LINGUISTIC-COMMUNAL POLITICS AND CLASS CONFLICT IN INDIA

Pratyush Chandra

The commonplace view propagated in the media is that religious fundamentalism and militant identity assertion are incompatible with liberal-democratic capitalism, and represent a mediaeval revival. Innumerable arguments are advanced to prove their primordial nature. The theory of a ‘clash of civilizations’ is presented. The American-British ‘war against terrorism’ in Afghanistan, waged ideologically through the BBC, the CNN and their Third World franchisees, popularizes this myth and creates new symbols to characterize it. Religious and social identities are redefined.

The Indian sub-continent was already an arena of sharp identity clashes, and with right-wing majorities in power in each country it faces the natural outcome – an intensification of these clashes. In India, particularly, where conflicts are multifaceted, the repercussions are grave. The authoritarian measures taken by the Indian government in the form of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, and the characterization of every militant identity assertion as ‘terroristic’, are the immediate consequence. The Kashmiri question itself is labelled ‘communal’ and ‘terrorist’, along with militant Dalit and regional struggles against the caste structure and regional inequalities. Some of the sufferings of Jewish communities at the hands of the Nazis have also befallen ‘minorities’ in India, especially Muslims. These ‘minorities’ are obviously not just contingent elements of society that happen to be assigned low status or are even excluded from the mainstream; their identities are differentially included, interwoven in the political structure from top to bottom.

Multiple identities exist, based on social, political, cultural and economic factors, and their mobilizations overlap. At different times and in different places we find different types of identity conflict at the centre of social relations – and
the most prevalent mode of resolution of any given identity conflict is the posing of another. But the ‘communal question’ remains the most formidable; its volatile effects make it central to any political discourse in South Asia. Recent events have simply reasserted this on a global scale.

Approaches to the communal question tend to revolve around arbitrary enumerations of cultural facts. Rightists list the oppressive attitudes of others, and their own valorous heritage, while leftists enumerate which cultural heritage should be kept and which should be renounced. So we find left leaders writing pamphlets which preach a ‘true’, tolerant and ‘secular’ Hinduism. This is usually justified in the name of pragmatism, but what is seen as pragmatic never changes, because in this process the hegemonic discourse is never questioned; the rules of the game continue to be set by the hegemonic players.

The so-called ‘secular’ compromise, which has sealed the fate of any genuine non-communal practice, is starkly evident in relation to the question of India’s national language. The language issue was manipulated to engineer political support for different elements of the elite. The ‘secular’ nationalists divided the options for a national language into three – Urdu, Hindi and Hindustani – which made the illiterate majority into pawns in the intra-class conflicts of the propertied class and its managers. Their talk of ‘the national language’ always concerned the written word and its script, which was really only of interest to those who knew the written word and script, in fact to those who could make a living from knowing them. Mobilizing mass support for this could be done only by attaching a popular identity to the language that was being championed – by Muslimizing or Hinduizing it.

At a time like the present, when emotions are running high, the only correct approach is to try to understand how identities are formed and what roles are defined for them in the present socio-economic formation. Any scientific analysis must be able to explain ‘communal’ and other social conflicts not as aberrations or deviations from some idealized politico-ideological practice, but as emanating from the very pores of the political-economic system. Seeking their causes in particular features of the religious and cultural heritage – such as the alleged degree of tolerance and intolerance inherent in this or that religion – is to surrender to ‘cultural hereditarism’, leading, once again, to mere arbitrary recitations of facts.

A GENERAL THEORY OF IDENTITY FORMATION AND ITS ROLE UNDER CAPITALISM

The present socio-economic structure, rightly termed an ‘acquisitive society’, derives its dynamic energy from the competitive engine inherent in the logic of capital accumulation. Wherever it has penetrated, capitalism has appropriated the pre-existing social structures and metamorphosed them, radically transforming their basic character – converting them into ideological ‘instruments’, while more or less retaining their form. This process embeds the universal in the particular. On the one hand, competition becomes more and more general, as ‘non-capi-
talist’ structures are penetrated; on the other hand, greater competition increases social fragmentation, creating multiple new hierarchical identities within society. This is why globalization and post-modernity go hand in hand.

The whole history of capitalism is an empirical manifestation of this essential logic. The advent of the nation-state and colonization, the globalization of imperialist wars in the twentieth century, the birth of the United Nations and ‘third world’ nationalisms, can all be perceived as realizations of the same dialectical process. Its latest manifestations, coming from the advanced capitalist states, are a demand for stringent global legal structures, as economic boundaries everywhere are eroded by liberalization, combined in practice with continuing forms of protectionism.

Like any other class-based social system capitalism destroys primitive political and cultural institutions, but it builds new ones with the same bricks and mortar; it cannot abolish the context in which it is born. There is a long transition from the ‘formal’ to the ‘real’ subsumption of labour under capital, so old institutions persist with new meanings and roles. And throughout this process competition does the midwifery at every level: that is, in order to realize itself, ‘capital in general’ depends on the competitive struggles between individual capitals. Socio-political institutions and ideologies constitute the arena in which these battles are waged. Capitalists strengthen their positions by forming combinations, associations and cartels, and these formations and their tactics are legitimated through cultural identities (geographic, ethnic, religious, linguistic, communal, etc.). Such identities serve as effective mechanisms to obscure the real economic processes that are taking place. They structure the norms of power in markets, where the outcomes of intra-class rivalries are actually decided. They create political infrastructures through which individual capitals, or combinations of individual capitals, exert their influence.

