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Reflections on the Political Present

K N Panikkar

Lineages of the Present: Political Essays by Aijaz Ahmad; Tulika, New Delhi, 1996; pp 440, Rs 550.

THIS collection of essays by the author of the widely acclaimed earlier work, In Theory, makes compelling reading on the political and ideological present. These essays, written over a period of 15 years, cover a very wide spectrum - from democracy and dictatorship in Pakistan to a critique of Derrida's Spectres of Marx. Each of them, the author states, is an effort "to make the opacity of the present intelligible" by reflecting on the making of the present, and on "the historical sedimentation, even contradiction, that went into that making". Although they do not "observe the protocols that are proper to history as an academic discipline", they are embedded in a view of history, firmly rooted in Marxism and critical of post-structuralist, post-modernist, sub-alternist paradigms of interrogating social reality. This theoretical engagement makes these essays a significant intervention in contemporary academic and ideological debates.

With the exception of a couple of essays, all others are concerned with political, social and cultural developments in the subcontinent. They cover the tortuous path of politics in Pakistan, a rather unconventional reading of Abul Kalam Azad's career and the ideological shifts in Urdu in post-independence India. The critique of Derrida's book Spectres of Marx, written in the wake of the collapse of European communism, persuasively argues that "no easy reconciliation between Marxism and deconstruction is really possible unless much changes not only in certain practices of Marxism but in deconstruction itself".

The opening essay of the volume, 'Imperialism and Progress', based on a review of the influential British author Bill Warren's book, Imperialism: Pioneer of Colonialism, published in 1980, firmly controverts the revisionist view that colonialism has brought about qualitatively beneficial transformation of colonial societies. This revisionist view, still popular and influential in certain quarters is essentially a defence of imperialism and legitimising of colonialism. In its reckoning colonialism is a progressive agency of industrialisation and technological advance. Discounting the importance of the 'drain of wealth' from the colonies and the role of colonial markets in the development of capitalism in Europe, it dismisses the very concept of imperialism as nothing but sheer propaganda unleashed by the Marxists to the detriment of the working class.

For underlying the progressive character of colonialism the revisionist history employs both empirical and theoretical arguments. Karl Marx is often invoked - his celebrated essays on India in which he referred to England as "the unconscious tool of history" in bringing about a social revolution in Hindustan is cited as an example. Warren makes out Marx as an outright enthusiast of colonialism which militates against the overall structure of Marx's analysis. Even when emphasising the social revolution, Marx refers to the crimes of England.

Aijaz rightly argues that it is not proper to construct Marx's theory of colonialism based on the two articles on India alone. They are not full-bodied texts on colonialism, written when the colonisation of India was just being completed and the European knowledge on India was quite rudimentary. If the India articles are read in conjunction with Marx's other writings on the subject, it would become clear that Marx and Engels did not hold a static view and had "certain evolution in their reflections on the subject", which culminate in a view of European colonialism ultimately as a 'bleeding process'.

Bill Warren's work was not the only one of its kind. Revisionist history has persisted in different forms, legitimising and rationalising colonialism, even exorcising colonialism from the analytical model. Both neo-colonialism and post-modernist scholarship share such tendencies. There are quite a few even among Indian scholars who subscribe to Warren's view, even if indirectly, that the benefits of colonialism went not to the coloniser but to the colonised. After all India did have the benefit of Pax Britannica, a modern transport system, a postal and telegraph service and so on. Never mind the cost India had to pay for it, both economically and politically. By either overlooking the specificity of colonialism or by negating it altogether the neo-colonial and post-modernist scholarship underplay the essentially exploitative and denuding character of colonialism.

I consider three interrelated essays on fascism and Hindu communalism the core of the book. They are 'Fascism and National Culture: Reading Gramsci in the Days of Hindutva', 'On the Ruins of Ayodhya: Communist Offensive and the Recovery of the Secular' and 'Structure and Ideology in Italian Fascism'. All the three essays were written in the wake of the demolition of Babri masjid on December 6, 1992 which unmasked the ugly face of right-wing Hindu-communal fascism. Looking for European parallels for what has been happening in India during the last decade or so is a very common tendency. It overlooks the specific socio-economic conditions in which fascism grew in Europe and its distinct ideological form in India. Aijaz cautions us that "it would be dangerous to seek real parallels or to merely apply ideas which arose in a different context of formulation and application". Yet, the Italian experience and Antonio Gramsci's reflections upon them offer rich analogues, perhaps more pertinent than the German, because of ideological and economic similarities, for charting out the course of Hindu-communal fascism.

