



# Historical roots, current manifestations, and future prospects of fascism in India

Burak Gürel

The global waves of the far-right historically coincide with the great depressions of the world economy (1873-1896, 1929-45, and the post-2008 era) and usually appear as a reaction to two main developments triggered by such crises. As witnessed during the previous two great depressions, the far-right movements and regimes served the big bourgeoisie to overcome its crisis by decisively crushing the labor movements associated with revolutionary or radical reformist politics. Second, the far-right reactionary movements and regimes emerge in response to the intensification of inter-capitalist, inter-imperialist, and inter-state competitions during great depressions. In such periods, national economies protect themselves with customs walls, and imperialist states fight with each other to increase their

respective shares within a stagnant or shrinking world economy. Nation-states use all means possible at such times, including military conflicts, as evidenced by two world wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In such conflicts, by making extreme nationalist and xenophobic politics mainstream and silencing its critics, the far-right movements and regimes serve the interests of their own national bourgeoisie.

The peculiarities of the current great depression can be identified in this comparative perspective. Unlike the post-1929 period when labor unions and communist parties were strong, the organizational level and political disposition of the working class today is not threatening enough to force the big bourgeoisie to depend on the far-right. The rapid aggravation of the current depression in part due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has slashed tens of millions of jobs within only a few weeks, may change this situation. Still, so far, there has not been a revolutionary upsurge. The main similarity between the depressions of 1929 and 2008 is the growing inter-capitalist and inter-state competition. Fierce economic competition has already set in, not only among the imperialist states of North America, Western Europe, and Japan but also among their rising contenders such as China and, to a lesser but still significant extent, Russia and India. A Third World War has already become a real danger.

In the same manner as before, today's far-right is remarkably diverse. Some movements aim to transform the state machinery in a more authoritarian and chauvinist direction without destroying the multi-party regime based on competitive elections. Other organizations seek to destroy the multi-party regime and basic civil liberties. There are also substantial variations in this pro-dictatorial group. Some movements are fundamentally similar to classical fascism of the interwar era, combining parliamentary and paramilitary methods to carry out regime change. Others, which can be named "proto-fascist," mainly lean on electoral/parliamentary means and are characterized by the lack of a paramilitary wing (or have it in a rudimentary form). The transition from proto-fascism to fascism or vice versa is possible, depending on the trajectory of class conflict at the national and global levels. We need to distinguish these different tendencies carefully and analyze their shifting positions over time to wage an effective struggle against the global rise of the far-right.<sup>1</sup>

This article examines Hindu fascism's long march to power. Understanding this movement will help us grasp general characteristics of the period we are going through. Hindu fascism is a religious fundamentalist and fascist movement. While

---

<sup>1</sup> Leon Trotsky's writings in the 1930s provide the best classical Marxist analysis of fascism (*The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1971). For other useful studies of fascism see Arthur Rosenberg, "Fascism as a Mass-Movement," *Historical Materialism*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2012 [1934], pp. 144–189; Daniel Guérin, *Fascism and Big Business*, New York: Pathfinder Press, 2016 [1939]. For detailed comparisons of fascism and proto-fascism with reference to the political circumstances of the second and third great depressions of the world economy, see Sungur Savran, "The Return of Barbarism: Fascism in the 21st Century (1) Historical Roots: Classical Fascism," *Revolutionary Marxism 2019*, pp. 15–48; "The Return of Barbarism: Fascism in the 21st Century (2) The Rise of Proto-fascism," *Revolutionary Marxism 2020*.

its roots trace back to the 19th century, the movement acquired a firm organizational framework in the mid-1920s. The middle classes and upper and middle castes of the Hindu majority have been the core constituency of fascism in India. The movement has used both parliamentary and paramilitary methods. Fascist paramilitaries have mobilized the lower-middle classes and the lumpenproletariat against the communists, secularists, and religious minorities, especially Muslims. Indian People's Party (Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP), the party of Hindutva fascism, has rapidly risen since the late 1980s and has been in power without the need for a coalition partner since 2014. The demise of the mainstream bourgeois parties—first and foremost, the Indian National Congress (INC, also known as the “Congress Party,” or the “Congress”)—and the socialist movement in the neoliberal era, has enabled Hindu fascism's rise to power. Unlike centrist parties, Indian fascists have consolidated their power by bringing social services and aid to the proletariat through their grassroots organizations and have maintained the same line while in power. Therefore, it is not enough to defend secularism and democratic rights against Hindu fascism (and other far-right movements). Except for a persistent and systematic revolutionary proletarian policy and organization, no strategy can decisively defeat such movements.

This article consists of eight chapters. The second section analyzes the political economy of religious communalism in India. Basic features and history of Hindutva fascism are explained in the third and fourth sections, respectively. The fifth section examines Hindutva fascism's rise to power. The sixth section surveys the BJP's administrative practice and strategic orientations since 2014. The seventh section addresses the degree and prospects of the fascistization of the Indian political regime and outlines the most feasible path of the left-led resistance against fascism. The concluding section summarizes the main arguments of the article.

## **The political economy of religious communalism in India**

A brief survey of the Mughal, British, and postcolonial periods will put India's religious communalism in historical perspective. The earliest roots of the Hindu-Muslim conflict can be traced to the Mughal Empire, ruled by the Muslim emperors, which conquered and governed the central and northern parts of the Indian sub-continent from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Islam quickly spread throughout the subcontinent during this period. The British colonization of India—which started with the East India Company's occupation of Bengal in 1757, deepened with the transition to direct British rule in 1857 and ended in 1947—added new dimensions to the problem of religious communalism. Although the history of Christianity in India traces back to the pre-colonial era, the presence of the British expanded the popular reach of Christianity in the subcontinent. Hindu chauvinists have targeted Christians ever since then, although not in the same degree as they have attacked Muslims, who comprise a larger portion of the population and are perceived as a bigger threat. The British Raj also implemented “divide and rule” policies to prevent a unified resistance against the colonial rule, which heightened the Hindu-Muslim animosity, and—to a much lesser extent—Hindu-Christian tension. Third, the division of the sub-continent into two separate states (India and

Pakistan), based on a brutal war and ethnic cleansing that began immediately after the end of British colonialism sow the seeds of today's communal fault lines and Hindu majoritarian politics.

Defying the Hindutva and Islamist theses, which claim that there was no cultural integration between Hindus and Muslims during the Mughal era, historical accounts document a certain level of synthesis. For example, the Mughal rulers were often the patrons of Hindu temples and festivals, whereas the Hindu rulers of the Maratha and the Rajput dynasties, who fought against the Mughals, did the same for Muslim mosques and religious festivals. There were also periods when Hindu and Muslim soldiers fought under the command of the same army. Therefore, it is wrong to claim that Hindu-Muslim relations were hostile at all times. Moreover, there were times when the Shia-Sunni sectarian conflicts in India were as severe as Hindu-Muslim conflicts. Nevertheless, it is an indisputable fact that the roots of religious communalism in the Indian subcontinent lie in the Mughal period and led to innumerable conflicts and pogroms since then.<sup>2</sup>

Although the trajectory of relations among different religious communities cannot be explained solely on economic factors, the changes in economic structure significantly affected the degree of religious tolerance and intolerance in India. Long before the Mughal conquest and the expansion of Islam, the relationship between Hindus and Buddhists in India had significantly varied across the spectrum of harmony and animosity, which was shaped by changing economic circumstances:

***The thing to mark is that the Indian character was not always so tolerant.*** There are periods when people came to blows over doctrine, ritual, and worship. Emperor Harsa Siladitya (circa 600-640 AD) of Kanauj found no difficulty in worshipping Gauri, Mahesvara-Siva, and the Sun, while at the same time he gave the fullest devotion to Buddhism. His enemy Narendragupta-Sasanka, raided Magadha from Bengal, cut down the Bodhi tree at Gaya, and wrecked Buddhist foundations wherever he could. What was the difference? Why was a synthesis of the two religions [...] not successful? [...] ***the underlying difficulties were economic [...] a dovetailing of the superstructure will be possible only when the underlying differences are not too great.***<sup>3</sup>

In other words, when “there was no longer enough for all; one or the other group had to be driven to the wall.”<sup>4</sup> Religious co-existence—and even synthesis—was easier to attain during the times of economic expansion, whereas economic contractions aggravated religious fault lines and led to increasing religious discrimination. Hence, while the expansionary phase of the Mughal economy created the basis of

---

2 For a careful analysis of the historical background of religious conflict in the Indian subcontinent, see C. A. Bayly, “The Pre-History of ‘Communalism’? Religious Conflict in India, 1700-1860”, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1985, pp. 177-203.

3 Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi, *Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1962, p. 29 (emphasis added).

4 Ibid., pp. 29-30.

Hindu-Muslim harmony, its subsequent depression diminished it: “With Mughal prosperity at its height, Akbar could dream of a synthetic Din-e-ilahi; Aurangzeb could only try to augment his falling revenue by increased religious persecution and the Jizya tax on unbelievers.”<sup>5</sup> These discriminatory measures created a sense of humiliation among the Hindu majority, which motivated the politics of revanchism, bigotry, and violence against Muslims, especially after the Mughal rule.

Class struggles during the era of British colonialism significantly shaped the Hindu-Muslim conflicts. The struggles within the upper classes and the struggles between the upper and lower classes coincided with religious divisions in many regions. For example, the majority of the poor peasants in the east of Bengal were Muslim, whereas most of the landlords were Hindu. The class conflicts in the region took the form of religious disputes.<sup>6</sup> The diverging paths of class alliances and conflicts in the heavily populated United Provinces (UP) of the British India, which includes the present-day states of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, are another interesting case. In the eastern UP, Muslim and Rajput (an upper-caste Hindu group) big landowners sustained a long-term alliance during both the Mughal and British periods. The language of education and communication of this dominant class alliance was Urdu, i.e., Hindi language with significant Arabic and Persian accretions. The Urdu-speaking elite dominated the UP politics until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the western regions of the UP, where landed interests were weaker and commercial and financial interests—almost exclusively represented by upper-caste Hindus, primarily from the Bania caste—were comparatively stronger. With the development of commercial economy due to a greater railroad connectivity, the economic power and political assertiveness of the latter group increased. The colonial administration’s promotion of local representation through elected bodies in return for raising taxes intensified the competition between these two dominant class fractions. To challenge the dominance of the Urdu-speaking elite, Banias, Brahmins and other upper and middle castes demanded that the colonial administration make Hindi language written with the Nagri script—which had religious significance for Hindus—the official language of education and administration in the UP. Hindu revivalism and Muslim separatism resulted from this initial inter-elite conflict.<sup>7</sup>

In many regions, the contradictions between Muslim weavers and Hindu usurer–merchants in the areas of trade and finance triggered religious conflicts in many instances. The conflicts among the lower classes have also taken religious forms.

---

5 Ibid., p. 30. “The attempted integration between communities was evident at the *Khanqahs* of Sufis,” which “provided a means of incorporating Hindu religious customs and beliefs into an eclectic system” (Zoya Khaliq Hasan, “Communalism and Communal Violence in India,” *Social Scientist*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 1982, pp. 25-26).

6 Amiya Kumar Bagchi, “Predatory Commercialization and Communalism in India”, In *Anatomy of A Confrontation: Ayodhya and the Rise of Communal Politics in India*, edited by Sarvepalli Gopal, London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1993, pp. 196-199.

7 Francis Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces Muslims 1860-1923*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 10-83.

During the Mughal era, the population was relatively small, and taxes were collected only from the cultivated land. Hence, vast common pasture areas were opened for animal husbandry. The reforms of the British colonial administration, which legally secured private property over land, changed this situation. These reforms made the tilling of land (either as private property or state property) mandatory. The private lands (regardless of their actual usage) were taxed. This rule led to the conversion of common pastures into private farmland. The land conflicts between farmers and those engaged in animal husbandry become widespread. These conflicts took on religious forms in regions where Muslims were mainly cultivators and Hindus mainly preoccupied with animal husbandry. Hindu and Muslim dominant classes which wanted to avoid conflict with the colonial administration framed this issue in religious terms. Upper caste landlords in North India started the “cow protection movement” in the last few decades of the 19th century. The Ulema and Muslim landowners took a similar path by declaring jihad against the Hindus.<sup>8</sup>

Another deep-rooted conflict was the dispute over the locations of Hindu temples and mosques. During the Mughal era, some Hindu temples were destroyed and replaced by mosques. During British colonialism, the Hindus took action to rebuild temples in these places. There were severe tensions and conflicts during religious holidays, especially those with conflicting dates.

The “divide and rule” policy of British colonialism poured gasoline into the fire of religious conflict. The fact that both Hindus and Muslims participated in the (Sepoy) Mutiny of 1857, the first major armed insurrection against colonial rule in India, alarmed the British colonialists. For instance, George William Forrest, a historian in the service of colonialism, warned the colonial administration that:

Among the many lessons the Indian mutiny conveys to the historian, none is of greater importance than the warning that it is possible to have *a Revolution in which* Brahmins and Sudras, *Hindus and Mohamedans, could be united against us*, and that it is not safe to suppose that the peace and stability of our dominions, in any great measure, depends on the continent being inhabited by different religious systems for they mutually understand and respect and take part in each other’s modes and ways and doings.<sup>9</sup>

The colonial administration’s divide and rule policy aimed to fend off this looming danger. Although the Indian National Congress, founded by the predominantly upper-class and upper-caste Hindus in 1885, did not initially voice the demand for national independence, in response to the growing desire for independence, British colonialists started manipulating the Hindu-Muslim tension. Quotas were set for greater representation of Muslims in local governments and at the national level. Muslim elites were encouraged not to join the INC but to establish organizations of

---

8 Bagchi, pp. 196-199. Also see Robinson, pp. 77-78.

9 D.R. Goyal, “Some Observations on the Origins of Communalism in India,” in *Communal Riots in Post-Independence India*, edited by Asghar Ali Engineer, Hyderabad: Sangam Books, 1991, p. 43 (emphasis added).



their own. Muslim elites founded the National Mahommedan Association in 1877 and the Muhammadan Educational Conference in 1886. The latter organization changed its name to All-India Muslim League on 30 December 1906. The strengthening of the Muslim League deepened the Hindu-Muslim divide further.<sup>10</sup> Despite its claim of representing all Indians, the INC became an almost exclusively Hindu organization, with Muslims constituting only 3% of its membership by the mid-1930s.<sup>11</sup>

Severe conflicts between Hindus and Muslims intensified from the late 19th century onward. Gaurakhshini Sabha (the Society for the Protection of Kine) was founded in 1882. The following year, violent clashes occurred in Lahore, Punjab, Haryana, and Delhi due to the cow slaughter issue. Similar events occurred in Punjab and Delhi in 1886 and Haryana in 1889. In the 1890s, communal violence shook North India. In August 1893, a small-scale civil war took place in Mumbai, where hundreds of people were killed and wounded.<sup>12</sup> In 1905, British colonial rule divided the state of Bengal into Muslim-majority East Bengal (today's Bangladesh) and Hindu-dominated West Bengal. Although Bengal was reunited in 1911 in response to protests mainly by Hindus, the first partition seriously affected the political struggles in parallel with the decline of British rule in India. The idea that Hindus and Muslims could not live under the same state roof has become increasingly accepted. As Indian independence rose over the horizon, conflicts between Hindus and Muslims spread in the entire subcontinent, sometimes taking the forms of local civil wars and pogroms. Finally, massacres and clashes during the India-Pakistan partition, which co-occurred with the end of the colonial rule in 1947, resulted in the death of between half a million and one million people, and displacement of about 12 million people.<sup>13</sup> During the Partition, a significant portion of Hindus in Pakistan migrated to India, while a significant portion of Indian Muslims migrated to Pakistan. Nevertheless, a sizeable Muslim minority remained in India. According to the 2011 census, the religious composition of Indian population is as follows: Hindu (79.8%), Muslim (14.23%), Christian (2.3%), Sikh (1.72%), Buddhist (0.7%), Jain (0.37%), "other religions" (0.66%), "not-stated" (0.24%).<sup>14</sup> In terms of the absolute figures, India is the second country with the highest Muslim population after Indonesia.<sup>15</sup>

10 For detailed information on the encouraging attitude of the colonial government on the separate representation of Muslims, see P. Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972, pp. 116-196.