But the most important point is that it is in this clash of identities that capitalism is reproduced. Through this means any decisive threat to its rule is neutralized. In the jargon of mainstream economics, it legitimates the segmentation of the labour market, which allows capital to ‘add more value’. Through segmentation, competition among workers is increased, which is the foundation of wage slavery, the essential condition for capital accumulation. This social and economic segmentation fragments and ghettoizes the consciousness of the working class. It is politically subjugated by the sterilization of its capacity to question the conditions of its exploitation.

The fundamental reality of capitalist development – capital accumulation and the increasing exploitation of labour power, in which competition works as the essential midwife – is realized in necessarily fetishized social forms, relations and conflicts. The caste, race and religion of yesteryear become ideological realities, essential for reproducing and legitimizing the fundamental processes through which accumulation is occurring. Modern identity formation is a necessary representation of the capitalist race for acquisition, of unequal exchange.
THE SECULAR FOUNDATIONS OF COMMUNAL POLITICS

When we analyze communal conflict in the Indian sub-continent we must keep in mind that the centrality of this problem has historical causes, and that it polarizes the societies of the sub-continental in a far-reaching manner, more than other identity conflicts. The British, who spearheaded capitalist penetration in this region, discovered this truth and constructed a system of control based on it. But the persistence of communal conflict is not simply a colonial legacy, but an inevitable result of the penetration of capital’s logic in a specific socio-cultural context. Liberal democracy only universalizes communal conflicts by fragmenting society still further, since the basic ideology of democracy, abstract individualism, makes citizens more prone to fundamentalist convictions: fundamentalism comes to seem the only basis for stability in a fast-changing world. This paradox is just one of the numerous paradoxes of which capitalism is composed.

Communal Identities and Class Politics

The ironies we are concerned with here concern the ‘secular’ purpose of communal identities and their politics. If we look at the history of communal sentiment and communal conflict in the Indian sub-continent, we find that the modern forms of both arose with the installation of the competitive ethic at the time of the advent of the British. Reform and modernization movements within the various communities mediated the process of identity formation. Westernization, which connoted bourgeois culture, engendered two different tracks of socio-cultural development. First, a reaction, represented by revivalism, financed and led by the declining aristocracy; and second, a process of assimilation and adjustment by the protégés of the British. Both were complementary. Among the propertied strata, family structures accommodated both strands – modernity and ethnicity – and this gave birth to Indian nationalities and nationalism. Western education generated a new sense of, and search for, identity, conditioned essentially by the question of who would get the ‘scarce’ material benefits that were available as rewards for the privilege of being educated. A new urban salariat started expressing its demands and needs, and gave birth to modern Indian politics. The Indian National Congress was its most significant attempt to create a political lobby but numerous other associations, varying according to the specificities of India’s diverse regions, began to be founded to voice the ‘deprivations’ – caste, religious and regional – felt by the new salariat.

The newly-educated and the salariat among the Muslims in the Muslim minority regions also felt deprived of opportunities befitting their qualifications. The birth of the Muslim League epitomized this feeling, and was their attempt to associate for this purpose. Hamza Alavi points out that it is true that it was Muslim notables, so-called ‘feudals’, who presided over the birth of the Muslim League in December 1906 at Dacca. This has misled too many historians about the character of the Muslim League. The
fact of the matter is that the Muslim League, soon after its initiation by Muslim notables, was taken over by the Muslim Salariat .... Later, by 1910, the leadership and control of the Muslim League passed into the hands of men from a relatively more modest background who have been described as ‘men of progressive tendencies’ .... They pushed the Muslim League in a new direction and sought co-operation with the larger Indian nationalist movement and the Congress, provided Muslim Salariat rights were protected.3

The Muslim League did not display any fundamentalist tendency. Distrust of the ‘secular’ credentials of the Congress among the leaders of the Muslim League came only after the Congress chose to negotiate with the Deobandi Ulema as representatives of the Muslim community and to back their Khilafat – ‘a bizarre movement of religious obscurantism that unleashed rabid and atavistic passions among Indian Muslims .... The movement promised to isolate the Muslim Salariat leadership from Muslim masses by arousing their fanatical passions behind a hopeless and anachronistic cause’.4 Yet the ‘secular’ leaders of the Indian freedom struggle backed it! It was this fact that alienated the Muslim League from the Congress, since it clearly showed the opportunism of the majority within the leadership of the Congress. On the other hand, from its inception there was a growing influence of Hindu sectarianism within the Congress too, due to the character of its main social base. The development of Hindu sectarianism reflected the same competitive logic which drove the Muslim salariat towards Muslim sectarianism.

Communal sectarianism took an ugly turn when its proponents resorted to mass propaganda and mobilization for settling their intra-class dispute. But it would be wrong to attribute the communal conflict evident throughout the history of the freedom movement to the conscious deliberations of a few selfish bigots, or the tactical ploys of inconsistent ‘secular’ democrats. Inherent in it were the multifaceted dynamics of colonial capitalism. It was a birth-pang of a new society – the absorption of the vast subcontinent of India into the global machinery of capitalist accumulation as a ‘late’ capitalist society. At that time, as Sarkar says, ‘one type of militancy could easily turn into another’.5 Newly urbanized workers, recently impoverished peasants and artisans, powerless in the already saturated labour market, could only rely on their traditional loyalties and bonds – caste, religion and region – as political shields and initial ways to form ‘combinations’. So, for example, Muslim and Hindu jute workers, both demanding holidays, rioted over when they should be – at Eid/Muharram, or Rathjatra. Significantly, ‘the first relatively stable labour organization that we hear of in the Calcutta industrial area was the Muhammedan Association of Kankinara, founded in 1895’.6 But then these associations took their own course – they would build temples and mosques, too. For a class response we must look to the action of the jute entrepreneurs, who demanded that the growth of these associations should be checked; which meant nothing less than repressing incipient working-class consciousness.
Although Islamic fundamentalism, like Hindu fundamentalism, was a response to the loss of the privileges and occupations that the ‘organic intellectuals’ (the clerks and the clergy) of yesteryear had formerly enjoyed, its mass base was provided by traditional artisans, guild-masters and petty traders, who were often lost in the new markets dominated by mass production, and relegated to the status of suppliers of raw materials. ‘They became extremely bigoted and developed an uncompromising attitude towards the West. The Ulema’s outlook reflected that also’.7

