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Unpacking BJP's Hegemony and the Need for a New Left Narrative in India

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Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh cadres decked up a statue of former Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, with saffron flags and a portrait of Chatrapati Shivaji, during a dharna in Tirupati on November 10, 2010. File photo: K.V. Poornachandra Kumar.

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India under the Bharatiya Janata Party is facing a new hegemony of the Right, which is attempting to replace a Left-leaning dominant narrative. What is being contested in this ideological sparring is the manner in which India was conceived and shaped by its founders.

*In this article, **Anup Kumar**, Associate Professor in Communication, Cleveland State University, U.S., draws on Stuart Hall's famous explication of Thatcherism to understand Modi-ism. Hall's essay was simultaneously an explication of a political conjuncture as a crisis, and a call for action. Hall called for forging of a new left modernity in the face of authoritarian populism. This article argues that that in this political conjuncture dominated by the*

Right, as represented by hegemonic articulation of Modi-ism, India needs a new Left politics that can foster a counter-hegemony of its own. It suggests that way forward is an alternative vision of progressive nationalism.

In India and world over, it seems as if the Left¹ is on the retreat. Today the Right is more visible as the principal actor at the grassroots and in the media. This politics of the Right is shaped by contradictory forces of individual aspirations and resentments rooted in social antagonism of race, caste, and religion. In his new book², Lord Meghnad Desai has taken this ascendance of the Right as evidence of collapsed and collapsing “liberal order.” By liberal order Desai means a “ruling hegemony of ideas and attitudes” favouring social inclusion, market driven globalisation, and cosmopolitanism that consolidated itself in a post-1989 world. I am tempted to say, not so fast Lord Desai! For example, look at how the aspirational politics is faltering under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and a groundswell of opposition seems to be gathering in the country to his economic, cultural, and social policies.

Yet, we cannot gloss over the fact that we are at a political conjuncture in which a new hegemony³ of the Right is attempting, if it has not already, to replace the old hegemony of the Left. To restore politics on an even keel soon, the Left needs a new plan for reinvigoration and resurgence. Any backlash to the ugly manifestations of nationalist politics of the Right on the streets may help. However, this by itself will not restore the liberal order.

The first step is to acknowledge that we did not arrive at this conjuncture through the course of a single election campaign in India or elsewhere in the world. In India, the Right, since the early 1990s, was chipping-away at the old hegemony carefully constructed by the “Congress System”⁴ and the Left-leaning civil society including media, academia, unions, and NGOs. The Right was exploiting the seeming hypocrisy in the praxes of ruling elites that arose from contradictions between politics of exploiting social difference for electoral purposes and the ennobling goal of social democracy. The new Left must first recognise that the material conditions that supported the old hegemony, represented by the Congress System in India, have all but disappeared.

In 2014, we were reluctant to accept that a paradigm shift was happening in real time when the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a landslide victory in the Lok Sabha election⁵. Lately, many astute observers of Indian politics have suggested that it was looking like Narendra Modi-led BJP’s grip on power is here to stay. In politics, long-term forecasting of fortunes of any political party is dangerous. And surely, political winds will blow in the other direction as well. As no political conjuncture is permanent.

Yes, the BJP’s electoral success is still nowhere near what the Congress had in its heydays. There have been a few significant electoral reversals for the BJP as well. Then the percentage of votes polled by the BJP, excluding the NDA, in the last general election hovered around one-third. All this may seem comforting. However, it would be overly optimistic reading of how the vote-share pans out in a multi-cornered contest in the first-past-the-post system. After witnessing how the BJP crafted a new social coalition⁶ in the Uttar Pradesh and then weaned away Nitish Kumar’s party back into its fold, it would be difficult to say how a joint opposition, a new *maha-gatbandhan*, would fare in a bipolar contest with the Modi-led BJP. Moreover, merely forging a pre-election coalition will not be enough. It will help. So will the setback to the economy that seems to be floundering following the botched-up implementation of demonetisation and rickety start of the Goods and Services Tax (GST). The economic decline has already shattered the myth of Modinomics. Running the Indian economy is not the same as running the economy of Gujrat. However, the central task in mounting a challenge to the ascendant Right for the Left, including the liberal civil society, is first and foremost cognitive.