11 Perry Anderson, *The Indian Ideology*, London and New York: Verso, 2013, p. 52.

12 Hardy, pp. 140—141.

13 Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017, p. 6, 9. The region that was known as "East Bengal" before 1947 and then "East Pakistan" for some time seceded from "West Pakistan" and turned into the independent state of Bangladesh in 1971. The foundation of Bangladesh is one of many examples showing that religious glue is not enough to sustain national unity.

14 "Religion Census 2011," <https://www.census2011.co.in/religion.php>

15 Jeff Diamant, "The Countries with the 10 Largest Christian Populations and the 10 Largest Muslim Populations," *Pew Research Center*, 1 April 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/tscs6ng>

One of the most significant consequences of the partition is the emergence of the Kashmir question. India annexed a sizeable part of Kashmir, where Muslims comprise the vast majority of the population. Kashmiri Muslims have been fighting for independence ever since. There is no consensus on the status of Kashmir, whether it should be a separate state or join Pakistan, even if it manages to win independence. Although not all Kashmiris want to join Pakistan, Pakistan has been deeply involved in the problem. India and Pakistan fought three wars (in 1947, 1965, and 1999) over Kashmir. Islamist movements have long been influential in the independence movement in Kashmir. Similar to other states, India is trying to legitimize its presence in Kashmir, using the argument of “terrorism” at the national and international levels. The unsolved Kashmir problem has fed Hindu chauvinism.<sup>16</sup>

Although communal violence had never disappeared, the first decade of the post-independence India was relatively peaceful in terms of communal relations for three main reasons. First, the immense amount of communal hatred accumulated over many decades had just been settled by the massive bloodshed during the partition. Second, the Congress enjoyed its highest degree of prestige in its entire history and Indian masses, regardless of their religious affiliations, had high hopes from the new India. Finally, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by a Hindutva fascist militant in 1948 also, temporarily, isolated the fascist movement from Hindu masses. However, this honeymoon ended in the early 1960s, when the tide of communal violence started to rise again. The first major communal riot of the post-independence era happened in the city of Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh state in 1961.<sup>17</sup> Despite brief interludes, communal violence pitting the Hindu majority against religious minorities—mostly against Muslims, but also against Christians and Sikhs in certain periods—had become part of daily life since the early 1960s.

Similar to the pre-independence era, the conflicts between and within different social classes have remained a major structural determinant of communal violence in the post-independence era. The contradictions within the petty and middle bourgeoisie in urban areas, especially in medium-sized cities of North India, shaped communal politics throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The most prosperous sections of the Muslim capitalists and landlords migrated to Pakistan during the partition. Along with the lowest castes of Hindus, Muslims have constituted the poorest section of the Indian society since then.<sup>18</sup> However, medium-sized cities of North India retain a fairly large number of Muslim-owned industrial and commercial firms. Although

---

16 On the historical background of the Kashmir question, see Anderson, *The Indian Ideology*, pp. 68—74, 142—143.

17 Asghar Ali Engineer, “The Causes of Communal Riots in the Post-Partition Period in India,” in *Communal Riots in Post-Independence India*, edited by Asghar Ali Engineer, Hyderabad: Sangam Books, 1991, p. 35.

18 For an analysis of the incidence of poverty by caste and religious groups see K.P. Kannan, “Macro-Economic Aspects of Inequality and Poverty in India,” in Alpa Shah, Jens Lerche, Richard Axelby, Dalel Benbabaali, Brendan Donegan, Jayaseelan Raj, Vikramaditya Thakur, *Ground Down by Growth: Tribe, Caste, Class and Inequality in Twenty-First Century India*, London: Pluto Press, 2018, pp. 43-44.



independent India has never gone through an economic renaissance similar to East Asia, the expansion of the national market and increasing international trade generated opportunities for this group. Hence, “Muslim artisans and craftsmen were able to work themselves into small entrepreneurs and began competing with Hindu traders and craftsmen” and some of them became “businessmen of substance,” running small factories and export commodities.<sup>19</sup> The economic boom of oil-producing Arab countries in the same period provided a significant advantage to Muslim capitalists who could establish links with these countries due to shared religion and cultural affinity. The competition among Muslim and Hindu capitalists was not confined to local and foreign markets. They also competed within the labor market. Muslim capitalists found “it easier to get Muslim workers to work for them unless their Hindu counterparts agreed to pay better wages and offered better conditions of work,” making “the situation of Hindu entrepreneurs to tighten and their competition with Muslim entrepreneurs tougher.”<sup>20</sup>

Economic advancement increased the visibility and posture of Muslims in urban areas, manifested through investments in real estate, Islamic education, mosque construction, and religious festivals. Finally, Muslim businessmen competed for leadership positions within the local branches of the Congress and sought office by mobilizing Muslim votebanks. The socio-economic advancement of Muslims resulted in an increasing sense of threat and resentment among the Hindu businessowners and lower classes. Hindu communalists portrayed the flow of money from oil-rich Arab countries to Muslim businesses as an Islamic fundamentalist conspiracy and a terror threat against India.<sup>21</sup> Hindu elites and the fascist organizations mobilized the low-caste Hindus against Muslims in communal riots by disseminating this sense of Muslim threat, which was accompanied by implicit and explicit promises of upward mobility for low-caste Hindus by conquering Muslim properties, markets, and jobs.

Larger cities and metropolitan areas have also been incorporated into the political economy of Hindu communalism over time. During the fascist mass mobilizations in the recent four decades that are examined below, Muslim properties and businesses were attacked by low-caste mobs and paramilitary forces mobilized by the Hindu fascist leaders of middle and upper castes and classes.

### ***Hindutva as a fascist ideology***

The *Hindutva* ideology and movement (commonly referred to as “Hindu nationalism” and “Hindu fundamentalism”) aims to make India a Hindu *rashtra* (nation) through establishing Hindu majority’s absolute dominance over religious minorities, especially over Muslims. As I will explain in the next section, the Hindutva movement, besides its political party, has been established primarily through a paramilitary organization that was initially formed in the inter-war period

19 Imtiaz Ahmed, “Political Economy of Communalism in Contemporary India,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 19, No. 22-23, 1984, p. 904.

20 Ibid., p. 905.

21 Ibid, p. 905; Engineer, pp. 36-40.

and directly inspired by Italian fascism and Nazism. Hence, “Hindu fascism” or “Hindutva fascism” is a more accurate description of the movement. Similar to Islamists’ view of the first Islamic state (established in the 7th century) as a golden age that needs to be resurrected, the Hindu fascists consider the pre-Mughal era as a golden age and aim to revive it. The Hindutva version of the national history narrates the Mughal conquest as the rape of the Hindu homeland and the biggest disaster. It perceives the Hindu states and principalities that survived in the Mughal period, especially the Maratha state which played a significant role in the decline of the Mughals, as positive historical references.

Hindu fascism views history through the prism of essentialist, sexist, and chauvinist definitions of male and female identities. A conventional narrative is that the eyes of the Muslim men are always on Hindu women, while Hindu men are weak, cowardly, and incapable of protecting their women. Apart from claiming that Muslim men are polygamous, Hindutva asserts that they do not use birth control, so the Muslim population is growing much faster and the demographic structure of the country is rapidly changing against Hindus.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, although Hindu fascists do not approve of British colonialism, they see it as a less catastrophic event than the Mughal rule. The fact that Britain defeated Muslims before colonizing India is the main reason for this more relatively favorable viewpoint.

Another characteristic of the Hindutva movement, similar to many far-right movements, can be seen in its expansionist ambitions. Hindu fascists have coined a term “United India” (*Akhand Bharat*), referring to a vast region which extends from Burma in the east to Afghanistan in the west and includes Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. They see this region as the territory they lost and must recover at the earliest opportunity. In 1948, a Hindutva militant assassinated Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of Indian independence movement, because he had supposedly failed to prevent the foundation of Pakistan. One of the most trenchant and enduring criticisms that Hindu fascists make against the Congress Party is that they disregard the goal of establishing the “United India.” Today, the map of *Akhand Bharat* frequently appears in the propaganda materials of Hindu fascists.<sup>23</sup>

Hindu fascism aims to remove the principle of secularism from the constitution and make Hinduism the official religion of the state. In other words, it intends to make non-Hindus second-class citizens at best. Hindutva ideology legitimizes the physical elimination of those who do not accept this status. Hindu fascists aim to achieve this goal through reconversion of religious minorities to Hinduism,

---

22 The ratio of Hindus to the total population decreased from 84.1% in 1951 to 79.8% in 2011, while the proportion of Muslims increased from 9.8% to 14.2% in the same period (Abantika Ghosh and Vijaita Singh, “Census: Hindu share dips below 80%, Muslim share grows but slower,” *The Indian Express*, 24 January 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/y9hoxddh>; “Religion Census 2011”). In short, the population balance has not changed much in sixty years, and the Hindutva demographic argument is non-sensical and chauvinist.

23 Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 110; Sankaran Krishna, “Cartographic Anxiety: Mapping the Body Politic in India”, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 1994, p. 511, 520.

deportation of Muslims to Bangladesh and Pakistan, and mass murder of those refusing the first two options. Similar to Turkish Islamists, Hindu fascists seek to erode secularism at the societal level gradually at first and then to change the political regime through radical legal amendments. In line with this perspective of a long-term struggle, they intend to eliminate certain legal rights given to the Muslims in a positive discrimination framework such as the abrogation of the application of the sharia law among the Muslim communities in specific issues such as family affairs. Hindu fascists often make baseless claims that the rights of the Hindu majority have been violated and call the central government and state governments to protect their rights. Similar to Turkish Islamists' discursive distinction of *laikler* (secularists) and *laikçiler* (those who are—allegedly—obsessed with “secularism” to the extent of violating the rights of the Muslim majority in Turkey), Hindu nationalists frequently use the term “pseudo-secularism” to attack the secularists resisting the Hindutva agenda.<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, they put themselves under legal protection by making lip service to the constitutional principle of secularism; on the other, they try to hollow out all secular ideas and principles. The Congress Party has made many concessions to Hindu chauvinism over decades and has become, in a manner of speaking, a party of “soft Hindutva,”<sup>25</sup> as evidenced by the murder of thousands of Sikhs in New Delhi after the 1984 assassination of Indira Gandhi, the then Congress leader and prime minister, and its passive and appeasing attitude towards Hindu majoritarian politics over the years. However, until recent years, most Muslim citizens of India viewed—and, to a lesser extent, still view—the INC as an imperfect but the best available bulwark against Hindu fascism and casted block votes for the Congress.<sup>26</sup> This political behavior is similar to the heterodox Alevi community's continuous support to the CHP (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, Republican People's Party) as the most secular establishment party (despite the CHP's serious concessions to Islamists over the years) as a relatively secular bulwark. As a result, like Turkish Islamists who label the CHP as the party of Alevis to isolate it from the Sunni majority, Hindu fascists often blame the Congress as the party of Muslims and try to separate it from the Hindu majority.<sup>27</sup>

Indian radical left has been the most consistent and principled enemy of Hindu fascism. The communist movement, which started to rise immediately after the October Revolution, frightened the Indian bourgeoisie and landlords. In the 1930s

24 Hansen, p. 150, 157, 165, 187; Yogendra K. Malik and V.B. Singh, “Bharatiya Janata Party: An Alternative to the Congress (I)?,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 32, No. 4, 1992, pp. 324–325.

25 Christophe Jaffrelot, “The Fate of Secularism in India,” In *The BJP in Power: Indian Democracy and Religious Nationalism*, edited by Milan Vaishnav, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019, p. 56.

26 Paul R. Brass, “Congress, the Lok Dal, and the Middle-Peasant Castes: An Analysis of the 1977 and 1980 Parliamentary Elections in Uttar Pradesh,” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 54, No. 1, 1981, p. 16; Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and Lloyd I. Rudolph, “The Centrist Future of Indian Politics,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 20, No. 6, 1980, p. 581.

27 Hansen, pp. 160, 173–174; Vinod K. Jose, “The Emperor Uncrowned: The Rise of Narendra Modi,” *The Caravan*, 1 March 2012, <http://www.caravanmagazine.in/reportage/emperoruncrowned-narendra-modi-profile>

and 1940s, communists led mass struggles that sometimes acquired insurrectionary characteristics. Although Indian communism followed the path of parliamentary reformism under the guidance of the Soviet Union, which wanted to get along with the Indian government, it continued, until recently, to be a considerable force capable of organizing among the workers and poor peasants. Following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) moved even closer to social democracy. Indian Maoism has been a notable exception to this broader trend of social democratization. The Maoists emerged as a formidable force after the peasant uprising in the Naxalbari village of West Bengal in the second half of the 1960s (the Maoists are often called “Naxalites,” a reference to the Naxalbari uprising). Although the Maoists faced a series of army crackdowns and factional splits, after the unification of two major Maoist factions under the umbrella of the Communist Party of India (Maoist), CPI (Maoist) in 2004, Maoism gained significant power. The Maoist guerillas are still active in a vast area of East-Central India known as the “Red Corridor,” spanning from Andhra Pradesh up to the Northeast. The Maoists retain a large following among the Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis) that comprise the poorest and most oppressed section of the Indian society. Hindu fascists see these leftwing organizations as enemies of the Hindu unity. Like other fascist parties, Hindu paramilitaries have fought against leftists since the very beginning.<sup>28</sup> These paramilitaries collaborated with both the British colonial government and the Congress Party against the communists. They continued this line of action after the independence. Despite their serious contradictions, both Hindu fascists and the Congress cooperated against communism in specific instances.<sup>29</sup>

### The history of the Hindutva movement

The Hindutva project, which had sprouted during the communal conflicts from the 1890s on, turned into a nationally organized political movement for the first time in 1913 after the establishment of the Hindu Mahasabha (All-Indian Hindu Grand Assembly). The fact that an openly anti-Muslim organization like Hindu Mahasabha remained within the Indian National Congress until 1938 reveals the Congress’s problematic relationship with secularism and its disposition to compromise Hindu chauvinism from the very beginning. Hindu Mahasabha, remained strong until the 1950s and later on became insignificant due to factional splits of the Hindutva movement.<sup>30</sup>

The foundation of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS, National Volunteer Organization) in 1925, while fascism was rising in Europe, was the real turning point of Hindu fascism. The RSS incorporated the mass base of Hindu Mahasabha

---

28 Hansen, p. 106, 166; Kiran Saxena, “The Hindu Trade Union Movement in India: The Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 33, No. 7, 1993, p. 691.