The Hindi-Urdu Conflict in Context

As indicated earlier, the elite origins of contemporary communal conflicts lie in the competition for supremacy between particular sections of the propertied interest and the professional political class which rules on their behalf. Skilled, educated workers are needed more and more in the production and service sectors, yet the production of ‘human resources’ always exceeds demand for them; in their desperate competition for privileged job opportunities they inevitably look for non-economic means to get them, and hence become first imbibers, and then agents and activists of the ideological abracadabra of fetishistic, homogenized socio-cultural identities. The Hindi-Urdu debate was a political artefact, which offered huge scope for dividing the ranks of the educated working class, since attaching a separate language to a social identity endows it with a sense of nationhood. In this particular case, however, the linguistic divide was itself false, rendering the whole concept of religious nationhood baseless and inconclusive, making the conflict between the ‘nations’ of Hindustan and Pakistan inherently irreconcilable.

For the Hindi/Urdu conflict was never about the legitimation of any popular language, but a struggle over a vocabulary and a script. Hindi and Urdu share an identical grammatical structure with somewhat different vocabularies and different scripts. With extra doses of Sanskrit words it becomes Hindi, and with extra doses of Persian and Arabic words it is Urdu; but Hindi-Urdu debaters conduct their arguments as if scripts and lexical borrowings were essential features of linguistic difference. It is worth remembering that most European languages use the same Roman script, while Japanese uses three different scripts. In terms of the way the proponents of Hindi versus Urdu conduct their debate, European languages would be considered all the same and Japanese would be considered three different languages; whereas from a European or Japanese standpoint, Hindi and Urdu are really two names for the same language. Yet by Muslimizing Urdu, and Hinduizing Hindi, the rivals in the competition for jobs for educated workers succeeded in making this false divide into a national one. Hindi would eventually become the official language of India, and Urdu of Pakistan.

The Hindi-Urdu issue was thus a vehicle of intra-class rivalry – between and among the rural and urban gentry. The ‘Hindiwallahs’, epitomizing the bid for power in the local state and other political institutions by rural and urban Hindu hegemonic interests, subordinated many rich popular languages, along with their speakers, the common majority. These languages were relegated to the status of
rustic vernaculars – dialectal appendages of the sophisticated Savarna Hindi: Maithili, Bhojpuri, Magahi, Marwari – all were merged into the ‘Hindi-belt’. This process gave the Hindu elite a homogeneous support base whose voice the newly arrived Hinduwallahs became – the organic intellectuals of the new propertied elements of the ‘Hindi-belt’. Thus, the popular masses and their voices were ‘subaltern’-ed. The vigour of Hindi imperialism was such that within a few decades local scripts such as Kaithi and Mahajani were completely forgotten. These successes inflated the hegemonic spirit of the Hindi elite, encouraging it to dub all attempts to counter it as divisive and insurgent. This created an unhappy situation after independence, especially for the non-Hindi ‘nationalities’.

In the United Provinces one sees this conflict developing with the rise of rural elites who came mostly from families of Hindu landlords (Rajputs-Bhumihars), priests (Brahmins) and merchants (Baniyas), and their gradual urbanization; in the towns they found already existing and powerful Muslim and Kayastha elites. The new Hindu elites found allies in Bihar and the Central Provinces, where Sanskrit vocabulary was a major influence, while the Muslim elites found allies in the Western areas of the region, where Persian-Arabic influence was strong.

Differential treatment of these elites on regional and communal lines by the colonial rulers furthered the divide. Lieutenant-Governor Macdonnell decreed that ‘The ratio of Muslims to Hindus should be reduced to three to five’. He wrote to the Governor-General, Lord Curzon: ‘We are far more interested in [encouraging] a Hindu predominance than in [encouraging] a Mahomedan predominance, which, in the nature of things, must be hostile to us’.8

In general, the Hindi-Urdu conflict in the pre-independence era set the tone for all other linguistic and identity clashes in the region after independence. The failure to subjugate Urdu script, in which most of the progressive literature in the ‘Hindi-belt’ had been written in pre-partition days, forced the hegemonic forces to communalize the issue. They made the script debate an issue for communal mobilization. The marginalization of popular languages and scripts was an evident result of this process. The economic have-nots everywhere were culturally marginalized – they became cultural have-nots at the service of the haves. This ghettoization of ‘the multitude’ is an essential part of this process, through which ‘the multitude’ is disallowed as a political entity. Urdu – the diction and the script of the old nationalist consensus, which had been a popular radical instrument in the hands of non-institutional literates (like Nazir Akbarabadi, Jafar Zatalli and many others in the twentieth century), became a mere tool of clerical manipulation: Urdu became the Muslim language. Illiterate people, living in the same area and speaking in an identical way, but using no script, were divided into two ‘linguistic’ communities. This fact shows clearly that the Hindi-Urdu debate is not a linguistic debate, but a potent politico-ideological device.

