS’s political mask – made deep inroads into an increasingly polarised society, gaining electorally – even forming governments in key States – fundamentally transforming the political landscape of India.

“The advent of right wing forces can be traced back to the liberalisation of the Indian economy in the early 1990s. Economic measures like reduction in import tariffs, deregulation of markets, reduction of taxes and greater foreign investment has accentuated poverty and inequality over the years, while increasing the Gross Domestic Product at the same time. Neo-liberal economic policies have led to a city-based middle-class culture, whereby the new urban youth are more focused on entrepreneurship and economic opportunities at the national and global level and, at the same time, protecting a conservative social fabric. The ideology of the present government fits their needs and as such constitutes one of its strong support bases,” elaborates another doctoral candidate at the Leiden Institute of History, Aditi Mukherjee. Across the border, the rightward shift in Pakistan gained momentum from the early 1970s attaining its zenith after the take-over of power by General Zia-Ul-Haq in 1976 with radical Islam consolidating its stranglehold over a deeply religious society ¹⁹ , paving the way for its subsequent degeneration into vicious religious and sectarian violence.

“There are no specific laws against dissent and dissidents in Scandinavian countries. The best illustration of the existence of alternative voices is Freetown Christiania in Copenhagen – a community which does not pay taxes and has its own laws,” explicates Mia Baldursdóttir, adding that right-wing politicians have now started congregating against the commune. Christiania – known also as a ‘micronation’ is a pedestrian-only city located in the centre of Copenhagen – claims to have seceded from the European Union ²⁰ . She also refers to the assault on the *ungdomshuset* or ‘the youth house’ in Copenhagen which was evacuated and later razed to the ground in 2007 given its long history as a meeting point for leftists groups and dissenting students. The conservatives termed it a breeding ground for anarchism. For Mahmood Kooria, doctoral student at the Leiden Institute for History, these

attacks on dissidents are normal fallout of growing conservatism. “Dissenting voices are always marginal to the predominant or mainstream narratives, which often are controlled by those who perpetuate power structures. Dissent, by default, connotes its marginality, I presume. Therefore, it is of no surprise how the larger sections of the society tend to stand with power, as much as they stand against any forms of dissent,” he elucidates.

For South Asian scholars and students, the Netherlands might appear almost as an anti-thesis of the political volatility prevalent in several other parts of the world, especially South Asia. According to Sarthak Bagchi, doctoral scholar at the Leiden Institute of Area Studies, this ‘neutrality’ is almost disturbing. “It is hard to find people, even students, participating in political activity. It is perhaps in conformity with the Dutch metaphor of ‘do normaal’, which actually means to be neutral and not take a political stand,” explains Bagchi. The student unrest, in 2015, at the University of Amsterdam, however, could be seen as a high-point in the ‘life’ of dissent in the Netherlands when students and faculty occupied the humanities building in opposition to the decision of the management to cut down funding to the humanities department [21](#) .

Students demanded the greater democratisation of universities in the Dutch system as well as introducing transparency in finances. Priya Swamy holds the corporatised educational structures in capitalist economies as the reason for the salience of conformist youth in these countries. “There is little space for critical reflection in most educational systems across the world. Rather than reflect on inequalities, educational bodies teach at a young age that to not accept them would be counter intuitive. What is more, universities operate more and more like corporations so that students can choose to be uncritical, even during, for example, a critical theory degree, as the attitude is ‘I pay for this, I should learn what I want’,” opines Swamy.

The ongoing attempt at appropriation of democratic spaces in universities by the Modi government in India is the latest in a whole series of assaults on rationality and reason in a communally charged atmosphere. “The space for dissent has been steadily shrinking, examples range from the murder of liberal thinkers and social activists like Dabholkar, Kalburgi, Pansare and overtly communal overtures like the building of Godse temple. The authoritarianism of the government is clearly reflected in the interventions in universities and high handed repression of student protests. Events in Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Hyderabad Central University and JNU testify to this,” expounds Aditi Mukherjee. “Democracy does not tolerate dissent after a point – no matter whether it is extreme right wing or radical left wing. The internal irony of democracy is that the ‘losers’ are bound to suffer as long as they do not have power, and ‘majority opinion’ can almost be mistaken for ‘majoritarianism’,” explains Mahmood Kooria.

Does it mean then that the space for free speech is shrinking irretrievably? The current political impasse involving JNU could be viewed as an attempt to generate public opinion against democratic spaces, including universities and civil society organisations. Students of South Asian politics view it as a ‘gimmick’ to divert the attention of the people from more critical issues. “It seems like a small part of a bigger plan – to divest critical thinking and free speech of its intrinsic and fundamental elements so that a conformist public tows the line,” says Archa N. G., a bachelor’s student at the Leiden Institute for History. The recent successes of far-right parties and the surge in support for formations like the Pegida in Europe are symptomatic of a more entrenched malaise. “The current right-wing Danish government has passed a new law making it mandatory for all incoming refugees to give up their possessions in return for asylum. This is inhuman and a violation of their basic rights,” remarks Mia Baldursdóttir. Of crucial importance, too, is the government’s recent decision to review subsidies and funding to certain educational and cultural institutions, prominent among them being JNU, Aligarh Muslim University and Sahitya Academy [22](#) .

“Nevertheless, it is too early to say that dissent is dying or critical thinking is losing its relevance. The situation is deteriorating, of course, but not alarming at present. Democracy gives everyone space under the sun and the far right will eventually run out of steam, one hopes,” says Sarthak Bagchi. “Only in a functional democracy can a Kanhaiya stand up and be counted, even as he challenges the prime minister of the day,” he quips.

“What is heartening is the solidity with which the student’s body, the teachers and the international academic community has rallied behind JNU. The Left movement in JNU (and India) seem to have closed ranks owing to the current standoff, which might result in uniting the opposition,” states a hopeful Archa.

The global jump in the popularity of right-wing parties – riding an Islamophobic, anti-immigrant wave – if viewed against microcosmic political and economic transformations in the respective countries, portends a difficult time ahead for oppositional politics, dissent and even basic fundamental rights to speech and expression. Use of obsolete and draconian laws against dissidents, rejection of alternative political views and lifestyles, manufacturing of consent through the abuse of the media and the shrill, hyper-nationalist rhetoric points undoubtedly towards the fulfilment of fascist agendas ²³. An abiding hope in democratic values, however, helps keep greater anxieties at bay, say young scholars and observers, even as lethal attacks on marginalised groups and communities continue unabated.

Given the political climate in Europe, the Anglosphere and, more importantly, in the sub-continent, it would not be far-fetched perhaps to predict a further hardening of stance by centre-right and far right formations such as the BJP with regard to minority rights and basic freedoms. The BJP’s posturing on fundamental rights of citizens and their inability (or shall we say reluctance?) to reign in rabble-rousing ‘fringe elements’ makes the scenario and the future appear grim. Already heightened public insecurities are being exploited by the right to win favour with a larger swathe of opinion – and for the moment at least, the benefits seem to be accruing. Considerable chunks of the burgeoning Indian middle class is swaying to the tunes of hyper-nationalism predicated on scant disregard for any and all forms of resistance. Dissent and its expression, therefore, remains hostage to a neo-conservative surge, with the continuing crackdown on dissidents and students signalling a blowback to McCarthyism in India.

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