29 Aijaz Ahmad, “India: Liberal Democracy and the Extreme Right”, *Socialist Register 2016*, edited by Leo Panitch and Greg Albo, London: The Merlin Press, 2015, p. 183.

30 Ibid., pp. 178—179.

by the 1950s and became the supreme fascist organization in India. The RSS was deeply influenced by classical fascism in ideological and organizational terms. For example, the RSS leader Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar explicitly expressed his approval of Nazis' treatment of Jews as an acceptable model for India:

To keep up the purity of the Race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging of the country of the Semitic Races — the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for Races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindusthan to learn and profit by [...] The foreign races in Hindusthan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no ideas but those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture [...] or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment — not even citizen's rights.<sup>31</sup>

Similar to the fascists in Italy and Nazis in Germany, the RSS is organized, first and foremost, as a paramilitary organization with local branches called *shakhas*. Professional fascist organizers called *pracharaks* train these paramilitaries with strict discipline. RSS paramilitaries hold rallies typically with their uniforms and carrying sticks. In short, the RSS is undoubtedly a fascist organization.<sup>32</sup>

The Indian central government banned the RSS three times. After an RSS-linked fascist killed Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 due to his alleged failure to prevent the foundation of Pakistan and concessions to non-Hindus in independent India, the government banned the RSS and arrested 20,000 of the RSS militants. The Congress government led by Indira Gandhi banned the RSS during the emergency period (1975-1977). Finally, after the Hindu fascists destroyed the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992, which led to nationwide communal conflict, the RSS was banned again. However, due to its historically strong influence among both the masses and the elites, each successive ban was shorter in duration and softer in implementation. Overall, those bans have not severely constrained the organization.<sup>33</sup>

The Hindutva movement has a large number of organizations that appeal to India's highly complex social structure, shaped by variations in class, caste, ethnicity, language, and region. In Hindutva terminology, the whole movement is called *Sangh Parivar*, i.e., Family of Organizations, and the RSS is the family's

31 Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, *We, or Our Nationhood Defined*, Nagpur: Bharat Publications, 1939, p. 35, 62; cited in Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics, 1925 to the 1990s*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1996, pp. 55-56. In 2006, sixty-seven years after the publication of Golwalkar's book, the RSS made an utterly unconvincing and ridiculous attempt at distancing itself from the book (Akshaya Mukul, "RSS Officially Disowns Golwalkar's Book," *The Times of India*, 9 March 2006, <https://tinyurl.com/uhltatm>).

32 For detailed information on the RSS see Hansen, pp. 90-133; Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics*, pp. 33-79.

33 Hansen, pp. 90, 130-131, 184-185.

“mother.” Sangh Parivar currently includes over 800 organizations.<sup>34</sup> Some of these organizations are specialized in non-violent activities, but the movement as a whole is firmly based on a paramilitary structure.

Several organizations of Sangh Parivar are worth mentioning. The World Hindu Council (*Vishva Hindu Parishad*, VHP), founded in 1964, is the ecclesiastical authority of the movement. It aims to provide an orthodox, uniform, and simple interpretation of Hinduism to build a Hindu nation. The VHP has organized campaigns to build Hindu temples in disputed areas between Hindus and Muslims. *Bajrang Dal* (i.e., “Monkey Brigade,” named after monkey-God Hanuman, a messenger of Lord Ram, according to Hinduism), is the paramilitary youth wing of the VHP which was founded in 1984 at the heyday of the Ayodhya campaign (that is explained in the next section). Its members mainly consist of unemployed and underemployed men from the lower castes. Bajrang Dal has committed numerous atrocities since then.<sup>35</sup>

Founded in 1936, the National Women Volunteers Committee (*Rashtriya Sevika Samiti*) rests on an essentialist, chauvinist, and distorted Muslim male–Hindu male duality outlined above. According to this distorted view, because of the cowardice of Hindu men, Hindu women are vulnerable to Muslim men, and they have to learn to protect themselves. Hence, under the guise of women’s self-defense, anti-Muslim chauvinism is advocated.<sup>36</sup> The All Indian Student Council (*Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad*, ABVP), bringing together pro-Hindutva university students, was established in 1948. The main goals of the ABVP have been to fight against the radical left and religious minorities. To date, the ABVP has carried out numerous attacks on campuses against leftists and students belonging to minorities. The ABVP has actively engaged with day-to-day problems of college students (such as the quality of educational facilities, dormitories, scholarships, etc.) to prevent the radical left from dominating the student movement. In line with the general rise of the Hindutva movement, the ABVP has become India’s largest student organization today, claiming to have more than 3 million members.<sup>37</sup>

The Indian Workers’ Union (*Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh*, BMS), founded in 1955, is the labor union arm of Sangh Parivar. The BMS is strongly corporatist and anti-communist. Less than 10% of the Indian working class is employed in the formal sector.<sup>38</sup> Unions are much more robust in the formal sector than in the informal sector. Therefore, union data alone are not sufficient to understand the power of a political movement within the Indian proletariat. Nevertheless, since

---

34 Thomas Crowley, “Modi Might Have Finally Gone Too Far: An Interview with Achin Vanaik,” *Jacobin*, 22 December 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/vltfd89>

35 Sumantra Bose, *Transforming India: Challenges to the World’s Largest Democracy*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013, p. 68; Hansen, pp. 155-156; Jaffrelot, “The Fate of Secularism in India,” p. 55.

36 Ahmad, pp. 183-184; Hansen, pp. 97-98.

37 Ahmad, p. 184; Jaffrelot, pp. 127, 258-265; Jose, “The Emperor Uncrowned.”

38 Elizabeth Hill, “The Indian Industrial Relations System: Struggling to Address the Dynamics of a Globalizing Economy,” *Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 51, No. 3, 2009, p. 404.



unions are active in critical sectors of the economy and different organizations are competing in the trade union field, the data on union organization is undeniably important. The BMS became the second-largest union by the early 1980s. With 12 million members, it is currently the biggest labor union of India.<sup>39</sup>

Rural political organization is extremely important in India, where two-thirds of the total population live in the countryside, and two-fifths of the workforce are employed in agriculture.<sup>40</sup> Hindu fascism is quite active in the countryside. The fascist movement is strong among small and medium Hindu farmers, especially in the northern regions of the country. The populist and conservative coalition of the landowning farmers (bringing large, medium, and small farmers together) successfully defeated Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's attempts at establishing cooperative farms and transferring the agricultural surplus to industry in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Hindu fascists played a vital role in this conservative camp through an intense campaign labeling Nehru as a communist. Later on, the farmers' movement led by the rich and middle farmers marked the politics of the country in the 1970s and 1980s. This movement extracted significant concessions from the government (and, indirectly, from industrial capital) such as higher procurement prices for agricultural products, more generous subsidies for farm inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides, and significant reductions of taxes on farm products and prices of water and electricity. The Indian Farmers' Union (*Bharatiya Kisan Sangh*, BKS, also referred to as *Bharatiya Kisan Union*, BKU) has been the most influential farmer organization of the country. Founded in 1978, the BKS/BKU represented both Hindu and Muslim landowners in its early years. However, since the 1990s, Hindu fascists have dominated the BKS/BKU, and Muslim farmers abandoned the organization, especially in northern states where Hindu-Muslim tension is high.<sup>41</sup>

Apart from these affiliates, Hindu fascism also has a political party wing. Since legal parties are generally more inclusive and accessible due to electoral dynamics, the movement's parties have maintained greater autonomy than any of the RSS's other subsidiaries. The RSS leadership has authority over the legal party, but there are occasional disagreements between the two. Three subsequent parties have represented the movement. The Indian People's Association (*Bharatiya Jana*

39 Ahmad, p. 184; Rina Agarwala, "The Politics of India's Reformed Labor Model," in *Business and Politics in India*, edited by Christophe Jaffrelot, Atul Kohli, and Kanta Murali, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 101.

40 World Bank Open Data, n.d., <https://data.worldbank.org/>

41 On the successful conservative coalition of the landowning peasantry against Nehru see Terence J. Byres, "Charan Singh, 1902-87: An Assessment," *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 139-189. On the involvement of fascists in this coalition see Christophe Jaffrelot, *Religion, Caste, and Politics in India*, New Delhi: Primus Books, 2010, pp. 259-260. On the increasing influence of Hindutva communalism within the farmers' movement and the BKU/BKS itself see Jairus Banaji, "The Farmers' Movements: A Critique of Conservative Rural Coalitions," *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 3-4, pp. 228-245; Tom Brass, "The Politics of Gender, Nature and Nation in the Discourse of the New Farmers' Movements," *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 3-4, pp. 27-71; R. Ramakumar, "Jats, Khaps and Riots: Communal Politics and the Bharatiya Kisan Union in Northern India," *Journal of Agrarian Change*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2017, pp. 22-42.

*Sangh*, BJS), was active between 1951 and 1977. The growing public dissatisfaction regarding the INC government's failures on many fronts, especially in economy, enabled the rightwing and leftwing opposition to strengthen their support in the 1970s. Unable to crush the street protests, the INC leader Indira Gandhi, Nehru's daughter, declared a state of emergency in 1975. The violation of human rights and political freedoms were the characteristics of the emergency period. Nevertheless, Indira Gandhi was unable to crush the opposition and put her political agenda to practice entirely. She lifted the state of emergency in 1977.

A coalition whose only common denominator was hostility to Indira Gandhi founded the Janata (People's) Party. At this stage, the BJS showed serious tactical flexibility by dissolving itself and joining the Janata Party, which won the 1977 elections and ruled the country until 1980, when it split and lost power. This tactical move significantly helped the fascist movement present itself as a democratic and legitimate force and thereby break the walls separating it from large masses.<sup>42</sup> In this sense, the Janata coalition was the starting point of the gradual fascistization of Indian mainstream politics in the next four decades. Following the dissolution of the Janata government in 1980, the Indian People's Party (*Bharatiya Janata Party*, BJP) was founded in the same year. We can measure the mass support for the Hindu fascism by looking at the votes of BJS and BJP in general elections. BJS received 3.06% votes in 1951, 5.93% in 1957, 6.44% in 1962, 9.41% in 1967, and 7.35% in 1971. BJP received 7.74% of votes in 1984 and 11.36% of votes in 1989.<sup>43</sup> In short, Hindu fascism was strengthened but did not become hegemonic before the 1990s.

### Hindu fascism's march to power

Hindutva's mass appeal has increased rapidly since the 1990s. BJP's vote share increased from 11.36% in 1989 to 20.1% in 1991 and 25.59% in 1998. Although its vote share fell to 18.8% in 2009 elections due to the internal discord and *relatively* poor record of the BJP-led coalition government between 1998 and 2004, this was only a temporary retreat. BJP received 31.34% of votes in the 2014 general election and came to power alone for the first time, and consolidated its power by receiving 37.36% in 2019 election.<sup>44</sup> As I show below, this success resulted mostly from the failures of its main rivals, the Congress and the socialist left. Sangh Parivar's organizational innovations and advances also helped. As a result, while the fascist movement has historically maintained strong support among the upper-middle castes and classes of Northern India, it has managed to increase its influence and support among the lower and lower-middle castes and classes across the country.

### *The decline of the Congress*

The Congress Party is one of few parties that stayed in power for such a long

---

42 Walden Bello, *Counterrevolution: The Global Rise of the Far Right*, Warwickshire: Practical Action Publishing, 2019, p. 71.

43 Election Commission of India, "Election Results- Full Statistical Reports," n.d., <https://eci.gov.in/statistical-report/statistical-reports/>

44 Ibid.

time in a multi-party parliamentary system. In this respect, it is similar to the Peronist movement in Argentina, the Swedish Social Democratic Party and the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan. The INC ruled India either alone or as the major partner of coalition governments between 1947-1977, 1980-1998, and 2004-2014. That the INC stayed in power for so long can be attributed to its deep ties with the regional elites and ordinary people due to its leading role in the independence movement. In this respect, the Congress is completely different from the CHP, which ruled Turkey between 1923 and 1950 under a single-party regime but failed to win general elections in the multi-party era, except the elections in 1961, 1973, and 1977. The Congress promised Indians rapid economic development and decent living standards. It is clear that, if some periodic improvements are left aside, it failed to fulfill these promises. This failure gradually eroded the INC's hegemony. Moreover, the dynastic character of the Congress' leadership (manifested by an unbroken chain from Jawaharlal Nehru to his daughter, Indira Gandhi, Indira's son Rajiv Gandhi, and today, Rajiv's son, Rahul Gandhi) and the party's rampant corruption over decades have resulted in mass alienation from the party. The INC under Indira Gandhi's leadership, which could not cope with the rising opposition, declared a state of emergency in 1975, the first clear signal of its crisis of hegemony. The Congress could not sustain the emergency rule for long and lifted it in 1977. The general election of 1977 brought to power the Janata coalition, which consisted of several center-left and center-right parties as well as fascists. Hence, the three-decade long uninterrupted rule of the Congress ended.

After the dissolution of the Janata government in 1980, the people gave the Congress, which demanded their votes with the slogan of "Remove Poverty" (*Garibi Hatao*), another chance in the 1980s. Yet the Congress failed again. Rajiv Gandhi (the Prime Minister of India from the assassination of his mother, Indira Gandhi, by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984, to his own assassination by Tamil militants in 1989) initiated an economic liberalization program by cutting taxes for the upper and middle classes and easing import restrictions. Following the economic crisis in 1991, the INC government shifted to full-fledged neoliberalism by privatizing state-owned industries and cutting agricultural subsidies and social expenditure, which alienated large sections of the proletariat and small peasantry.<sup>45</sup> Although the INC managed to be the first or second party in elections after 1990, it lost its mass appeal. The INC's vote share declined from 39.5% in 1989 to 28.3% in 1999, 28.5% in 2009, 19.5% in 2014, and 19.49% in 2019.<sup>46</sup>

### *The crisis of the socialist left*

The second important reason behind the rise of Hindutva is the decline of the socialist left. The Stalinist bureaucracy ruling the Soviet Union prioritized good relations with the INC governments over the revolutionary struggle in India. As a result, the CPI supported the Congress under the pretext of alliance with the

45 Amiya Kumar Bagchi, "The Republic at Crossroads," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 77, 2016, p. 971.