Secular-Communal Politics and Class Struggle

In Muslim majority areas, west and east presented different pictures. On the whole, in none of these areas did the Muslim League and its community politics have any decisive influence before the late 1930s. Not even the slogan of
‘Pakistan’ could raise any support, except from a few utopian urban intellectuals and the salariat. In Punjab, for example, while the Muslim League existed, under the leadership of the great poet Iqbal, religious bigotry was not the basis of its politics; it simply wanted to unite the urban professionals and salariat in the Muslim community in defence of their interests. Even so it had a meagre presence in the political life of the region.

In the east, the dynamics of the polity were given by peasant struggles and landlord reaction, and this class struggle was by and large open and, hence, secular. The peasantry (both Hindus and Muslims) stood in solidarity with their brethren in Bihar and elsewhere, who were linked to the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) and the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha (BPKS) and their radical leaderships. Alongside this was a secular Krishak Proja Party, under the leadership of A.K. Fazlul Haq, in which power rested with a radical coalition of Muslims and Hindus united around the demand for the abolition of Zamindari. On the other side, to curb the menace of this peasant radicalism, the Hindu and Muslim Zamindars [tax-collecting landowners] of Bengal joined hands whenever they needed to, even if they belonged to different parties for their daily competitive purposes. The communal rift, in fact, became their single most important tactic for breaking up the unprecedented unity along class lines that was being displayed by the tenants and poor peasantry.

In the west, in Punjab, before the 1940s, the dominant ruling party was a secular landlord alliance – the Unionist Party, composed of Hindu-Muslim-Sikh landed magnates. Sir Fazli Hussain, with his right-hand man Sir Chhotu Ram, founded and dominated the party, and Sir Sundar Singh Majithia, the leader of the Sikh landed interest, completed the triumvirate. In Sindh, too, coalitions of Muslim and Hindu landlords dominated the politics of the province and formed the provincial government, their socio-political behaviour and legacy being similar to that of their counterparts in Punjab. So in these regions, too, communal politics was not dominant. On the other hand the Muslim peasantry, who predominated in the west, were unable to develop their own class politics as their counterparts did in the east, and the populist religious politics of religious leaders played an important role in keeping matters this way. These religious leaders, many themselves belonging to the landowning class or feeding off its patronage, anaesthetized and sublimated popular feelings of discontent, creating instead a mass base for their patrons. This religious influence proved lethal and potent for fundamentalist exploitation in later years.

It was only when the actual cultivators in the east raised a demand for tenancy rights, giving rise to fears of a pro-peasant tilt in the nationalist leadership throughout the country, that rent-squeezing landlords and the rural aristocracy started taking shelter under the cloaks of the Ulema and the Pundits, seeing this as the only way to protect their economic interests in what was still predominantly a rural society. As for the western regions, one may quote Hamza Alavi again:

The politically more astute and, in terms of recognition of their class interests, far-sighted landlords, such as Mumtaz Daulatana and Nawab
Mamdot, saw the need to change horses earlier than many others. Ultimately, by that fateful year 1946, most of them accepted the change of tactics to preserve the long term interests of their class by joining the Muslim League and taking over the new state of Pakistan, which was to be the guarantee of their survival as a landlord class, which was threatened by the Congress commitment to land reform.9

I would add simply that the Congress’ commitment to land reform turned out to be mainly tactical and verbal, as the whole history of the peasant movement in India attests.

As stated earlier, both the Congress and the Muslim League began as associations of the salariat, an auxiliary class whose natural attachment to the economically dominant class derives from their personal class ‘origins’ and career needs. This accounts for the opportunist and inconsistent stands taken by the Congress and the League throughout the history of the independence movement. They were always ready to compromise, however defiant they sounded. In the process they became vocal lobbyists for the indigenous fundamental classes, the rising bourgeoisie, landlords, moneylenders and others who wanted concessions from the state. Their apparent separateness from their protectors made them acceptable to the downtrodden fundamental classes whose grievances they also voiced – the peasantry, simple commodity producers and the proletariat. This made these associations powerful and effective agencies for controlling the lower classes for the benefit of their benefactors. Moreover this political structure revealed the crystallizing shape of the future post-colonial state.

The last decade of colonial rule in India saw massive unrest on class lines. When organized trade unionism and the peasant movement appeared on the political scene they terrified the established leadership of the nationalist movement. Although the propertied interests appreciated the value of mobilizations of the downtrodden when bargaining with the state in their own interests, they always tried to rein in the independent activities of these forces, aligning themselves for this purpose with the colonial regime. When the peasantry in Bihar stormed the Assembly in 1937, G.D. Birla, an industrialist and protégé–sponsor of Mahatma Gandhi, voiced the fears of the ‘nationalists’ when he warned that this could lead to an open assault on the bourgeois and petty bourgeois nationalist leadership: ‘the rank and file’, he said, ‘seems to be confusing freedom with indiscipline’. Later, he complained that ‘indiscipline’ was leading to ‘threats of a flight of capital from Congress ruled Bombay and UP to the princely states where labour laws hardly existed’.10

The Congress’ willingness to serve the interests of its propertied trustees was reaffirmed in 1946 when independent working-class action ‘infested’ even the armed forces, and workers and peasants struck in unison throughout the whole country in a remarkable show of communal harmony – on the eve of the communal holocaust which was already being engineered in the plans for partitioning the subcontinent. An unprecedented situation arose when the nationalist leadership stood against the rising wave of revolutionary discontent, condemning
as sinful the growing Hindu-Muslim unity at the grass roots. It was certain that if the British stayed any longer it would create a situation where the uprising would not be only against them, but also against the bourgeois leadership of the national movement. It was at this juncture that the national leadership abandoned every kind of mass initiative and started seeking administrative solutions to the ‘national’ question.