To perform this cognitive task, I suggest we must go back and learn from a similar conjuncture in the 1980s in the U.K. and the U.S. Desai and others have often stressed that Modi-ism shares a striking parallel with the rise of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the U.S. and the U.K. respectively ⁷. The parallels are not only in a popular yearning for a strong leader. It is more than that. For the Left, the lessons are on understanding the hegemonic articulation ⁸ of Thatcherism and Reaganism, and how not to contest it, like new Labour and new Democrats did respectively.

To unpack Modi-ism and hard realities that the Left must confront on its path towards a renewal, I would like to draw attention to Stuart Hall's insightful essay that explains the political conjuncture represented by Thatcherism and the return of the Right in the U.K. Hall's essay was simultaneously an explication of a political conjuncture as a crisis, and a call for action. Hall called for the forging of a new left modernity in the face of authoritarian populism ⁹.

Thatcherism/Modi-ism and regressive modernisation

Drawing on Antonio Gramsci, Hall had reminded his fellow Leftists to attend "to the specificity of historical conjuncture: how different forces come together, conjecturally, too, to create a new terrain, on which a different politics must form up. That is the intuition that Gramsci offers us about the nature of political life, from which we can take a lead." ¹⁰ Hall argued that the crisis faced by the Left, in Britain, was rooted in its failure to see that Thatcherism was a political project, not just a power grab, which was in the making for a long time. It was chipping-away on the compromise arrived at between the Keynesian welfare state and neo-liberalism after the World War II. In Thatcherism, British conservatism was produced and reproduced via the neo-liberal and monetarist revolutions.

Similarly, in Modi-ism conservatism of Hindutva is being produced and reproduced in the moralism of crusade against black money, *Swatch Bharat Abhiyan*, Aadhaar, Demonetisation, and the GST. In its articulation, Modi-ism, on the one hand, is deploying symbols of patriotism that retroactively hold together aspirations for economic transformation and rejuvenation of national political community, whereas, on the other hand, Modi-ism is using resentment bred by the Hindutva Movement to carve out a new social imagination that is exclusionary of Muslims. This may seem confounding. Again, reading Hall, one is reminded of the Indian Left's predicament. Hall writes:

"It [Thatcherism] is a project—this confuses the Left no end—which is simultaneously regressive and progressive... the idea that the best the future holds is for them to become, for a second time, 'Eminent Victorians'. It's deeply regressive, ancient and archaic.... But don't misunderstand it. It's also a project of 'modernisation'. It is a form *regressive modernisation*. Because, at the same time, Thatcherism had its beady eye fixed on one of the most profound historical facts about the British social formation: that it never properly entered the era of modern bourgeois civilisation. It never made that transfer to modernity. It never institutionalised, in proper sense, the civilisation and structures of advanced capitalism—what Gramsci called 'Fordism'. It never transformed its old industrial and political structure." ¹¹

The disparate political issues that constitute the regressive and progressive strands are held together by sentiments of imagined "former glories" ¹² of the empire and symbols of authentic British-ness. The political project of Thatcherism was draped in the Union Jack ¹³.

“The historical project of Modi-ism is to dismantle the Nehruvian postcolonial state and replace it with a new state that hybridises the imagination of the sacred geography symbolised by ‘Bharat’ with the neoliberal forces of the market.”

The historical project of Modi-ism is to dismantle the Nehruvian postcolonial state and replace it with a new state that hybridises the imagination of the sacred geography symbolised by ‘Bharat’ with the neoliberal forces of the market. For Modi-ism too the memory of the former glories comes from the deep past. And like Thatcherism, Modi-ism is deeply conservative in its ethos, yet seemingly liberal in terms of the faith it has placed on economic forces of the market and hegemonic developmentalism. Alluding to new hegemony of Modi-ism, Faisal Devji suggests that we see it as an illusion of universalising identity-free politics of development and nationalism in the context of federalism where exploitation of social difference is reserved for “regional arenas” ¹⁴.