46 Election Commission of India, "Election Results- Full Statistical Reports."

“national” and “progressive” bourgeoisie against imperialism and even claimed that India was following the path of “non-capitalist development.” However, the Congress did not tolerate any advances of the CPI. For example, responding to the CPI’s victory in the state election in Kerala in 1957 and launching a land reform program afterwards, the central government under Prime Minister Nehru declared a state of emergency in Kerala and dismissed the CPI government in 1959. This counterrevolutionary move did not change the CPI’s collaborationist line, evidenced by its support to the Indian government against the People’s Republic of China (which was a workers’ state, albeit bureaucratic) during the China-India War of 1962. Another shameful action of the CPI was its support for Indira Gandhi’s emergency rule during which basic civil liberties were suspended and thousands of socialists were arrested.<sup>47</sup>

The Communist Party of India-Marxist, founded in 1964 by those who had resigned from the CPI, protesting against its class-collaborationist line (especially during the China-India war), initially created hope, but after a while, the CPI-M also shifted to a similarly class-collaborationist direction. In Kerala, the state government has changed hands in subsequent elections between the INC-led and CPI-M-led coalitions since the late 1960s.<sup>48</sup> Education and healthcare services and indicators have improved significantly, but economic underdevelopment and chronic unemployment continued. The CPI-M-led “Left Front” governments uninterruptedly ruled the state of West Bengal for thirty-four years (1977-2011). Since West Bengal is a much larger and populous state than Kerala and the CPI-M governed there for such a long time, the developments in West Bengal have mattered more than those in Kerala for the long-term trajectory of Indian communism. Unfortunately, the CPI-M’s record was dismal there. In 1985, a perceptive observer provided the following analysis of the CPI-M’s performance in West Bengal:

The fact is that in the past three or four years the Left Front has failed to put forward and carry out even a credible parliamentary programme of change. Its early policies of panchayat government, land rights to *bargadars* and food for work soon reached the point of exhaustion. It has never formulated a viable programme of agricultural development, except to shamefacedly collude in the percolation of a degenerate form of capitalist agriculture. On the industrial front, it has been able to do nothing about the prolonged and seemingly irreversible stagnation, increasing unemployment and the proliferation of a deeply impoverished sector of unorganized labor. On power, transport, health and education, not only has there

---

47 Bagchi, “The Republic at Crossroads,” pp. 968-969; Ouseph Varkey, “The CPI-Congress Alliance in India,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 19, No. 9, 1979, pp. 881-895. Forty years after the declaration of emergency, the CPI leadership acknowledged that supporting the emergency rule was a grave mistake! (Shiv Sahay Singh, “Supporting Emergency Was a Mistake: CPI Leaders,” *The Hindu*, 27 June 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/t5b2geh>).

48 Joseph Tharamangalam, “The Perils of Social Development without Economic Growth: The Development Debacle of Kerala, India,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1998, pp. 23-34.

not been any effective programme of change, even the existing systems have been allowed to rot and crumble. Its constant plea of stepmotherly treatment by the center has increasingly sounded like a hollow excuse rather than the rallying cry of a popular struggle for changing the present constitutional framework. On top of this, charges of sectarianism, corruption and manipulation of government machinery and patronage systems for serving narrow partisan interests have become more and more vociferous.<sup>49</sup>

Later developments only confirmed these early observations. Although effective campaigning by a disciplined party apparatus and opportunistic coalitions with various local interest groups helped the CPI-M win subsequent elections, its political orientation and dismal administrative record continued.<sup>50</sup> Making things even worse, both the Left Front government in West Bengal and the CPI-M leadership collaborated with the Indian government to crush the Maoist insurgency in the countryside.<sup>51</sup>

The collapse of the Stalinist regimes in 1989-91 worsened the situation even further. Both the CPI and CPI-M fell into a deep ideological-political crisis and shifted towards a center-left line. In this new context, the West Bengal government even flirted with neoliberalism by encouraging mining and industrial corporations to invest in the state and suppressing the mass opposition against these corporations in the 2000s. The disillusionment created by the CPI-M's class collaborationist line and poor administrative record was a critical factor behind the decline of the Indian left. The CPI-M's loss of West Bengal in the 2011 state election was a turning point in this regard. The combined vote share of the CPI and CPI-M was 9.85% in 1971, 8.73% in 1980, and 9.12% in 1989, which then declined to 6.88% in 1999, 6.76% in 2009, 4.02% in 2014, and 2.33% in 2019.<sup>52</sup>

Meanwhile, although Indian Maoism has avoided these reformist pitfalls, the reliance on guerilla methods in the forests of central and eastern India and lack of a nationwide revolutionary strategy have separated large sections of the urban and rural proletariat from the Maoists. The impasses of Stalinism, Maoism, and reformism have discredited the communist alternative in India as a whole.<sup>53</sup>

### *Growing influence of Hindutva among the Indian bourgeoisie*

The Hindutva movement has made a significant electoral and organizational breakthrough, primarily through its legal party BJP. As noted, the movement started

---

49 Partha Chatterjee, "1 January 1985: Left in a Bind," *Frontier*, 5 January 1985, reprinted in Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 116.

50 Kheya Bag, "Red Bengal's Rise and Fall," *New Left Review*, No. 70, 2011, pp. 69-98; Bagchi, "The Republic at Crossroads," pp. 976-977.

51 Thomas Crowley, "The Many Faces of the Indian Left," *Jacobin*, 12 May 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/ufwyt9>

52 Election Commission of India, "Election Results- Full Statistical Reports."

53 Crowley, "The Many Faces of the Indian Left."

mainly as the representative of the upper caste small and middle bourgeoisie. However, it lacked the support of the big bourgeoisie, which is necessary for any organization to become a contender for power in bourgeois politics. This situation has changed notably since the 1990s. The BJP harmonized its economic policy with neoliberalism despite criticism from other organizations of the Hindu movement, especially the BMS and the BKS/BKU. Besides, the policies pursued by Narendra Modi during his fourteen years (2001-2014) in the office, as the Chief Minister of the Gujarat state, improved the party's relations with the big bourgeoisie. The fact that Gujarat is one of the few economically most developed states of India and that it has strong ties with the Indian diaspora capitalists in Britain, USA, and Canada makes the relations cultivated in that region determining at national and international scales. Modi seized that opportunity well. He gained the trust of the big bourgeoisie and attracted investment to Gujarat through low taxes and the provision of low-cost land. Through many well-publicized summits held in Gujarat, he cultivated personal relations with top Indian and foreign capitalists. These policies increased the BJP's appeal to the big bourgeoisie. Finally, long before capturing the central government, the BJP-controlled state governments like Gujarat utilized administrative power to nurture pro-Hindutva capitalists through various favoritisms.<sup>54</sup>

### *Growing influence of Hindutva among the Indian proletariat*

Getting the support of the big bourgeoisie is necessary but insufficient to come to power. Since India is still a poor country (in terms of per capita GDP and the percentage of population below or slightly above the poverty line), winning lower classes is necessary for achieving decisive electoral victories. The simultaneous decline of the Congress and the Marxist left in the neoliberal era allowed fascists to gain influence over large sections of the classes of labor. Although successive Congress governments implemented the policies of import substitution industrialization during the first three decades of the postcolonial era, and thus increased formal industrial employment, the great majority of India's labor force continued to be informal workers. The liberalization of the 1980s and neoliberalization after 1991 destroyed millions of formal sector jobs and further swelled the ranks of the informalized and unorganized proletariat. The socialist left was incapable of resisting this process and organizing millions of recently unemployed and informalized workers.

Similar to the rise of fascism in the interwar era, increasing lumpenization of the proletariat provided fertile ground for the rise of Hindu fascism from the 1980s onwards. This process was especially dramatic in Gujarat. Ahmedabad, Gujarat's capital city, had been the center of textile industry and known as "Manchester of India" and "Manchester of the East" for about a century. About half of Ahmedabad's workforce was employed in textile mills. The degree of formal employment and unionization in Ahmedabad was much higher than national average. The Textile Labor Union (*Majoor Mahajan Sangh*) founded in 1917 by the leader of national independence movement, Mahatma Gandhi, was the strongest union. Although it

---

<sup>54</sup> Jose, "The Emperor Uncrowned."



followed a class-collaborationist line, Majoor Mahajan Sangh secured considerable gains in terms of wages and working conditions for over decades. This situation changed completely in the 1980s and 1990s. Most of the textile mills were closed and 125,000 workers were laid off. Surat city became the new industrial heartland of Gujarat. Surat's industries relied on migrants from Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh. This new labor force entirely consisted of informal workers without any union protection, who worked long hours under dismal conditions for low wages. The sea change in Gujarat's labor force shifted the political terrain in favor of Hindu fascism:

Whenever communal tensions have flared up and erupted in street riots in the past, these clashes could be defused by appealing to working class solidarity, which transcended the boundaries of primordial loyalties. The social consciousness produced by factorised employment did not arise spontaneously but had been built up during the social struggle in which the Majoor Mahajan Sangh played a pivotal role [...] No doubt, there were communal riots also then. When riots broke out in 1969 [...] factories had stopped production but on the third day of riots the call came for members of the MSS to report back to duty. Workers of the same shift but with different caste and religious identities were told to go to the mills and back home in mixed batches in order to safeguard each other's wellbeing. Nowadays there is hardly any space left for that sort of intercommunal sharing and mutual protection. The union which at that time with more than 150,000 members was one of the largest and best organised in the country is a spent force, reduced to less than one-tenth of its former strength and depleted of all economic and political power.<sup>55</sup>

This resulting lumpenization of the labor force played into the hands of the fascist movement:

Since there was no security to be obtained from the state and the community, people thought their only resort would be to religion and became victims of godmen and the RSS. Just as the contractionary policies of Heinrich Brüning and Franz von Papen had created a huge army of unemployed labour, in the same way, the failure of earlier governments to provide enough employment and the repeated budget squeezes of the NDA and UPA governments generated an enormous mass of labour, some of whom became lumpenised through repeated failures to find employment.<sup>56</sup>

This lumpenized proletariat actively participated in two major anti-Muslim pogroms (in 1992 and 2001), which will be briefly explained below. During the massacre in Surat in 1992, "most of the hunters came from the hordes of labour

55 Jan Breman, "Communal Upheaval as Resurgence of Social Darwinism," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 37, No. 16, 2002, pp. 1485-1486.

56 Bagchi, "The Republic at Crossroads," p. 972.

migrants. The survivors identified them: Kathiawadi diamond cutters, Uttar Pradesh *bhaiyas*, Oriya *malis*, who operate the power looms.”<sup>57</sup> During the pogrom in Ahmedabad in 2002, “the orgy of violence that has taken place [...] have reached a climax in ex-mill localities.”<sup>58</sup>

The caste dimension of this sea change is also noteworthy. According to the 2011 census data, Dalits and Adivasis make up a quarter of the total population.<sup>59</sup> Since the Hindutva movement was based on upper-middle castes and classes, it faced serious difficulties in winning the hearts and minds of Dalits and Adivasis for a long time. However, the movement has made considerable progress in this regard since the 1980s. The local mass organizations of the Hindutva movement have made significant effort to win these groups. Public services such as healthcare and education are dismally inadequate in urban slums and villages. Hindutva grassroots organizations have mobilized to fill this gap and thereby win the political support of lower castes and classes. They opened a large number of schools, dormitories, and healthcare centers that provide free services to the poor. Wealthy fascists and local governments under the BJP’s control finance these grassroots organizations. Fascist militants work as teachers and doctors in these schools for modest wages. These people, who grew up with organizational discipline, are much more devoted workers than civil servants. The people find the education and health services provided by Hindutva grassroots organizations at a much higher quality than the services offered by the state. These institutions work for the BJP during election campaigns. This organizational innovation has significantly contributed to the rise of Hindu fascism.<sup>60</sup> Today, as the class position increases, the votes to the BJP increase, but the 2014 election results show that the party has significantly increased its support within the lower castes and classes.<sup>61</sup> In a paper published right after the Gujarat massacre of 2001, Jan Breman underscored this phenomenon:

The mobilisation of low and intermediary castes to participate in the activities of

---

57 Jan Breman, “A Footloose Scholar,” *New Left Review*, No. 94, 2015, p. 58.

58 Breman, “Communal Upheaval,” p. 1485.

59 <https://www.census2011.co.in/scheduled-castes.php>; <https://www.census2011.co.in/scheduled-tribes.php>

60 Hansen, p. 103; Tariq Thachil, “Elite Parties, Poor Voters: Theory and Evidence from India,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 108, No. 2, 2014, pp. 454-477. Radhika Desai provides a careful analysis of the alliance of the middle class and the big bourgeoisie that brought BJP to power. However, an exclusive focus on the neoliberal face of the BJP leads her to almost entirely ignore the factors behind the party’s growing support among the lower classes (Radhika Desai, *Slouching Towards Ayodhya: From Congress to Hindutva in Indian Politics*, New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2004; Desai, “A Latter-Day Fascism?,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 49, No. 35, 2014, pp. 48-58).

61 Christophe Jaffrelot, “The Class Element in the 2014 Indian Election and the BJP’s Success with Special Reference to the Hindi Belt,” *Studies in Indian Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2015, pp. 19-38. Regarding BJP’s increased support among lower castes and in former strongholds of the socialist left, see Achin Vanaik, “India’s Landmark Election,” *Socialist Register 2015*, edited by Leo Panitch and Greg Albo, London: The Merlin Press, 2014, pp. 55-56.

the Sangh Parivar organisations in the last two decades has broadened the base of Hindu fundamentalism as a social-political force. The price these previously denigrated segments have to pay for their acceptance within the Hindutva fold is their willingness to express antagonism to Muslims as members of the religious minority and, in brutal acts of confrontation, to do the dirty work of cleansing on behalf of their high-caste brothers and sisters.<sup>62</sup>

### *The Ram Janmabhoomi movement*

As noted above, the Hindutva movement has based itself on a paramilitary organization since its early days. The Hindu-Muslim conflict over the status of Babri Masjid in the Faizabad district of Ayodhya city of the northern state of Uttar Pradesh has become a core issue of fascist mass mobilization since the mid-1980s. The Babri Masjid was built in 1528-29 upon the orders of Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire. According to Hindutva mythology, the masjid was constructed right at the place where the Hindu god Ram was born. According to the whole Hindutva movement, especially the World Hindu Council (VHP), the birthplace of Ram is an indispensable part of Hindu religious doctrine. Therefore, it cannot be subject to any scientific scrutiny and debate. Hindutva ideology interprets the very existence of the Babri Masjid as a symbol of the oppression and humiliation of Hindus by Muslims. Destroying the Babri Masjid and building a Temple of Ram in its place has been one of the most popular demands of the Hindu chauvinists since the mid-19th century and has been the motivation of numerous mass mobilizations. Many violent clashes took place between Hindus and Muslims in Ayodhya in 1853-55, 1883-86, and 1934. Aiming to demolish the masjid after the independence, the Hindu mass mobilization continued. The nine-day religious ritual organized by Hindu Mahasabha around the masjid in December 1949 was the turning point. On 23 December 1949, the last day of the ritual, about 50 people entered the mosque and placed Hindu icons around. Soon afterwards, fascist agitators announced (via megaphones to thousands of people gathered around the masjid) the fake news of a divine miracle that Hindu idols had just suddenly appeared inside the masjid. At that moment, the masjid was *de facto* converted into a Hindu temple that attracted visits of tens of thousands of Hindus each year. Uttar Pradesh state government, afraid that the volatile situation might trigger a fierce religious conflict, declared the masjid as a “controversial area” on 16 January 1950 and locked its door. Hindutva and Islamic activists filed separate requests (in 1959 and 1961) demanding the area, but they did not get any results.