Partition was its inevitable result — a compromise between all the ruling-class forces in the region to thwart a bigger threat to established property relations. And post-colonial history confirms that partition provided a long-term formula for limiting any political fallout from the volatile path of bourgeois development. Indian and Pakistani ‘nationality’ became two ideologies by which nationalist-communal frenzy is fomented in each country to thwart any political ‘instability’ in the region. ‘National security’, ‘foreign intrusion’ and proxy wars constitute the post-colonial political lexicon in terms of which class-based unity among the exploited classes is routinely opposed.

PARADOXES OF ‘SECULAR’ AND DEMOCRATIC POLITICS – THE POST-COLONIAL MIASMA

The formation of the Constituent Assembly and the transfer of power in 1947 constituted a two-part compromise charted by the nationalists. First there was a purely legal-administrative gradual transfer of power in order to allow agitation to subside, to be isolated and managed, giving the hegemonic politico-economic interests enough time and space to take up their positions in the management of independence and the future government. The British aim was to develop the region as a future neo-colonial arena for business, direct colonialism having become redundant. They also sought to minimize the damage to foreign economic interests already established in the region. The influential presence of the Soviet Union naturally played an important part in determining the British formula for Indian independence.

The second dimension of the compromise proved decisive for the geo-political formation of the Indian State. It was a compromise between the rural feudal strata and small-scale capitalists, on the one hand, and the nationalists representing mainly the big bourgeoisie, on the other. The federal character of the Indian state represented this compromise. Landed interests and small-scale capitalists got a strong say in regional politics and mobilization, and a degree of relative autonomy, while ‘national’ planning, with its obvious tilt in favour of the big industrial interests (the Bombay Club), constituted the centre. The allocation of powers in the constitution via Centre, State and Concurrent lists confirmed this compromise: the passing and implementation of anti-zamindari laws became dependent on the regional ruling interests.

This compromise served to consolidate a peculiar kind of multi-party ‘democracy’ in which interests seem to be very fragmented, yet until recently were quite stable. A summary dating from the early 1970s remains apt, notwithstanding its Soviet provenance:
… a large number of organisations enjoying limited influence within the confines of a single state or even a single region within a state; a complex interweaving of revolutionary-democratic and bourgeois-nationalist ideology and politics; blurred distinctions between bourgeois and petty bourgeois interests; a significant role of religious, caste and regional interests behind the emergence and activities of political organisations, which provided a reliable reflection of the social and class structure of Indian society in the course of transition to capitalism, in which petty bourgeois strata and groups were predominant, but which also contained classes representing the now obsolescent feudal order. The political life of India had been affected by the specific character of the Indian bourgeoisie which was only just taking shape, the main groups in which consisted of small-scale entrepreneurs, often representing local, ethnic or regional interests, and also by the role of such traditional social institutions as caste and religion.11

In this context ‘secularism’ offered a political ideology to rationalize these compromises and the evolution of ‘salad-bowl’ democracy. In the wake of the mass non-communal upsurge of the rural and urban oppressed against their exploitation and oppression, ‘secularism’ was an engineered harmony between the rival communal leaderships, recognizing the communities represented by them as the negotiating units for independence. Throughout the years 1945-47, then, the issue of independence was negotiated as a communal problem. As mentioned above, the negotiators denounced the working-class and peasant struggles throughout the region which had hastened the departure of the British – and which, remarkably, had overcome the so-called ‘communal problem’ – as obstacles to the attainment of independence. This behaviour on the part of the nationalist leaders reflected their class allegiance, as events after independence proved. The Telangana Movement against landlordism led by Nizam, the Tebhaga struggle for tenancy rights, the Kashmiri uprising against Hindu landlords, the Warli uprising against the ‘simple reproduction squeeze’ of the moneylending merchants, were all crushed by the post-independence ‘secular’ government lest they call into question the ‘composite’ regime of exploitation negotiated during the transition.

The way the language issue was dealt with provides a glimpse of the India which the hegemonic forces sought to build. With the ‘secular liberal’ nationalist compromise between the bourgeoisie and the Hindu fundamentalist rural rent-squeezers, the former had to make considerable concessions to the latter. These compromises are evident in the constitution itself. Regarding the language issue, the Hindi/Urdu divide was constitutionalized, Urdu being reduced to the status of a communal language. Initially, it was not even included in the list of national languages, and when it was later included, at the behest of Nehru, Sanskrit accompanied it, as a ‘modern’ Indian language. The volatility of the issue was thus confirmed and ensured forever. The nationalist goal of a composite national language died with the advent of ‘administered’ freedom.
‘Secularism’ as practised in India thus represents not the defeat of communalist forces but a compromise between them. It is a screen behind which the bogey of communalism can safely rest, to be recalled from its slumbers whenever the ‘fundamental’ system requires. In recent years, however, the ‘secular compromise’ has been in crisis, reflecting politico-economic changes and realignments of class forces that have occurred since independence.