The late Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith, who had also served as the U.S. ambassador to India, described politics of free markets as an “innocent fraud” on the very people governments claim to help. “It is innocent because most who employ it are without conscious guilt... It is a fraud because it is quietly in the service of special interest,” wrote Galbraith ¹⁵. Modi-ism as a hegemonic project calls upon the plebs to suspend their fears of its deeply conservative and divisive roots and keep focus on fruits of development that the *mind* of market will make equally accessible to all (*sabka saath, sabka vikas*). The most disastrous consequence of market driven developmentalism is reflected in the euphemistic reference to ‘ease of doing business’. This reliance on the market has been concentrating wealth and income at the top and transforming the hinterland into a wasteland. Ironically, the developmentalism is having a devastating effect on the ecology of the sacred geography of Bharat that seems to have attracted foot soldiers for Modi-ism outside the Hindutva cadre.

Moreover, on closer examination, even the seemingly progressive strands of Modi-ism too are tainted by regressive forces of Hindutva represented by ugly majoritarianism marked by *gau-rakshak* vigilantism. Once again, to seek insight into the above discussed contradictory and confounding characteristics of Modi-ism, a close reading of Hall will be helpful. Hall writes:

“We are perplexed by the contradictory nature of Thatcherism. In our intellectual way, we think that the world will collapse as the result of a logical contradiction: this is the illusion of the intellectual—that ideology must be coherent, every bit of it fitting together, like a philosophical investigation. When, in fact, the whole purpose of what Gramsci called an organic (i.e. historically effective) ideology is that it articulates into a configuration [of] different subjects, different identities, different projects, different aspirations. It does not reflect, it constructs a ‘unity’ out of difference.” ¹⁶

So, it is not surprising to see that, like the Left was paralysed in the face of Thatcherism, the Left in India is stuck within its own anachronistic categories. The readily available analytical construct, which is popular in the press commentary, to counter the nationalist articulation of the BJP is the “idea of India”. Use of the “idea of India” ¹⁷ as a metaphor to question Modi-ism is understandable, but more likely a convenient one as the idea has been a dominant *doxa* of Nehruvian liberalism. But the problem is that in praxes—the idea that was articulated through an

idealised reading of western categories of modernity and enlightenment—liberals have been selling the idea short, of its core idealism, for now almost two hundred years ¹⁸ .

“*Like Thatcherism, Modi-ism thrives on images of Bharat/authentic Indian-ness and not a fine print of policies.*”

That said, an important hint from Hall's analysis of Thatcherism is that a large plurality of Indians has been voting for Modi-led BJP, not because their lives are getting better, but because his message resonates with aspirational collective identity and self-worth. For example, despite having gone through the misery of the standing in queues for hours to change old currency to new ones the people of Uttar Pradesh voted for the BJP with a thumping majority. Like Thatcherism, Modi-ism thrives on images of Bharat/authentic Indian-ness and not a fine print of policies. The imagination of India as a national political community gives hope to escape the drudgery of endless political fragmentation, including the fragmentation of Hindu social imaginary. And Hall would have argued, Modi-ism “addresses the fears, the anxieties, the lost identities, of a people... has dominated that idiom, while the Left forlornly tries to drag the conversation round to ‘our policies’” ¹⁹ .

Counter-hegemony of progressive nationalism

The truth that we do not hear often in liberal circles is that the Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the principal actor, and he is backed by a strong plurality of Indians who are willing to accept his leadership. Additionally, the BJP has been successful in framing the political opposition as reacting to his agenda without offering a new politics. In this the first step is to call out the ‘innocent fraud’ in developmentalism, which was recently compellingly symbolised in the media meme *vikas gando thayo che* (Development has gone crazy). But a mere meme will not be enough. What is needed is an alternative vision that resonates with public aspirations and inherent progressive values of ordinary people. The new hegemony that the Right has built using idioms, symbols and images of regressive nationalism can only be challenged by a counter-hegemony of progressive nationalism.