Hindu fascists have reignited the Babri Masjid conflict since the mid-1980s. In 1984, the VHP started the *Ram Janmabhoomi* (“Ram’s Birthplace”) campaign and established “The Committee for Sacrifice for the Liberation of Lord Ram’s Birthplace.” In the same year, the VHP also established Bajrang Gal, its paramilitary youth. The number of Bajrang Dal members reached 100,000 by the late 1980s. The VHP founded *Durga Vahini* (Durga’s Battalion) in 1991, which is a similar organization for recruiting young women. In 1985, the campaigners organized a

<sup>62</sup> Breman, “Communal Upheaval,” p. 1485.

march that started from twenty-five different locations in North India and finished with a mass demonstration in front of the Babri Masjid. The campaign gave its first result in the following year. In February 1986, the Faizabad District Court allowed Hindus to hold a religious ceremony around the masjid. This decision was, of course, not enough for the fascists who wanted to demolish the masjid and build a Hindu temple instead. However, by helping the movement gain a legal ground, it helped mobilize more people in the following period.<sup>63</sup>

In 1989, the VHP announced to the public the plan to move the bricks which it deemed “blessed” from all over the country to the region by mass marches. To win the votes of Hindus under the influence of the temple campaign in the general election scheduled for December, the Congress government headed by prime minister Rajiv Gandhi declared a parcel adjacent to the Babri Masjid as an “undisputed land” in September 1989. The INC government also allowed the VHP and other campaigners to carry on their effort to move the bricks to the area. Panicked by the intense protests of the Muslims who supported the Congress Party, the Gandhi government stepped back and banned the construction of the temple. However, the arrow had already come out of the bow. The campaigners rejected the ban and continued the protest. Standing behind the scenes for a while, the BJP finally took the stage and supported the campaign vehemently. According to pro-Hindutva sources, more than 100 million people participated in the temple campaign in every corner of the country in 1989. Hundreds of millions of bricks were collected from villages, towns, and cities and moved to the conflict zone.<sup>64</sup> Religious polarization played an essential supportive role in the BJP’s election campaign. As a result, its vote share increased from 7.74% in 1984 to 11.36% in December 1989. More importantly, the BJP won state elections in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Himachal Pradesh.<sup>65</sup>

In September 1990, L.K. Advani, the then BJP leader, started a 10,000-kilometer-long march from Somnath Temple toward Ayodhya. The RSS called this march a “holy war.” On their way to Ayodhya, Hindu fascists carried out many attacks against Muslims. After the Bihar government arrested Advani at the end of October, things broke new ground. On October 30, fascist militants erected the saffron flag symbolizing Hinduism on top of the Babri Masjid. During the clashes that followed, the police killed more than 50 militants and detained hundreds of them. This event sparked the movement even more. The fascists started a great agitation organized around their so-called “martyrs” who sacrificed themselves for the sake of their religion. The campaigners branded the Congress-led Bihar and Uttar Pradesh governments as “pro-Muslim pseudo secularists.” Persistent mass mobilization had a positive impact on the BJP’s performance in the 1991 election. The party’s national vote share made a huge leap, from 11.36% in December 1989 to 20.11% in June 1990. The BJP not only retained the three state governments it had won in the previous election but also won Uttar Pradesh, the most populous province of India

---

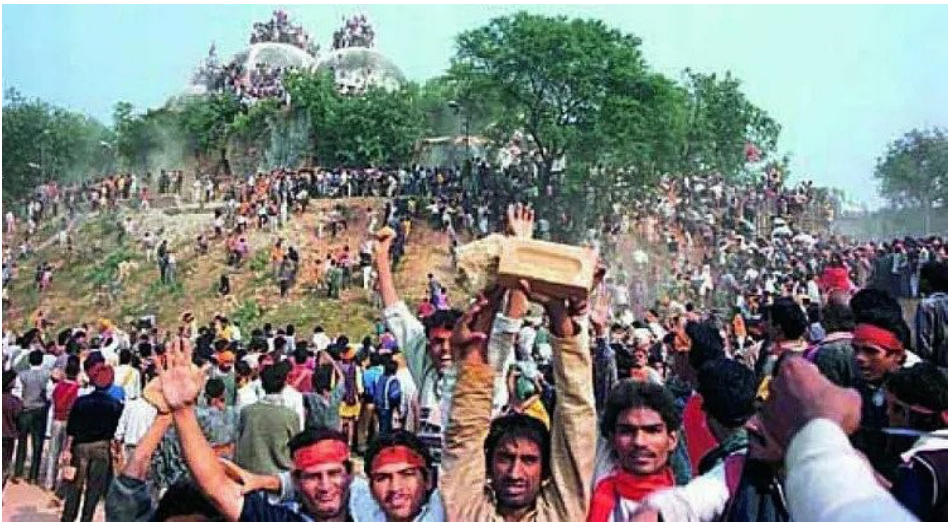
63 Hansen, pp. 154-156.

64 Ibid., pp. 156-161.

65 Saxena, p. 693.

and the center of the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign.<sup>66</sup>

After the BJP's landmark victory in Uttar Pradesh, the final stage of the masjid crisis started. The Chief Minister of the UP, Kalyan Singh, claimed that the BJP's victory meant a referendum on this issue. Singh tried to please the fascist campaign that had brought him to power, keeping his actions within the limits of legality and preventing the demolition of the masjid. He confiscated a large area around the masjid and allocated it for Hindu rituals. On the other hand, he assured the Constitutional Court that the masjid demolition was out of question. However, the RSS and the VHP did not care about Singh's legalistic gestures and pressed the button for masjid demolition. On 6 December 1992, more than 200,000 Hindutva militants and sympathizers from all over the country quickly broke the poorly staffed security cordon, first hit the masjid structure with sledgehammers and then set it on fire. Five century old Babri Masjid was destroyed. Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Singh resigned immediately after the incident. In reality, the BJP-led state government did nothing serious to protect the masjid. It gave tacit support to its "mother organization" RSS and religious authority VHP in their efforts to destroy the Babri Masjid.<sup>67</sup>



*An image showing the demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992.*



The demolition of the Babri Masjid was a turning point in India's post-independence history. It poisoned Hindu-Muslim relations further. Immediately after the incident, a small-scale civil war broke out between Hindus and Muslims across the country, which, according to official figures, took 1200 lives.<sup>68</sup> The campaign and its aftermath were a real test for the Hindu fascist movement. Immediately after the demolition of the masjid, the BJP-led Uttar Pradesh government resigned. The central government in New Delhi removed other BJP-led state governments (of Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Rajasthan) due to their failure of providing law and order. Many fascist leaders, including the BJP leader Advani, were detained. Finally, the RSS, VHP, and Bajrang Dal were banned.

The Hindu fascist movement successfully passed that test. The demolition of the Babri Masjid and post-demolition conflicts (where the majority of victims were Muslim) created a sense of triumph among the lower and middle-class Hindus. Expressions like "teaching the minorities a lesson" and "do not take on the Hindu wrath" became popular. For this reason, the Congress government could not seriously enforce its ban on Sangh Parivar organizations.<sup>69</sup> Neither the demolition of the masjid nor the events that broke out afterward were subject to a serious police investigation. Those arrested for communal violence comprised a tiny portion of the perpetrators. The Hindu paramilitary organizations endured the process virtually unscratched. The central government lifted the ban soon, and the RSS and the VHP activities continued without any hindrance. The BJP's vote share increased from 20.29% in 1996 to 25.59% in 1998<sup>70</sup> and the party ruled the country as the senior partner of a coalition government between 1998 and 2004.

### *The Gujarat pogrom*

Fascist violence reached its second peak during the Gujarat massacre in February–March 2002. On February 27, 2002, when a train carrying Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya (the location of the demolished Babri Masjid which had become a Hindu pilgrimage site) to Gujarat stopped at the town of Godhra (where 40% of the population was Muslim and many religious conflicts had taken place in the past), a fight broke out between Hindu pilgrims and Muslims. Fifty-nine pilgrims died in the fire that broke out on the train. The cause of the fire is still a controversial topic. However, Sangh Parivar organizations and media immediately referred to it as a massacre of Hindus perpetrated by Muslims. On 7 October 2001, less than four months before the incident, Narendra Modi, an RSS veteran, had taken the office of the Chief Minister of Gujarat, not through popular vote but replacing the former CM who was in poor health and declining popularity due to corruption allegations. Modi ordered the transfer of 59 burned corpses to state capital Ahmedabad for public display for several days. This public display fueled the anger of the Hindu majority. On February 28, a large crowd led by fascist paramilitaries attacked Muslims all over Gujarat, especially in Ahmedabad. Approximately 1000 people were killed,

---

68 Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics*, p. 463.

69 Hansen, pp. 181-185.

70 Election Commission of India, "Election Results- Full Statistical Reports."



mostly Muslims. Many people, including babies, were burned and skewered, while women were first raped and then killed. Approximately 20 thousand houses and businesses were destroyed, together with 360 places of worship, most of them belonging to Muslims. One hundred and fifty thousand Muslims left the region after the pogrom and moved to ghettos.

One of the most dramatic episodes of the pogrom happened at a Muslim-majority apartment complex called the Gulbarg Society in Ahmedabad. People who were afraid of being murdered took refuge in the house of the former INC deputy, Ehsan Jafri. Jafri called many state administrators, including Modi, and several officials in New Delhi, saying that they were about to be killed by the mob and requested the police to be sent to the area urgently. These demands were ignored. As a result, Jafri and many others accompanying him were murdered. In short, the 2002 Gujarat Pogrom is a mass murder and ethnic cleansing carried out by Hindu fascist mobs, the state government under Modi, and the BJP-led coalition government in Delhi.

### *The rise of Modi*

Although his responsibility in the Gujarat pogrom is clear, Modi has never been investigated and put to trial. He repeatedly said that he had no responsibility in the incidents and did nothing to apologize. The BJP-led federal government did not dismiss Modi but instead called for a snap election in the state. Being a candidate again in the state election on 15 December 2002, Modi organized his election campaign in an utterly anti-Muslim communal framework. One of his main messages was the unity of Hindus. While repeatedly reminding the 59 Hindu pilgrims burned on the train, he never mentioned 1000 Muslims killed by his supporters. As the BJP won 127 seats out of a total of 182 of the Gujarat parliament, Modi was elected as the CM of Gujarat. In short, fascists triumphed both on the street and in the ballot box.

After this victory, Narendra Modi rapidly climbed up to the leadership of the BJP. His charismatic leadership positively contributed to the party's image. The fact that Modi had come from a low-caste and poor family was beneficial for the BJP, which tried to change its image as the party of the middle-upper castes and classes. Modi joined the RSS when he was eight years old, and he did not engage in anything other than RSS organization until his forties. Little is known about this period of his life. This mystery halo contributed to his charisma. In addition to his oratory skills, Modi is known to be brutal and risk-taker. He endured the challenges of the post-pogrom era. The US and British authorities denied Modi's visa applications due to his alleged role in the Gujarat pogrom. In 2003, shortly after this massacre, the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), an organization of the big bourgeoisie, organized a "Meeting with the President of Gujarat Prime Minister Narendra Modi". What happened at the event is a striking example of Modi's determination and risk-taking behavior. At the beginning of the meeting, the president of the Bajaj Group, Rahul Bajaj, said to Modi:

Why don't we get investment in Kashmir, the Northeast, or Uttar Pradesh and Bihar? It is not just the lack of infrastructure, but also the sense of insecurity. I hope this won't happen in Gujarat—all this comes to mind because of the unfortunate

events last year [...] We would like to know what you believe in, what you stand for, because leadership is important [...] You are today the undisputed leader of your party and government in Gujarat and we want to know you better [...] We are prepared to work with governments of all hues, but we also have our own views on what is good for our society and what works for it.<sup>71</sup>

Not willing to be tamed in this way, Modi gave the following response while shouting: “You and your pseudo-secular friends [...] can come to Gujarat if you want an answer. Talk to my people. Gujarat is the most peaceful state in the country [...] Others have vested interest in maligning Gujarat. What is your interest?”<sup>72</sup> Immediately after this scandalous meeting, Modi founded an alternative organization called the *Resurgent Group of Gujarat* (RGG) by the pro-BJP businessmen. In its first statement, the RGG accused the CII of insulting the Gujaratis and invited the Gujarat branch of the confederation to resign. Frightened by the threat of resignation from one hundred large companies from Gujarat, the CII bowed to pressure and apologized to Modi. Modi’s victory in the first arm wrestling with the big bourgeoisie benefited him in the long run. As noted above, Modi facilitated investments in Gujarat, curry favored with the big bourgeoisie but continued to hold the strings all the time. Modi also managed to impress the Hindu Gujaratis of all classes and castes with his alarmist and uncompromising rhetoric about national security, exaggerations of economic growth, and administrative efficiency. In an interview during the 2014 election campaign, an ordinary supporter described Modi in the following words:

Today the most helpless people are Hindus in India. In Kashmir people burn Indian flags. Only in India can such things be considered normal. After the 2002 riots, when the media and other political parties started blaming Modiji, thousands of people like us—now it must be crores of us—started becoming staunch supporters of Modiji. The more you blamed him, the more of our support he gained [...] If Modi becomes PM we know for the next 10, 15 to 20 years we will have a leader who will work day and night to make India stronger. He has set an example by governing Gujarat well [...] What did the Congress do in the last 10 years? How hopeful we were in 2004! Where are we now? Modiji will take 5, 10 years, but, at least, after those five years we will be back in the race to compete with China.<sup>73</sup>

### The BJP in power

The BJP came to power for the second time in 2014. This time, unlike the coalition government experience between 1998 and 2004, the party had an absolute majority in the parliament. Despite the absolute majority, to avoid offending its coalition partners within the National Democratic Alliance, the BJP also gave

---

<sup>71</sup> Jose, “The Emperor Uncrowned.”