All this having been said, it is important to remind ourselves again that political engineering through identities and ideologies is not a mere ‘legacy’ of colonialism, as many would have us believe, but a necessary political realization of the competitive ethic inherent in the social relations of production in a ‘late capitalist’ country. It provides the necessary infrastructure for determining the pace and path of the constant reorientation of markets. In this regard, we may recall the complementary roles of baniyas (petty traders) and the Hinduization process in the tribal areas throughout the country. In the tribal regions they have been agents of both Hinduization and commercialization. The marginalized communities become part of the mainstream politico-economic processes – as potential consumers and recruits in the labour market. Maratha chauvinism and Ganapati utsavas in the Warli belt of Maharashtra destroy the simple isolated life of the tribal peoples at the same time that they monetize their social life by drawing them into costly Hindu festivities and giving them mainstream aspirations. The immediate effect of this process has been a tremendous growth in the plantation industry in this region, exploiting cheap female labour, while the male members of the community become ‘lumpenproletarians’ and are hired as agents of control by individual capitalists and merchants, and become enthusiastic activists and ‘goons’ for local political forces.

Another example is the way Hindu fundamentalism was the ideological weapon of choice of Hindu mercantile and financial interests facing tough competition from Muslim Bohras and Parsis on the western coast, while the power of the Hindu landlords–merchants in Muslim-majority areas was declining. After independence, the ousted feudal and rentier landlords joined the ranks of right-wing fundamentalism. Within the Congress itself there was a very powerful lobby of these classes. But productive capital and parasitic interests clashed frequently, leading to constant re-combinations of the latter as separate political forces – the Hindu Mahasabha, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Jan Sangh, the Swatantra Party, etc. The number of disaffected groups was further swelled by frequent crises in the federal structure, due to clashes between the general interest of the capitalist class, dominated by the monopolies, and the regional interests of the rising rich peasantry and petty bourgeoisie.

On the other hand, after Partition the Islamic community in India suffered an introversion; it became ever more suspicious of the intentions of the Hindu mainstream, as industrialization and the growth of the metropoles steadily impoverished the self-employed Muslim artisans and the Muslim lower middle class. This process created a mass base for Muslim politics, making the victims pawns
of the hegemonic interests in the Muslim community – the traders, the clergy and the intelligentsia/salariat. Despite the absence of serious competition between Muslims and Hindu elites – or for that matter, between any other sections of these communities – Partition established communal conflict and chauvinism as normal political devices to thwart any real threat to the politico-economic system or the balance of class forces.

In the 1960s a tremendous growth in urban unemployment, especially of educated people, and an absence of any genuine attempt to unite unemployed youth on class lines, created a basis for a politics of right-wing reaction in which diverse and contradictory interests aligned against the pro-monopoly policies of Indira Gandhi. Besides this there was a clear conflict between the particularist interests of private capital and the state as the general protégé of the capitalist interest, a conflict which was resolved in the form of the Janata government of 1977-80, heralding the end of state-regulated capitalism. Subsequent governments were more and more inclined to take the path of liberalization.

The inability of the bourgeoisie to completely overthrow the old rural order, for fear of destabilizing their own position, meant that they had to wait for the gradual ‘trickle-down’ effects of macro-economic policy to open up the country’s vast rural market for direct profit-making. They had to give the landlords an opportunity to transform themselves into capitalist farmers by the so-called green revolution. This, however, could work only in perennially irrigated areas; in other areas, the transformation of the country’s political-economic system was an example of what Gramsci called a ‘passive revolution’, occurring through monetization, commercialization and the slow fragmentation of landholdings. The social elements left over from the old regime fed on the new one, but still the revolution occurred. Kulaks – rich peasants and rural entrepreneurs – did slowly evolve.

With the rise of new elites from the rural gentry in north India the ‘Hindiwallahs’ once more tried to claim places in the administration. Hindi again became a tool for mobilizing the masses: Lohia’s Angrezi Hatao movement, and the Brahminical Hindi Sangharsh Samiti, comprising communals, Gandhians and intellectuals, were products of this period. State-regulated capitalist development had also seriously afflicted merchants, shopkeepers and moneylenders. The strengthening of the state sector through nationalized banks and the attempted state-monopolization of the grain trade created a large discontented element within the urban and rural bourgeoisie too. All these forces combined with the organizations of the old ‘nobility’ and mercantile capital, most of which had a communal-chauvinist orientation, like the RSS and the Jan Sangh, and rallied to the call of the Gandhian ‘national’ socialist Jayprakash Narayan for ‘total revolution’, which was already attracting a growing portion of the educated unemployed in north India. The national big industrial bourgeoisie, united under the banner of the Congress, were bewildered by this unprecedented combination and resorted to the declaration of an emergency and authoritarianism. The conflicts between these sections of the
propertied class thus provided an opportunity to ‘save’ the country from any real radical transformation, such as was evolving in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, with an increase in local class conflicts and social unrest due to unemployment.\textsuperscript{13}

By the time Rajiv Gandhi came to power in 1984, liberalization was the only course of capitalist development the Indian ruling class wanted to pursue. Even when an alternative government was formed under the leadership of V.P. Singh in 1989, on a platform of social justice, the finance ministry continued with the policy of liberalization. The eventual toppling of the V.P. government was a clear indication that the ruling class would destabilize any government that faltered in satisfying its needs. But one thing was clear about this government: it included that section among the ruling elite which had struggled hard to overthrow the parasitic class of high-caste absentee landlords in the rural sector. This new elite of newly-rich peasants was composed of former tenants who had acquired a somewhat independent status after the legal abolition of landlordism and the imposition of ceilings on landholdings, but who still did not have a definite lobby at the heart of the government, at least in the northern belt. Hence, its spoils: a statutory quota of 27 per cent of the positions in the mandarin-like bureaucracy.\textsuperscript{14}

The rise of the right

The re-communalization of politics in the 1980s and 1990s and an increasingly chauvinistic tendency reaffirmed the subtle link between politics and the ongoing economic transformation of the country. In 1991 the new Congress government of Narasimha Rao responded to the call of indigenous capital for the further liberalization it required for its expansion. In this process, an invitation to foreign capital and signing the GATT agreements were also important, as these concessions in turn gave national capital access to global markets.