For social production of a counter-hegemony, the Left must re-learn Antonio Gramsci's lessons for modern politics on manoeuvring and tactical resistance in the war of movement and war of position respectively ²⁰ . As the war of position is being fought by intellectuals and academics on university campuses and in the field of knowledge production, politicians and civil society must engage in war of movement in the political field, at the grassroots, in the media including social media.

If the Left is recalcitrant to give up the old theory of the case, despite noticing that it is not working in practice, then there isn't much hope but to wait until 2024. To mount a counter-hegemony the Left must appreciate positive appeal of nationalism and articulate a progressive version of paying homage to the gods of the polis. Intellectual production requires denial of the gods of the polis ²¹ , but for a politician denial of nationalism is a luxury that she cannot afford. This brings me to the relative success of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). The AAP's victory in Delhi and performance in Punjab were central to whatever little reinvigoration we saw in the Left, or to be precise a new Left. The Kejriwal-led AAP came out of a populist *andolan* that had an anti-establishment political idiom, yet projected itself as nationalist. The Jan Lokpal Andolan used metaphors and symbols such as “*bharat mata*” and “*tiranga*” to establish equivalence among seemingly contradictory motivations of its supporters who cut across social difference ²² . Patriotic nationalism was the glue that tied together disparate ideas in Kejriwal's manifesto of *Swaraj* ²³ . Although,

since coming to power, the AAP under the leadership of Kejriwal decided to confront the nationalist appeal of Modi with crude tactics. The BJP was successful in spinning AAP's crude handling of nationalism as self-flagellation on the issue of national security.

The Left has failed to appreciate the power of patriotic national imagination to move people, especially when articulated in opposition to a politically antagonistic frontier. Nationalism gives a sense of protection to ordinary people, from even the imperfect apparatuses of the nation-state, when they are faced with the tyranny of a local oppression. The complex link between socio-economic deprivation and historic legacy of local alienation is often lost in the public debate.

The Left needs to produce its own new hegemonic articulation that retroactively holds together the disparate demands and aspirations of the people with collective identity, while simultaneously responding with a fresh insight to overcome old social antagonisms in body politic. For this it needs an idiom that on the one hand respects the nationalism of patriotic masses, and on the other hand, offers an alternative to the innocent fraud of developmentalism offered by Modi-led BJP.

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So, to overcome the present paralysis in responding to the political conjuncture represented by Modi-ism, the Left must act, and not only react, with an alternative political vision that presents the national political community that is based on reconfiguring of an inclusive social imagination and avoiding clichéd odes to fragments. The lesson of the twentieth century has been that politics of the Left that does not hybridise pluralism with national imagination is doomed for failure. The Left politician should leave the job of critiquing and dismantling of nationalism as an ideology to intellectuals and academics teaching critical political theory. Modern politics works within the confines of nation-states; as political parties they are in the business of nationalism.

To conclude, progressive nationalism will be central in mounting a counter-hegemony to the hegemony of Modi-ism in the next general election of 2019.

Notes and references:

[All URLs were last accessed on October 05, 2017].

1.^ The Left and the Right are imprecise concepts. Hence, here I will be using the Left as a catchall placeholder for favourable political attitudes on the need for pluralism and social justice. As a corollary, the Right privileges a unitary view of a national community with the faith in the market to distribute income fairly. For our purpose, here, I especially call upon readers to bracket political attitudes on individual liberty because as ideological coalitions neither the Left nor the Right care much for freedom of an individual to dissent. [Return to Text.](#)

2.^ Lord Meghand Desai, *Politicshock: Trump, Modi, Brexit and the Prospect for Liberal Democracy*, New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2017. [Return to Text.](#)