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Jaffrelot, “The Class Element in the 2014 Indian Election,” p. 24.

ministries to those parties in the government. However, it has acted as a single-party government.

The BJP government's main objective in the field of economy is to attract foreign capital to the country by keeping wages, taxes, and land prices low, thus keeping the economic growth at a high rate. Modi aims to make India a popular destination for international capital, which is seeking an alternative to China due to the substantial increase in wages and land costs there. Modi tried to make amendments in the Land Acquisition Law to expand the state's eminent domain to provide cheap land to industrial investors. Besides rural landowners (including small and large farmers) and opposition parties, numerous organizations within the Sangh Parivar such as the BMS labor union and BKS/BKU farmer union also opposed Modi's land acquisition bill.<sup>74</sup> The growing opposition and related loss of elections in Bihar in 2015 forced the BJP to step back and shelve the planned changes.<sup>75</sup> Modi's failure to provide a large amount of cheap land to industrial investors has so far obstructed his goal of attracting industrial investment from China to India.<sup>76</sup>

I have mentioned above the critical role of Sangh Parivar's social service and assistance activities in the slums and villages in the BJP's success. The BJP continues these activities while still in power. It has also maintained a series of social programs launched by the INC governments. Modi harshly criticized the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which was legislated in 2005 with the support of the INC government and the Left Front parties, especially the CPI-M. The MGNREGA scheme provides minimum wage employment in rural infrastructure projects for up to 100 days every year. Many leftists took Modi's statements at face value and claimed that the BJP government was going to abolish the MGNREGA program. However, since the BJP has been increasingly concerned with expanding his support among rural lower castes and classes, it has so far allocated more funds to this program than the Congress government.<sup>77</sup>

As the party of a movement organized primarily by provoking hatred against

74 "Land Bill: RSS Affiliates Lodge Strong Objections before Joint Parliamentary Committee," *The Indian Express*, 23 June 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/yxy4ehvq>

75 Amy Kazmin, "India's Narendra Modi Stumbles on Land Reform", *Financial Times*, 9 August 2015.

76 Aman Thakker and Vikram Albrecht, "Modi Reform Scorecard: Improving Land Acquisition in India," 10 July 2019, <https://www.cogitasia.com/modi-reform-scorecard-improving-land-acquisition-in-india/>

77 Sanjeeb Mukherjee, "10 Years of MGNREGA: How the Modi Government Was Forced to Adopt the Scheme", *Business Standard*, 3 February 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/vzsj25n>; Liz Mathew, "Why the BJP Embraced MGNREGA, the 'Living Monument' of the UPA's Failures," *The Indian Express*, 3 February 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/tuundan>; Manas Roshan, "In a Hole: Political Realities Blunt Narendra Modi's Attack on the NREGA", *The Caravan*, 1 March 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/wzxmk2w>; Ujjwal Krishna, "NREGA: How Political Will Impacted Implementation," *Financial Express*, 5 June 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/wtohyvo> For an accurate prediction that the Modi government will capitalize on the existing social programs rather than eliminating them, see Vanaik, "India's Landmark Election," p. 63.

non-Hindus, the BJP's practice in communal politics is critical for both itself and the future of India. The pressure on Muslims increased after the BJP had come to power. Expanding the restrictions on cattle slaughter is one of its most critical aspects. There has been a ban on cow slaughter for a long time in states other than Kerala, West Bengal, and the ones in the Northeast. However, there was no prohibition on the slaughter of other bovine animals that are unable to reproduce or be used in transportation. Hindutva movement has campaigned for the ban on slaughtering all kinds of bovine animals for a long time. Modi enforced such a ban in Gujarat in 2005. After BJP's victory in 2014, Haryana and Maharashtra state governments did the same. Despite the slaughter ban, eating beef has not been banned yet. The Hindutva movement is pushing it to be banned. After 2014, there has been an increase in attacks against those trading cattle and eating beef. In May 2015, the Modi government put a nationwide ban on cattle sales for non-agricultural purposes. The Indian Supreme Court annulled this decision in July 2017.<sup>78</sup>

The VHP and the RSS are running an aggressive campaign to reconvert low caste (especially Dalit) Christians and Muslims to Hinduism. Many Dalits converted to Christianity and Islam as a form of resistance against the caste system that has historically been associated with Hinduism. The VHP and the RSS promise financial aid and the right to choose whatever caste they want in return for reconversion to Hinduism. If these incentives do not work, they try to force the target population through violence. Reconversion to Hinduism usually takes place through grand ceremonies. The Hindutva movement uses these ceremonies as a tool of mobilization and display of strength. These reconversion efforts further worsen the relations between Hindus and other religious groups.<sup>79</sup> In addition to frequent targeting of Muslims, the pressure on Christians is also increasing. Fascists are attacking churches and threatening those celebrating Christmas.<sup>80</sup> Christian and Islamic organizations and secular mass organizations have repeatedly called Prime Minister Modi to condemn and prevent these practices. Modi did not respond to these calls satisfactorily. Modi's tacit approval encourages fascists to intensify their attacks. A BJP deputy of the Uttar Pradesh parliament declared that by 2024, India would become an entirely Hindu nation.<sup>81</sup>

One of the earliest attacks of the BJP after 2014 was against the students and

---

78 "India's Supreme Court Suspends Ban on Sale of Cows for Slaughter", *The New York Times*, 11 July 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/ydxfp4zk>

79 "Indian Agra Muslim Fear Conversions to Hinduism," 11 December 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-30429118>; Sarath Babu George, "30 Christians Converted in Kerala: VHP," *The Hindu*, 22 December 2014, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/30-christians-converted-in-kerala-vhp/article6713944.ece>

80 "Fear Grips India's Christians Amid Church Attacks", 2 February 2015, <http://www.dw.com/en/fear-grips-indias-christians-amid-church-attacks/a-18235914>; "Right-wing Hindu Groups Target Christmas in India", 22 December 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/rightwing-hindu-groups-target-christmas-in-india/a-41906732>

81 "50 per cent of Muslims Converted from Hinduism, Will Return: BJP MLA from UP," *The Indian Express*, 15 January 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/sw4tcun>

scholars at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and Hyderabad University (HU), prestigious public universities, and secularist and leftist strongholds. The government has put significant pressure on academics and students opposing state repression in Kashmir by charging them with “sedition.” The events that took place at JNU in February and March 2016 are exemplary in this regard. The first link in the chain of events is a campus protest in February about the execution of the separatist Kashmiri militant Afzal Guru. Guru was executed in 2013 for his alleged involvement in the armed attack on the Indian parliament in 2001. Human rights advocates claimed that Guru’s trial and punishment had been marked by many violations of law and human rights. The Guru incident has become one of the symbols of the Kashmir tragedy. At a demonstration at the JNU campus, some students shouted slogans in favor of Kashmir’s independence. The Hindutva movement then started a massive campaign against the leftists at the JNU. The ABVP, a university student arm of the fascist movement, organized mass demonstrations during which JNU students were declared as “separatists,” “traitors,” and “collaborators of Pakistan.”

Immediately afterward, the JNU administration opened a disciplinary investigation about the student protestors. The BJP government’s Interior Minister Rajnath Singh, on the other hand, ordered the Delhi police not to tolerate any action against the national union and to take action immediately. After this order, six students were arrested, including Kanhaiya Kumar, the president of the JNU Student Association and one of the leading members of the CPI. Prosecutors demanded life imprisonment on charges of “sedition,” a crime inherited from the colonial era. Following this event, demonstrations were held for weeks in many campuses and squares across the country to defend the arrested students. In this process, most of the mainstream media put the JNU students on the target board. As a result of the resistance, Kumar was released. However, fascist provocations and threats continued. For example, one of the leaders of the BJP’s youth branch announced that he would reward 500 thousand Rupees to the person who cut off Kumar’s tongue. Upon the reactions, the BJP announced the termination of that person’s party membership. In many districts of Delhi, posters that put prizes on Kumar’s head were hung.<sup>82</sup>

Modi’s administration has also worked feverishly to break the influence of secularists and leftists in social sciences in India, especially in the field of Indian history. Administrations of major central government institutions such as the Nehru Museum and Library and the Indian Council of Historical Research were changed.<sup>83</sup> There has been a persistent effort at the federal and state levels to rewrite the primary and secondary school textbooks in conformity with the unscientific dogmas of

82 “Kanhaiya Kumar: ‘Sedition’ Student Returns to JNU with Fiery Speech”, *BBC News*, 4 March 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/vldo7p5>; Saif Khalid, “Kanhaiya Kumar on Sedition and ‘Freedom’ in India,” *Al Jazeera*, 7 March 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/rcw8rpr>; Piyasree Dasgupta, “BJP Leader Allegedly Announces Rs 5 Lakh Reward For Anyone Who Cuts Off Kanhaiya’s Tongue”, 5 March 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/rjovubg>

83 Manash Firaq Bhattacharjee, “Making India Great Again,” *The New York Times*, 10 March 2017, [shorturl.at/gATZ4](https://shorturl.at/gATZ4)

Hindu fascism.<sup>84</sup> While the artistic and scientific contributions of Muslims to Indian civilization are denied, ridiculous claims such as the use of computers and planes and practice of plastic surgery in ancient India have been made without shame.<sup>85</sup>

The Modi government also revoked the permission of many international organizations, including the Greenpeace and Human Rights Watch, accusing them of working to stir unrest and divide the country. The BJP advertised these acts to prove its nationalist credentials and expand its mass appeal.<sup>86</sup>

Since the BJP's capture of the central government, the effort to create a personality cult around Modi has intensified. This effort aims to project Modi's image as an energetic, selfless, and perseverant leader. The propaganda machinery of the Hindutva movement presents Modi's leadership as a historic chance to save India from backwardness, ensure that it overtakes China, defeat the country's internal and external enemies, and finally turn the 21st century into a golden age of Hindus. Millions of Modi supporters convey this message through social media effectively. Social media trolls, some of which are paid by Sangh Parivar organizations, effectively intimidate those who oppose the Hindutva agenda with profanity and threats.<sup>87</sup>

### *The 2019 elections*

The BJP increased its vote share from 31.34% in 2014 to 37.36% in 2019. It also increased its share of the seats in the Lok Sabha (the lower-house of India's bicameral parliament) from 51.9% to 55.8%. The INC's vote share did not change at all: 19.52% in 2014 and 19.49% in 2019. The socialist left declined to its all-time low. The CPI-M's vote share dropped from 3.2% to 1.75% and CPI's vote share decreased from 0.78% to 0.58%.<sup>88</sup> In short, fascists won a historic victory and both the mainstream opposition and the socialist left suffered disastrous defeats.

The most striking symbolic manifestation of the increasing confidence of the fascist movement after the 2019 election is the attack against the Gandhian legacy. As noted before, Gandhi was assassinated by an RSS-linked fascist in 1948. However, the RSS has continuously denied its involvement with the assassination, and the Sangh Parivar organizations have often presented themselves as the best Gandhians. Boasted by its recent election victory, the fascist movement has recently started to remove its pseudo-Gandhian cover. Vandalism against the statues of Gandhi is increasing, and the popularity of Nathuram Vinayak Godse, the assassin

---

84 Christophe Jaffrelot, "Why the BJP Rewrites History," *The Indian Express*, 7 June 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/yx8ylup8>

85 Subhoranjan Dasgupta, "Intolerance is Sweeping, No Room for Questions, Says Amiya Bagchi," *The Telegraph*, 15 April 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/t3sb977>

86 Samant Subramanian, "India's War on Greenpeace", *The Guardian*, 11 August 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/tnw4q57>; Nita Bhalla, "India: Foreign Funding Law Used to Harass 25 Groups," 9 November 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/st7zq7b>

87 Swati Chaturvedi, *I am a Troll: Inside the Secret World of the BJP's Digital Army*, New Delhi: Juggernaut Books, 2016.

88 Election Commission of India, "Election Results- Full Statistical Reports."



who killed Gandhi, is growing.<sup>89</sup> The BJP-led Uttar Pradesh government has even toyed with the idea of changing the name of the Meerut district to Pandit Nathuram Godse Nagar.<sup>90</sup>



***A photo showing the members of Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha, a fascist organization that is not affiliated with the RSS, holding a ceremony in front of the bust of Gandhi's killer, Godse, in Meerut in 2020.***

### *The abrogation of Kashmir's autonomy*

As noted before, the Indian occupation of Muslim-majority Kashmir region and the Indian-Pakistani controversy over Kashmir are critical factors in aggravating Hindu-Muslim relations and benefitting Hindutva fascists. A critical political event in 2019 was the suicide attack by a Pakistan-based Islamist group *Jaish-e-Mohammedin*, which killed 40 Indian soldiers and wounded 35 in the Pulwama district of Jammu and Kashmir on 14 February 2019. This was the deadliest attack against the Indian army since 1989.<sup>91</sup> Hindu fascists capitalized on the attack to realize their historical goal of ending Kashmir's autonomy. One of the BJP's key promises during the 2019 campaign was to revoke the Article 370 of the Indian constitution (originally accepted in 1949) which gave autonomy to Jammu and Kashmir and barred non-Kashmiris from obtaining permanent residency and property in Kashmir. Following its electoral victory, the BJP government revoked Article 370 entirely on 5 August 2019. At the same time the government cut internet access and practically abrogated basic civil liberties in the region.<sup>92</sup> The termination

<sup>89</sup> Sameer Yasir, "Gandhi's Killer Evokes Admiration as Never Before," *The New York Times*, 4 February 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/wondtxl>

of Kashmir's autonomy has significant potential to further poison Hindu-Muslim relations in India as well as India-Pakistan relations.

### *The Citizenship (Amendment) Act*

One of the ultimate goals of the Hindutva movement is making non-Hindus—especially Muslims—*second-class citizens* and ultimately *non-citizens* to be eliminated through reconversion, deportation or outright killing. The recent amendment of India's Citizenship Act is an important step toward this goal. Indian Citizenship Act of 1955 defines two paths towards acquiring citizenship. First, migrants from the “undivided India”—those living in Bangladesh and Pakistan—can apply for Indian citizenship after 7 years of residency in India. Second, migrants from other countries residing in India for 12 years can apply for Indian citizenship.<sup>93</sup> The BJP government proposed to amend the law in July 2016. It failed to legislate that law at that time due to widespread opposition. The BJP's decisive victory in 2019 elections cleared the path and the Citizenship Amendment Act was passed by the Indian parliament on 11 December 2019. The new citizenship act allows the Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and Christian migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who suffered “religious persecution or fear of religious persecution” in their country and entered India before 2014 to apply for citizenship. The new act also requires everybody to provide a set of documents to prove their citizenship and to be included in the National Register of Citizens. Finally, the amendment also introduces conditionality to the status of the Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) by stating that OIC cardholders may lose their status if they violate local laws.<sup>94</sup> Hence, Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan are explicitly excluded from the right to apply to Indian citizenship. There are Muslim communities who suffer from religious persecution in these three countries. For example, Shia Muslims and the Ahmadiyya community suffer from religious persecution in Pakistan. The Rohingya Muslims, who had suffered persecution in Myanmar, took refuge in Bangladesh and many of them then migrated to India. The new citizenship act closes the path of citizenship for these communities and threatens them with deportation.<sup>95</sup> The Modi government ordered the construction of several detention camps for illegal immigrants. Moreover, the government can exploit the new conditionalities introduced to the OIP status to revoke the residency permits of non-Hindus and political dissidents. Overall, the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 is an openly anti-Muslim law and a grave blow to secularism in India.