In the wake of the new inflows of foreign capital indigenous industrial capital needed to check and control their all-round effects, and for this strong government was required – a ‘magnetic’ political formation with a disciplined rank and file, capable of uniting all the social forces in the country while remaining committed to the basic tenets of liberalization. The Congress had lost much of its credibility due to open corruption during its tenure of office, and had always been recognized as a rather ‘polite’ force whose loose-knit organizational structure made it unsuitable for militant policy decisions. A ‘third front’ had emerged on the initiative of left forces, but after V.P. Singh’s government of 1989 its relevance rapidly declined as it failed to propose any clear alternative socio-economic agenda, and merely bewailed the destruction of the secular and democratic fabric of the Republic. Initially, the third front played an important role in bringing to the fore the hitherto ‘subaltern’ voices of rural capital in north India, but it became a spent force, and power was soon transferred to a strong right-wing coalition government led by the BJP. The Hindu chauvinist and nationalistic slogan of ‘Swadeshi’ provided an appropriate ideological plank, which appealed to a broad range of politico-economic interests – even, as seen above, the industrial sector, whose ultimate aim was secure access to the global
market. It also proved able to mesmerize even the educated unemployed youth who were becoming a potential threat to the status quo.

Along with these developments, a movement began against those aspects of the GATT agreements, and of the subsequent activities of the WTO, which were detrimental to indigenous capital, including agrarian capital. On the whole national industrial capital benefited from the GATT, but it found it could insert its own items into the Swadeshi agenda – such as opposition to the WTO’s call to curb industries which employed child labour – and could also use the militancy of the Swadeshi movement as a weapon to hegemonize the domestic market. This dual face of industrial capital finally found perfect expression in the actions of the Vajpayee Government.

The first time Hindu nationalist militancy was used directly by industrial capital to curb militant trade unionism was right after independence in 1947. Industrialization and the gradual intrusion of capital in agriculture had created a vast population of urban have-nots who were becoming unionized. Trade unionism had already shown its militancy during the last few years of British rule, and industrialization threatened to increase its strength still further, especially around the city of Bombay. The rise of the fascistic regional party Shiv Sena, now one of the most important constituents of the Vajpayee government, was a product of this process.

Despite frequently successful attempts to play the chauvinist card, however, the representatives of industrial capital were themselves by and large secular, as they needed a smooth process for industrial expansion, and communal fascism was a force that could not be tamed for long. On the other hand they had to form coalitions with regionally-based agrarian interests, since in spite of the agrarian sector’s declining share of the GDP the strength of the rural vote gave them a major political voice. And once these interests had secured a political and administrative lobby for themselves, their declining economic strength was bound to draw them towards the assertive communal politics of the Right, which captured their aspirations in the name of Swadeshi, and towards a nationalist assertion in geo-politics; not with a compromise, but with a bang – a series of nuclear tests.

The Vajpayee government’s nuclear tests, coming early in its term of office when it had not yet obtained the confidence of the parliament, represented everything that the critics said; but more than that, they expressed the dream of all the ruling economic interests. In fact, those who criticized the government were mostly competing to take credit for the tests. The explosions were intended to warn foreign capital that it should not take the Indian market for granted; in return foreign capital would have to recognize the strength of indigenous capital, and not merely recognize it but make concessions to it. This confidence arose from the fact that global capital could not afford to neglect the Indian market.

Indeed, after the USA imposed sanctions as a response to the tests a group of American industrialists immediately realized what their repercussions would be: on the one hand, other western capitals would enter India, and on the other hand
domestic capital would get a breathing-space and be able to consolidate its position while dealing with the problems caused by the sudden inflow of foreign capital. Nuclear tests and the Swadeshi movement in India are in no way a negation of liberalization or of the process of global integration, but a political bid by a section of Indian capital to set its own terms for India’s participation in such processes. The Vajpayee government’s ‘strong’ policies express the logic of this binary politico-economic exigency.

**THE QUEST FOR AN ALTERNATIVE**

Communal mobilization is an important tool for stabilizing the hegemonic interests in society. It serves two purposes. First, it creates a social tie between rulers and ruled, giving the former a potent language in which to communicate with the latter, and fetishizing the real politics of production relations. Second, it reduces the potency of counter-hegemonic forces by diverting their energy and resources, by dividing them. It is not that in these apparent tensions the essential conflict is un-represented – on the contrary, the ideological miasma is composed of the fumes arising from that conflict, the mode in which the hegemony realizes itself. The thickness of this miasma depends on the subjective preparedness of the counter-hegemony at the moment of crisis, and how the radical forces have prepared themselves – through day-to-day guerrilla battles, as Marx called the struggle for political and economic reforms – for open class conflict.

For any alternative politics, the question is not how a particular community can gain concessions from the existing system, or how its rights are defined and secured, but rather how united action can be taken against the system which breeds community conflicts. The problem for us is not how to handle community politics but how to transcend it. The former perspective is the ground on which modern ‘secular’ politics in India stands – recognizing the hegemonic voices in communities, while ignoring their internal conflicts, and ultimately building bridges between hegemonic interests of different shapes and colours. This is basically like the petty bourgeois utopia in which free and ‘just’ competition is accepted and even sanctified, without recognizing the necessary logic inherent in it, its inevitable transformation into monopolies as a result of capitalist accumulation. ‘Secularism’ as professed in India is an abstraction made in the capitalist polity to sublimate the different voices within the ruling class, and secure its unity. It does not exclude ‘communal politics for secular purposes’.