3. ^ Hegemony is about articulating legitimacy of a political ideology with the consent of the dominated. Hegemony works through consensual means that foster intellectual and moral leadership. Antonio Gramsci's in his seemingly counterintuitive reflections on the failure of the "proletarian moment" in Italy (and Western Europe) showed how the anti-fascist political forces had failed to create a new hegemony to counter the old hegemony of the Italian state. See, Antonio Gramsci, (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. New York, NY: International Publishers, 1971. For a philological analysis of "hegemony" in political theory and history see Perry Anderson, *The H-Word: The Peripeteia of Hegemony*, London: Verso Books, 2017. [Return to Text](#).
4. ^ **Kothari, R. 1964.** "The Congress 'System' in India", *Asian Survey*, December, Vol. 4, No. 12, pp. 1161-1173. [Return to Text](#).
5. ^ **Kumar, A. 2014.** "Modi-wave or Modi-hype: A Paradigm Shift in Indian Democracy?", *The Hindu Center for Politics and Public Policy*, April 22. [Return to Text](#).
6. ^ **Farooqui, A. and Sreedharan, E. 2017.** "Failure of pre-election of coalition: Uttar Pradesh Elections 2017", *Economic & Political Weekly*, April 15, Vol. 52, No. 15. [Return to Text](#).
7. ^ **Das, G. 2014.** "Modi Needs to Give India Its Thatcher Moment", *The Financial Times*, May 18. [Return to Text](#).
8. ^ "Articulation is an important concept in discursive approaches in social sciences that explores how meaning is produced in a chain of signification (Kumar 2014)." See Anup Kumar, "Looking Back at Obama's Campaign in 2008: 'True Blue Populist' and Social Production of Empty Signifier in Political Reporting", *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 38(1), 2014, 5-24. Also see Simon Critchley and Oliver Marchart, *Laclau: A critical reader*, London, U.K.: Routledge, 2004. [Return to Text](#).
9. ^ **Hall, S. 1988.** "The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left", *London, U.K.: Verso Books*, November. [Return to Text](#).
10. ^ **Hall**, *ibid*, p. 163. [Return to Text](#).
11. ^ **Hall**, *ibid*, p. 164. [Return to Text](#).
12. ^ In the case of the Modi-ism these actual and imagined former glories are in the pre-colonial past. [Return to Text](#).
13. ^ The British Left responded to Thatcherism by either trying to recover a proletarian moment without realising that the terrain had changed or by hybridising Keynesianism with neo-liberal economics and British militarism that gave birth to the politics of the Third Way represented by Tony Blair. This led to resurgence of the Left only in the name. Today the Left in Britain is once again faced with a situation where it must counter the nationalism of Brexit, while at the same time fight the neoliberal economic orthodoxy of the European Union. James Corbyn-led Labour Party seems to have lost its way while articulating support for progressive Europe and criticising the neoliberalism of Brussels. There are lessons for the Indian Left here too. [Return to Text](#).
14. ^ **Devji, F. 2016.** "The Rediscovery of India in Making Sense of Modi's India", New Delhi: *Harper Collins* (ebook). [Return to Text](#).
15. ^ **Galbraith, J.K. 2006.** "Free Market Fraud", *Progressive Magazine*, April 12. Also see, Galbraith, J.K. 2004. *Economics of Innocent Fraud: Truth of Our Times*. New York: Houghton Mifflin. [Return to Text](#).
16. ^ **Hall**, *ibid*, p. 166. [Return to Text](#).
17. ^ **Guha, R. 2011.** "The Enemies of the Idea of India", (ebook/Winklets: Visions through Versions). Kottayam: *D.C. Books*, December 15. [Return to Text](#).
18. ^ **Mishra, P. 2017.** "Age of Anger: A History of the Present", *Farrar, Strauss & Giroux*, New York. [Return to Text](#).
19. ^ **Hall**, *ibid*, p. 167. [Return to Text](#).
20. ^ **Gramsci**, *ibid*, pp. 230-43. [Return to Text](#).
21. ^ Leo Strauss, *Leo Strauss on Plato's Symposium* (Ed. Seth Benardete), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. [Return to Text](#).

22.^ **Kumar, A. 2014.** "Vernacular Publics, News Media and the Jan Lokpal Andolan" in Taberez Ahmed Neyazi, Akio Tanabe, Shinya Ishizaka, eds., *Democratic Transformation and the Vernacular Publics in India*. London: Routledge (Routledge Series on New Horizons in South Asian Studies), pp. 95-112. [Return to Text](#).

23.^ **Kejriwal, A. 2011.** *Swaraj* (Hindi). New Delhi: *Harper Collins*. [Return to Text](#).

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