Massive protests against the act were staged across the country. These protests had two main types. Protests in eight northeastern states, especially those in Assam,

---

93 The Citizenship Act, 1955, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/410520784.pdf>

94 “The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019,” *The Gazette of India*, 12 December 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/wp5w5d6>; Press Information Bureau of the Government of India Ministry of Home Affairs, “Parliament Passes the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill 2019,” 11 December 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/su84lzh>

95 “Citizenship Amendment Bill: India's New ‘Anti-Muslim’ Law Explained,” 11 December 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-50670393>

were *not* against the anti-secular character of the act. People protested because they thought the act would give citizenship to a large number of people who migrated from Bangladesh over decades and thereby destabilize the demographic balance. Demonstrations in other regions explicitly protested against the anti-secular and chauvinist character of the new act. Protests were banned in many regions. The number of protestors killed by the police reached 27 by the end of December 2019.<sup>96</sup>

### *The Delhi pogrom*

The second—and so far, the deadliest— episode of the incidents after the Citizenship Amendment Act took place in northeastern New Delhi in the last week of February 2020. Hindu fascists carried out a pogrom in Muslim neighborhoods by shooting, slashing, and setting people on fire. The police either turned a blind eye or overtly supported the fascists for the entire week. According to official records, 53 people were killed during the incidents and nearly 40 of them were Muslim. Hundreds of people were wounded. Many Muslims are still missing, probably killed by the fascist mobs.<sup>97</sup>

In short, the BJP's victory in 2019 elections, a more decisive victory compared to the 2014 elections, has encouraged the fascists to take bolder steps to eradicate secularism by making non-Hindus—first and foremost Muslims—second-class citizens. The electoral victory has also strengthened the fascists' hand to intensify the suppression of political dissent. The mainstream and radical leftist opposition in India has also fallen further to a state of demoralization and disarray. However, the mass protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act show that the struggle is far from over and there is still hope to counter the rise of fascism in India.

## **Fascism and the struggle against it in contemporary India**

This section addresses two urgent political questions based on the preceding survey of Indian fascism's century-long march to power. First, whether and to what extent the Indian political regime has acquired fascist characteristics? To put more bluntly, has India already become a fascist dictatorship? Second, how—with what kinds of methods, tactics, and strategies—should the Indian left confront fascism?

Statements by four Indian Marxist intellectuals provide a useful template to address these questions. In an interview conducted during the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act, Achin Vanaik underscores the significant advance but the still incomplete character of the fascistization of the Indian state:

The theoretical question is: how do you understand fascism? Do you understand fascism as an organism, or do you understand it as a process? I've always taken the view, based on left traditions of understanding, that it's a process, it's something in motion. *There's always a fascist potential. And the culmination of the fascist*

96 "Internet Banned in India's Uttar Pradesh Amid Anger Over Killings," *Al Jazeera*, 27 December 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/s53orhe>

97 "Delhi Riots Death Toll at 53, Here Are the Names of 51 of the Victims," *The Wire*, 6 March 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/vrk7jpt>

*potential would be the fascist state.* And the fascist state is one of the most class-autonomous forms. You have an extremely centralized and autonomous state. It's a one-party dictatorship with nothing to do with democracy, an imperial character and so on. Many people were worried about a fascist state when the BJP first came to power in the 1990s. But I remember saying very clearly that even if it comes to power, the democratic state will not be lost. *Now, most people recognize that there's not going to be a complete elimination of democracy. Instead, there's going to be a dramatic hollowing out of democracy, which means that you will continue to have elections because they provide legitimacy for many far-right forces and so on.* So I think one needn't make too much of the fascist debate. It's enough to recognize that this is a very, very, very dangerous force, with fascistic characteristics, and the important thing is to not get too hung up on theoretical differences. Much more important are programmatic differences that may follow from theoretical disagreements.<sup>98</sup>

Aijaz Ahmad explains the incompleteness of the fascist counterrevolution based on the absence of a revolutionary threat coming from the left:

When I wrote that every country gets the fascism it deserves, I had in mind the great difference between Germany and Italy, between Italy or Germany and Spain, and so on, which then implies that if and when fascism comes to India it will be a product of our own history and society, quite different from any other. *You ask me if fascism is coming to India now. The answer is "No". Neither the Indian bourgeoisie nor the RSS needs fascism. In interwar Europe, varieties of fascism came in countries where the working-class movement was very powerful and a communist revolution was very possible. No such situation obtains in India.* Communal violence, no matter how ugly or punctual, is not fascism. Do the RSS and several of its non-parliamentary fronts have some fascist attributes? Yes, they do. But so do dozens of movements and parties of the Far Right all over the globe.<sup>99</sup>

In a similar vein, Bernard D'Mello, a Maoist intellectual, argues:

The consequence of this can be *semi-fascism*—fascism hyphenated with a semi—not full-blown fascism, mainly, but not wholly, because there is no need to dispense with electoral democracy, given bipartisanship (concurrence of the Congress and the BJP) as far as both neoliberal economic policy and strategy and nascent sub-imperialism are concerned. Indian big business has no reason to endorse an overthrow of electoral democracy and support the institution of a one-party dictatorship. Despite the Maoist movement, *the ruling establishment is not threatened by revolution from below, and hence, there is no imperative for instituting a*

---

<sup>98</sup> Crowley, "Modi Might Have Finally Gone Too Far" (emphasis added).

<sup>99</sup> Jipson John and Jitheesh P. M., "A Conversation with Aijaz Ahmad: 'The State is Taken Over From Within'," *Monthly Review*, 22 July 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/t3pyygr> (emphasis added).

*full-blown fascist regime.*<sup>100</sup>

Similar to the three authors cited above, Irfan Habib also thinks that fascism has not decisively won in India yet. Yet, Habib does not rule out the possibility of total fascistization in the foreseeable future:

*It is obvious that with the constitution still in place and most state governments out of BJP's control, civil liberties and democratic rights are not abrogated though they are under attack through organised hooliganism.* The RSS which controls BJP has a manifestly fascist ideology as can be seen from [M.S.] Golwalkar's writings and RSS's quasi-military practices. How long the present phase will last is anyone's guess. *If no united opposition is put against the present regime, the present state of balance may not last long.*<sup>101</sup>

All four comments acknowledge the existence of a serious fascist threat but also stress that the Indian political regime has not become totally fascist. The concept of "proto-fascism," explained detailly in Sungur Savran's recent works,<sup>102</sup> is particularly useful to explain this phenomenon. Similar to Vanaik, Savran underlines the character of fascism as a process whose outcome depends on the trajectory of class struggles at the national and international levels. As Savran notes, the world economic crisis that started in 2008 shares with the 1929 crisis the characteristics of a "great depression." Therefore, the political consequences of the ongoing crisis would be as radical as those of the 1929 crisis. Like those in the past, many far-right movements and governments of the present-day have fascist tendencies that should be taken very seriously. However, unlike Italian and German fascisms, which came to power on the back of strong paramilitary organizations, most of the contemporary far-right organizations either do not have such organizations or have them in quite rudimentary forms. Savran brands these formations as proto-fascist.

While Savran's comparison helps us understand the global rise of the contemporary far-right, the case of India presented in this paper requires taking a slightly different approach and expanding the concept of proto-fascism. The character of Sangh Parivar is fascist rather than proto-fascist. However, the same cannot be said about the political regime, because despite the BJP government's severe assault against the secular and democratic characteristics of the state outlined in this paper, a variety of legal political parties (including legal communist parties) are still allowed to exist and participate in the still highly competitive periodic (general and state) elections, and civil rights and liberties are not totally eliminated. Proto-fascism is a suitable concept for defining the character of the current regime.

100 Bernard D'Mello, *India After Naxalbari: Unfinished History*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2018, p. 306 (emphasis added).

101 Ajoy Ashirwad Mahaprashasta, "Interview: Irfan Habib Debunks RSS's Nationalism and Their Attempts to Rewrite History," *The Wire*, 9 October 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/wfqf23y> (emphasis added).

102 See the first footnote.

In short, what defines proto-fascism, or, “semi-fascism” in D’Mello’s parlance, in contemporary India is not the absence of a full-blown fascist party with a paramilitary wing but the incomplete fascistization of the political regime.

The critical question is whether the Indian political regime would transition from proto-fascism to fascism in the foreseeable future. I agree with Ahmad and D’Mello that the absence of a credible revolutionary threat makes total fascistization unnecessary from the point of view of the Indian bourgeoisie for the time being. As noted above, the two legal communist parties rapidly declined in the last two decades and the rural insurgency led by the CPI (Maoist) failed to create a revolutionary momentum despite its initial achievements in the countryside in the 2000s. On the other hand, we cannot rule out the possibility of complete fascistization based solely on the weakness of the revolutionary left. Historically speaking, the rise of the proletarian movement often leads to the rise of revolutionary or radical reformist political organizations. However, we should also be undogmatic and open enough to identify exceptional circumstances under which a strong labor movement that constrains capitalist accumulation is present without a corresponding rise in communism or radical reformism. Hence, we need to take a close look at the trajectory of the Indian labor movement to determine whether this is the case. That three general strikes occurred in the recent years (in 2013, 2016, and 2020) shows the significant combativeness of the Indian working class. However, Table 1 shows there is not a clear upward trend in workers’ movement in recent years.

**Table 1. Strikes, lockouts, and gheraos in India (1991-2014)<sup>103</sup>**

Years	Strikes			Lockouts			Gheraos		
	Number	Workers Involve (In ' 000)	Mandays Lost (In ' 000)	Number	Workers Involve (In ' 000)	Mandays Lost (In ' 000)	Number	Workers Involve (In ' 000)	Mandays Lost (In ' 000)
1991	1278	872	12428	532	469	13999	-	-	-
1992	1011	767	15132	703	484	16126	-	-	-
1993	914	672	5614	479	281	14686	-	-	-
1994	808	626	6651	393	220	14332	1	@	@
1995	732	683	5720	334	307	10570	1	@	@
1996	763	609	7818	403	331	12467	2	5	5
1997	793	637	6295	512	344	10738	-	-	-
1998	665	801	9349	432	488	12713	1	@	-
1999	540	1099	10625	387	211	16161	-	-	-
2000	426	1044	11959	345	374	16804	-	-	-
2001	372	489	5563	302	199	18204	1	@	@
2002	295	900	9665	284	199	16921	-	-	-
2003	255	1011	3206	297	805	27050	-	-	-
2004	236	1903	4829	241	169	19037	-	-	-
2005	227	2723	10801	229	191	18864	-	-	-
2006	243	1712	5318	187	98	15006	-	-	-
2007	210	606	15056	179	118	12111	-	-	-
2008	240	1514	6955	181	66	10479	6955	10479	17434
2009	167	1793	8075	178	74	9547	8075	9547	17622
2010	199	990	13150	172	85	9980	13150	9980	23130
2011	179	645	4697	191	90	9761	4697	9761	14458
2012	133	1221	2843	185	86	10094	-	-	-
2013	103	1774	4045	155	64	8600	-	-	-
2014	137	1051	2883	25	8	911	-	-	-

Note:

<sup>103</sup> <https://www.indiastat.com/>



@: Less than 500

Furthermore, as Table 2 demonstrates, although India's large-scale industry has not fared well in terms of profitability, workers' bargaining power is *not* the underlying reason. In fact, Indian industry managed to keep real wage growth below real productivity growth between 1982 and 2012. Rapid expansion of informal employment has been an important determinant of this outcome. Although the organized manufacturing sector was the traditional bastion of formal employment and trade union power in India until the early 1980s, this has changed significantly in the last four decades. The share of contract labor in registered factories increased from 12% in 1985 to 23% in 2002 and 51% in 2011. Even the public sector has not been immune to the informalization trend. The share of regular-informal workers in public sector employment increased from 13% in 1999 to 18% in 2011.<sup>104</sup> In short, besides their long-term failure to organize informal workers in small and medium-sized (and unregistered) enterprises, currently comprising about 90% of all workers in India, trade unions have failed to protect formal employment even in the large enterprises of the (supposedly) formal sector.<sup>105</sup> Hence, up to the present, there has been no labor conflict-related imperative pushing the Indian bourgeoisie towards a fascist solution.

---

104 Agarwala, p. 111.

105 The fact that the BMS (the labor union arm of the Sangh Parivar) is the largest labor union puts a significant obstacle to the rejuvenation of the working-class movement in contemporary India. The BMS is a particularly dangerous formation because, similar to fascist labor unions in interwar Italy and Germany, it has been smart and flexible enough to establish hegemony over the proletariat. For instance, it follows a strictly class-collaborationist line in its strongholds like Gujarat. In contrast, it tries to project a relatively combative image to organize the workers in left-dominated states like Kerala. An RSS-trained BMS leader in Kerala vividly illustrates this approach: "We are different from the BMS in other parts. We are more stringent trade unionists. That is because we can't survive any other way. The situation requires it because it is like that at the grassroots level. The communist seed in this land was cultivated in such a huge way that it has [spread] to every 'hook and crook' of the state. The BMS' ideology was also joining with [the ideology of the early Communist movement in Kerala], because, as we say in our songs and in our work, we are also working for the poorest of the poor. That is what we have in common [...] Even if we are reluctant to call for a *hartal* [strike] or *bandh* [blockade/closure], because that's exactly the practice [the Left unions] follow, we cannot say otherwise" (Smriti Upadhyay, "Workers and the Right Wing: The Situation in India," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 93, 2018, p. 87).