An alternative agenda will have to begin by exposing the real semantics of status quo politics – secular and communal. To return, by way of example, to the language question: the Hindi-Urdu debate resulted in a big minority everywhere being withdrawn from the political mainstream. These citizens were insulated from participating democratically and freely in political movements, especially counter-hegemonic movements, as they naturally looked on these with suspicion and also lived in fear of being suspected of anti-‘national’ designs. Thus, the scope for radical progressive politics within their ‘communities’ was minimized. And the imputed homogeneity of those who were ghettoized and
excluded could be continually posed by the state and its allies as a potent threat – thus creating a counter-ghetto of the ‘majority’. Hence, any permanent solution to the problem of communal mobilizations will have to confront this politics directly and aim at the de-ghettoization of the multitude. Strategy will have to be built on reforms that expose and thwart the hegemonic model. We will have to hit at the ideological assumptions that rationalize such politics. By implication, in this particular case, for example, if Hindi-Urdu is really one language, why cannot both scripts be taught compulsorily and to everybody, like Japanese? This will simply do away with all the communal schisms and sectarianism that have been developed on this particular issue, while also partially dealing with the real danger of the marginalization of the country’s ‘progressive literary heritage’. Any other solutions are futile exercises, based on false assumptions.

NOTES

The author wishes to acknowledge Dr. Ather Farouqui not only for his inspiration, but also for his determination to make his collaborators and associates deliver for a definite cause.

1 Under the category of militant Dalit struggles I include the rural mobilizations by Naxalite outfits. Though the mobilizers themselves would generally resist such categorization, because of their allegiance to Marxist ideology, the rural struggles in 1980s and 1990s reveal that the issues on which mobilizations took place were largely linked to notions of dignity, or issues relating to the sphere of circulation. They rarely centred on the system of production, but focused more on cultural and social vestiges of the ancien régime which in fact were regularly reproduced by the system of production.

2 ‘The “salariat” is an “auxiliary class” (a concept that must be distinguished from that of a “ruling class”) whose class role can be fully understood only in terms of its relation to “fundamental classes” (from which the “ruling class” is drawn); i.e. the economically dominant classes viz. the economically dominant metropolitan and indigenous bourgeoisies and the land owning classes on the one hand and, and the subordinate classes, the proletariat and the peasantry on the other. Given a particular configuration of class forces in the state and society members of the salariat attach themselves to “fundamental classes” by virtue of their own personal “class origins” or through “class affiliation” by virtue of its need and willingness to serve an economically dominant class for career considerations regardless of their individual class origins. An example of such careerism can be seen in the willingness of the Indian and Pakistani salariat to serve anti-national purposes of foreign (metropolitan) bourgeoisies at the cost of the nation that they purport to serve’ (Hamza Alavi, ‘Pakistan and Islam: Ethnicity and Ideology’, http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/sangat/Pakislam.htm, originally published in Fred Halliday and Hamza Alavi, eds., State and Ideology in the Middle East and Pakistan, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1988.
3 Alavi, ‘Pakistan and Islam’.
4 Ibid.
6 Sarkar, Modern India, p. 63.
7 Alavi, ‘Pakistan and Islam’.
9 Alavi, ‘Pakistan and Islam’.
10 Sarkar, Modern India, pp. 361-2.
12 The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (literally the National Voluntary Organisation) is the biggest cadre-based Hindu organization based on fascist principles. Though declaring itself to be a cultural organization, it is the mother of all the major Hindu fundamentalist organizations in the country, including the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which is leading the ruling coalition in India.
13 In this the propertied classes were helped by the homogenizing ideology of ‘oppositional politics’, which again dominates the scene today. Every real radical option was thwarted by rhetorical verbosity and sloganeering, such as the call for ‘total revolution’.
14 The reservation policy or quota system reserves government jobs for members of specified castes. Earlier, 22 per cent of jobs were reserved for scheduled castes and tribes (SC&ST), which due to their prevailing lack of educational opportunities meant low-paid menial jobs such as sweepers and peons, or at most clerks. Initially, for these castes, government job reservation provided an opportunity to become part of the mainstream proletariat. But with the rise of a rural bourgeoisie coming mostly from middle-status castes, another 27 per cent reservation was demanded and conceded to these castes. In contrast to the SC&ST reservation, this demand was primarily aimed at securing a lobby in the All-India and regional state bureaucracies. It definitively broke the political power of the upper-caste leadership in rural India, and provided an opportunity for the new rural rich to articulate their interests in policy-making. In fact, caste-based reservation, by neglecting class divisions within castes, ensures that the benefits go to the new-rich sections within each caste. Castes in India, like other identities, express political-economic competition within the propertied interest.
15 Attempts have been made to make Urdu part of the secular curriculum. It is a welcome idea, as it would draw Urdu away from the obscurantist fold. But it should be remembered that as long as Hindi (the specific Brahminist Khari Boli) exists as a separate ‘language’, seeing Urdu in a secular light is implausible. Hindi’s existence depends on the marginalization and ghettoization of Urdu. Urdu’s inclusion as part of a ‘three-language formula’ would also evidently be dishonest in relation to non-Hindi/Urdu speakers.