**Table 2. Compound annual growth rates (%) of the rate of profit, real labor productivity, and real wage in India's organized manufacturing sector (1982-2012)<sup>106</sup>**

Period	Rate of profit	Real labor productivity	Real wage
1982–1991	–4.24	5.36	2.44
1991–1996	5.6	9.01	1.47
1996–2001	–8.07	–0.74	–0.8
2001–2007	11.38	9.24	–0.45
2007–2012	–1.66	1.96	1.11
<b>1982–2012</b>	<b>0.14</b>	<b>5.74</b>	<b>1.02</b>

Beyond the issue of a labor repression imperative, we need to view fascistization from the angle of the expansionary-irredentist tendencies of the Indian bourgeoisie and state. A possible hypothesis would be that the BJP government reflects and represents the imperial desires of the Indian bourgeoisie. This is not an entirely unsustainable proposition because after decades of state-directed and import-substituting industrialization and the subsequent neoliberal offensive, the Indian big bourgeoisie matured and reached the stage of finance-capital, i.e., the formation of private sector conglomerates incorporating the means of production, circulation, and finance under a single roof.<sup>107</sup> This development has increased the confidence of Indian capital and pushed it towards a more assertive and potentially expansionary foreign policy. In fact, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Indian bourgeoisie and state have opted to become a junior partner of the US imperialism in Asia. India has become a key partner of the US-led coalition aiming to stop the rise of China. The Indian navy's assertiveness in the Indian Ocean has also increased. On the economic side, the Indian private sector's involvement in the defense industry, including the partnerships with American and European military-industrial corporations investing in India, has significantly grown in recent decades. Hence,

106 Deepankar Basu and Debarshi Das, "Profitability in India's Organized Manufacturing Sector: The Role of Technology, Distribution and Demand," *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2018, p. 146. The general trend in the period 1982-2012 illustrated in Table 2 is not fundamentally different from the trends of the 1970s. For an analysis of the period of 1969-1985, see Ranjit Sau, "Falling Rate of Profit in India's Industry?," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 24, No. 30, 1989, pp. 95-99.

107 Of course, India's economic growth and finance-capital formation performances have been much more modest compared to many countries of the Global South, especially in comparison to China. The number of Indian corporations in the Fortune Global 500 list increased from only one in 1995 to seven in 2019. In the same period, the number of Chinese corporations in this list rose from two to 119 (<https://fortune.com/global500/>).

Sangh Parivar's irredentist *Akhand Bharat* vision appears suitable for the zeitgeist of contemporary Indian political economy and geopolitics.<sup>108</sup> However, almost all of these developments trace back to the INC period, during which the Indian army fought three wars against Pakistan, one war against China, and implemented an essentially colonial policy with an almost permanent state of emergency in Kashmir and the Northeast since 1947.<sup>109</sup> Finally, there has not been any necessity to push the Indian bourgeoisie towards a fascist takeover for the sake of irredentism.

There is, of course, nothing to celebrate about a proto-fascist state run by a fascist party. On the other hand, as Vanaik and Habib both stress, the political process is dynamic and open to different possibilities. In the context of the ongoing great depression, which is recently aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic, the future prospects of the Indian economy do not seem bright. Hence, we cannot entirely rule out the prospect of a revolutionary renaissance of the workers' movement and the Marxist left in India. Such a renaissance would either rapidly transition to a full-fledged fascist regime with the support of large sections of the Indian bourgeoisie or it would crumble fascist hegemony over the lower and lower-middle classes and castes of India, which may force the bourgeoisie to cease its support to the Hindutva project. Similarly, the ongoing great depression aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic may also intensify class struggles as well as inter-capitalist and inter-state competition. The Trump administration's increasingly aggressive stance towards China, recently accompanied by allegations that Covid-19 originated in Chinese laboratories, indicate the seriousness of this possibility. Such a scenario may push the militaristic and irredentist tendencies of the Indian establishment to a new height, which may complete the fascistization process. In brief, although the proto-fascist fix has suited the needs of the bourgeois regime until recently, in the age of the third great depression and the Covid-19 pandemic, there is no insurmountable barrier between proto-fascism and fascism in India or elsewhere.

It is also impossible to rule out the radicalization of religious minorities coexisting with or without a communist rejuvenation. Islamist radicalism is already quite influential among Indian Muslims. Since the army crackdown on the Sikh movement for the separation of the state of Punjab from the Indian union in the 1980s, Sikh radicalism has continued its existence like a silent volcano. As in other states of India, the BJP has implemented flexible and successful tactics in Punjab, involving coalitions with Sikh parties. However, the increasingly patronizing attitude of Hindu fundamentalists towards Sikhs expressed through claims like "Sikhism is not a separate religion but a branch of Hinduism" has been annoying many Sikhs.<sup>110</sup> Christian militancy has been a much weaker tendency but exists in certain pockets such as Tripura state. Although the BJP government signed a peace agreement with Christian rebels, the Hindutva agenda would probably clash with Tripura Christians

108 D'Mello, pp. 311-319.

109 Itty Abraham, *How India Became Territorial: Foreign Policy, Diaspora, Geopolitics*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, pp. 115-140.

110 Hartosh Singh Bal, "The Akal Takht's Call to Ban RSS Reiterates Sikhism's Long Resistance to a Hindu Rashtra," *The Caravan*, 15 October 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/y4f5dnho>

in the future. Hence, the intensification of the “Saffronization” trend would trigger these fault lines and lead to armed insurgencies of various religious minorities. A proto-fascist state led by the BJP/RSS would probably suppress these insurgencies more violently than the Congress governments did in the past. However, taking into account the Indian state’s failure in wiping out Maoist insurgency in central and eastern regions after decades of counter-insurgency efforts, it would not be entirely far-fetched to think that if these religious insurgencies take place more or less simultaneously, then the situation may look more like Lebanon of the 1980s or Syria of the 2010s than Italy and Germany of the 1930s.

To sum up, Sangh Parivar’s fascism has gained significant ground but it is not destined for an inevitable victory. Hence, the Marxist left should shed its current disarray and disorganization, and start waging a serious struggle for hegemony. Only a class-based offensive of the working class and poor peasantry can truly unite the people from diverse religious, ethnic, caste, and linguistic backgrounds. This is the only path that could save India from a religious bloodbath (and a possible genocide of religious minorities) or a complete fascist takeover.

A left-led anti-fascist movement should not waste time and energy to cooperate with the Congress for two main reasons. First, the Congress gradually became a party of “soft Hindutva” and is therefore unreliable for an effective fight against the Hindutva agenda. Second, and more importantly, both the CPI and CPI-M lost power and prestige due to their local and national-level alliances with Congress. As the INC has proven to be a dismally corrupt organization, close association with it would not help the left win the laboring masses. Although equating the INC and BJP would be a grave mistake, winning the lower-class Congress supporters is important, and organizing anti-fascist demonstrations with the INC-affiliated organizations should not be principally ruled out, since the INC has proven to be a dismally corrupt organization, close association with it would not help the left win the laboring masses. A genuine united front of the leftist parties and left-affiliated organizations (especially labor and farmer unions) is the priority of the current struggle against fascism. This united front should use electoral methods and tactics as much as possible but should not repeat the opportunistic parliamentarism of previous “Left Front” experiences.

In a polemic against Prakash Karat, one of the leaders of the CPI-M, renowned Marxist historian Jairus Banaji argued that rejecting an alliance with the Congress against the BJP is akin to the Comintern’s suicidal “Third Period” policy (1928-1933) that characterized German social democracy as “social fascism.” Notwithstanding his significant contributions to Marxist theory in other areas, and despite the fact that his polemic has strong points such as the critique of the CPI-M’s previous policy of alliance with the Congress, Banaji’s intervention in this debate is extremely problematic. He seems to oppose Karat’s narrow focus on finance capital at the expense of the mass character of the fascist movement on the basis not of class struggle, as Trotsky does, bringing in a rich array of classes and strata starting with the petty-bourgeoisie in deadly fear of the proletariat, but on a Reichian concept of authoritarian personality formation on the terrain of “culture

and ideology.”<sup>111</sup> More to the point for our debate here, the “Third Period” analogy is inappropriate. Trotsky argued that a united front of communists and social democracy against Nazism was necessary because social democracy consisted of a large part of the labor movement. The Congress has been the party of the Indian bourgeoisie since its inception. Although it is *not* certainly a “social fascist” party, the Congress perpetrated one of the most violent communalist massacres of Indian history, killing thousands of Sikhs in Delhi in 1984 in the aftermath of the Indira Gandhi assassination. Moreover, it is now on the same wavelength with the BJP in relation to the neoliberal attacks of the latter on the working class and the poor, although for reasons of short-term politicking, it tries to distinguish itself from some of the harsher policies that come on the agenda. Any durable alliance with the Congress Party would end up being neoliberal in its program. Hence, prioritizing an alliance with the Congress over the urgent task of reorganizing the revolutionary communists is a strategy that is doomed to fail. What is needed is a double-pronged strategy that relies, on the one hand, on the broadest unity of all the organizations representing working and toiling masses in action against the BJP and the capitalist class and, on the other, a reorganizing drive within and outside the traditional communist movement with the perspective of awakening Indian communism from its decades-long reformist slumber and building a truly revolutionary Marxist vanguard organization.

A revolutionary rejuvenation should overcome two important obstacles. First, as noted before, the CPI and CPI-M, the two prominent parties of the Stalinist left, have gradually become mainstream social democratic parties and supported the Congress in various occasions. On the other hand, although Indian Maoism currently led by the CPM (Maoist) has avoided these reformist pitfalls, the reliance on guerilla methods in forests of central and eastern India and lack of a nationwide revolutionary strategy have separated it from large sections of the urban and rural proletariat. In short, impasses of Stalinism, Maoism, and reformism have discredited the communist alternative in India as a whole. Hence, although the revolutionary Marxists of India and elsewhere should cooperate with these currents against Hindu fascists—and even insist on an immediate end of disastrous bickering among these three parties—they cannot rely on them to reorganize the labor movement. As Vanaik aptly notes,

Long reduced to primarily an electoral force with a diminishing cadre base that clings to old Stalinist verities when it does think about Marxism, their cadres with a few exceptions in a few places, have lost the capacity and interest in pursuing the politics of popular mobilization around genuine and justified grievances [...]. Finally, the last and to my mind the only realistic option is the creation of a new much more radical left force through a process which for a long time will be one of molecular accumulation but beyond a critical point its growth can become much more sudden and dramatic. *Central to this process will be the development of*

---

111 Jairus Banaji, “Stalin’s Ghost Won’t Save Us from the Spectre of Fascism: A Response to

*ideologically trained and disciplined cadres involved in concrete struggles on multiple fronts and guided by a larger transformative vision of building a capitalism-transcending socialism* whose democratic character will be much deeper than anything capitalist liberal democracy can hope to provide [...] There is the presence of various groups and independent activists involved in various progressive struggles who still see themselves as radical and revolutionary leftists even as they have through their own experiences become disillusioned with the hitherto two dominant traditions of the Indian Left — Stalinism and Maoism. There is therefore fertile ground to be ploughing and we need to get on with it.<sup>112</sup>

Vanaik's emphasis on the reorganization of "ideologically trained and disciplined cadres" of communists is laudable but needs to be qualified that such a reorganization initiative should embrace the Leninist theory of organization and carefully put it into practice. Liberal and lax organizational methods would not work to achieve this gigantic task.

## **Conclusion**

Hindutva ideology and politics emerged based on Hindu-Muslim hostility in the Indian sub-continent. The bloody religious conflicts that started in the second half of the 19th century and reached a peak with the partition that followed the end of colonial rule in 1947 created the political basis of the Sangh Parivar. The core of its mass base has been the upper-caste small and medium bourgeoisie. The RSS, probably the oldest and best-organized fascist paramilitary organization of the world, is the organizational core of Sangh Parivar, the family of fascist organizations of India. Hindu fascists have waged a militant struggle against both the (relatively) secular mainstream parties, especially the Congress, and the socialist left. Sangh Parivar also has an irredentist program based on the dream of "United India." In short, Hindutva is a fascist political movement. The electoral power of Hindu fascism hovered around 10% of the popular vote before the 1990s. The mass discontent with the Congress's socio-economic failures and corruption, as well as its turn to neoliberalism after 1991, paved the BJP's way to power. The gradual mainstreaming and loss of prestige of large sections of the Indian communist movement, especially after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in 1989-91, also made the rise of fascism easier. While adopting neoliberal policies to strengthen its ties with the big bourgeoisie, the BJP has also enhanced its appeal among the lower classes and castes by providing social services and assistance in slums and villages through Hindutva grassroots organizations. The Hindutva movement, which participated in coalition governments between 1977-80 and 1998-2004, came to power alone with 31.34% of the votes in the 2014 general election and consolidated its hold on power by increasing its vote share to 37.36% in the 2019 general election.

While the fascist credentials of Sangh Parivar are undisputable, the fascistization of the current political regime is still incomplete due to (first and foremost) the absence of a revolutionary or radical reformist threat coming from the left. Moreover,

---

<sup>112</sup> Achin Vanaik, "The Indian Catastrophe," *Jacobin*, 30 May 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/wr5zep5>



India's highly complex social structure and the existence of many political parties organized based on different castes, ethnicities, and regional interests pose a severe obstacle to the Hindutva movement in its long-term endeavor to turn India into a fascist dictatorship. The opposition of the mainstream parties and the radical left have not weakened enough to allow such a radical transformation. Therefore, there is still a steep road in front of the Hindu fascist movement to reach its ultimate goal. However, since the ongoing great depression aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic may intensify class struggles as well as inter-capitalist and inter-state competition, there is no insurmountable barrier between proto-fascism and fascism in India or elsewhere.

It is not enough to defend secularism and democratic rights against the rising Hindutva fascism (and other similar religious right-wing movements) that has risen by establishing hegemony on the lower classes and castes through grassroots organizations and social assistance networks. Except for a militant, persistent, and systematic proletarian policy and organization, no political movement can decisively defeat fascism.

## Correction and Clarification

Burak Gürel  
26 January 2021

In the article (p. 117, 122, 131), Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) and Bharatiya Kisan Sangh (BKS) were presented as if they are identical organizations. They are *not* identical. Founded in 1979, BKS is the farmer wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Organization, RSS), the mother organization of the fascist movement in India.

BKU is *not* affiliated with the RSS. Founded in 1978, BKU was originally a non-partisan and non-communalist farmer organization that organizes both Hindu and Muslim farmers. However, the BKU has supported the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political party wing of the fascist movement, in some (but not all) general and state elections since the 1990s. As my article stresses, Hindu communalism has also become influential within the BKU since then. However, it would be wrong to label the BKU as an entirely Hindu communalist organization.

On the Hindu communalist dimensions of the BKU, see:

Christophe Jaffrelot, *Religion, Caste, and Politics in India*, New Delhi: Primus Books, 2010, pp. 440-441.

Anjali Mody, “Politicians and Politics that Stoked Latent Communal Tensions in Muzaffarnagar,” *The Caravan*, 15 January 2015.

<https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/politicians-politics-communal-tensions-muzaffarnagar>

Raj Patel, “Islamophobia Gastronomica - On the Food Police, Rural Populism and Killing,” 26 February 2018.

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/openindia/islamophobia-gastronomica-on-food-police-rural-populism-and-killing/>

S. Raju, “Muzaffarnagar Riots End Hindu, Muslim Farmer Unity,” *Hindustan Times*, 18 September 2015.

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/muzaffarnagar-riots-end-hindu-muslim-farmer-unity/story-e4mgSvCmbpQGx1HZqfRB8N.html>

R. Ramakumar, “Jats, Khaps and Riots: Communal Politics and the Bharatiya Kisan Union in Northern India,” *Journal of Agrarian Change*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2017, pp. 22-42.