Antonio Gramsci, often misrepresented as a culturalist and his concepts applied by ignoring his Marxist theoretical framework, underlines the conjectures in which the growth of fascism was rooted in Italy. In the ideological-cultural sphere Gramsci recognises the failure of the Renaissance and Reformation to institute a secular culture and to create a modern nation-state, despite great civilisational depth, as a crucial factor. It would be useful to consider the weakness of our own Renaissance in the 19th century and its limitations in the creation of a civil society, in the context of the emergence of hindutva.

The author reminds us that Gramsci initially considered fascism as a "superficial, superstructural phenomenon, bound to be defeated in the short run". This optimism soon turned out to be illusory as fascism was rooted in many pathologies of national life and reflected the crises generated by them. In India too hindutva was dismembered by many as a transitory phenomenon which, given the cultural plurality and civilisational depth, will not be able to succeed. Like in Italy, this was soon belied, as hindutva gained considerable clout during the decade, after remaining marginal for a long time. Aijaz argues that it was possible because of "the lapsing of the Nehruvian, Left of Centre hegemony coupled with the failure of the Left to provide a national alternative".
Hindutva made great strides in this political vacuum: it attracted adherents out of those keen on a cultural identity in a modernising society; and drew the support of those mired in religious obscurantism. Above all, communal fascism is the by-product of the pathology of uneven development.

Gramsci's analysis of the interrelationship between tradition, nation and irrational politics offers useful lessons for us. Without opposing tradition, but only rejecting what "have become irrational and yet survive as signs of stasis in popular life or as oppressive encrustations in the social make up of the upper classes", Gramsci unravels the historical myth of the nation. He writes:

the rhetorical prejudice (originating in literature) according to which the Italian nation has always existed, from ancient Rome to the present day. This and other tenets and intellectual conceits, although politically 'useful' in the period of the national struggle as a means of stirring up and concentrating energies, are critically inept and become, ultimately, a weakness (p 241).

Gramsci's view on Italy is a strong reminder of the contemporary Indian situation in which the idea of an enduring Indian nation, from the Vedic times to the modern, a myth which came into being as a necessary ideological prop for the anti-colonial struggle, is being accepted as a historical reality. Aijaz rightly argues that "nation is not a thing which once made, simple endures; that 'nation', like class, is a process, which is made and remade, a thousand times over, and more than a process, 'nation' is a terrain of struggle which condenses all social struggles".

The Hindu fundamentalists are currently engaged in constructing and propagating concepts of nation and nationalism which are both ahistorical and undemocratic. Ahistorical because they trace nationalism to the ancient past and undemocratic because they negate the historically evolved reality of cultural pluralism. Yet, they have gained considerable social acceptance, particularly among the middle class. An explanation for this phenomenon does not lie within its history alone, it is embedded in the way in which Indian society and polity was shaped during the last 20 years. But there is a tendency to account for it is exclusively religious-cultural terms which Aijaz rightly rejects. If Hindutva were the issue a 'Hindu Rashtra' would have come into being in the wake of the partition. That India opted for a non-denominational, constitutional democracy, despite the painful experiences of 1946-47, cannot be easily wished away. Political Hindutva asserted itself very much after the partition, even if the partition has been invoked as a symbol for communal mobilisation.

The conditions which helped fascism to grow in Italy Aijaz puts succinctly as follows:

...the inner decay of the institutions of liberal democracy; massive public outrage against the conduct of those institutions; the inability of the Left, owing to its own internal crisis and fragmentation, to channel this outrage into purposive and progressive action; the acceptance of fascism as a legitimate national force by the bloc of Rightist forces that may not be otherwise fascist; outbreak of a whole range of morbid symptoms and irrationalities, including a resurgence of philosophical irrationalism, owing to a generalised sense of betrayal; a growing perception among the directionless people that only a strong government can save them from the chaos created by the historic ruling bloc, and a perception among the ruling classes that only a fascist government can carry out the tasks of orderly social reproduction that the eroded liberal institutions can no longer ensure (p 329).

At least some of these conditions inherent in Indian polity and society have helped the resurgence of Right wing political Hindutva. The erosion of democratic institutions since the emergency and the manner in which these institutions have functioned, including the electoral system, led to a general disenchantment. Hindutva has successfully appropriated the political space thus created by the failure of democracy. The Left in India has not been able to take advantage of this bourgeois failure and to push politics on progressive democratic-secular lines. Even when an opportunity was offered to the Left after the election of 1996, it was unwilling to try. (Incidentally, Aijaz Ahmad was vehemently opposed to the Left leading the Left-democratic-secular coalition.*)

The political experience of the last two years when the secular forces failed to give a credible alternative leading to the capture of power by the Hindu communal right-wing has exposed the mistake of the Left. Lastly, the BJP came to power in 1998 on the slogan of a strong government – however, inept has been its track record in states in which it has ruled – which appealed to the middle class thirsting for an orderly public life.

Hindutva, it is now well known, thrives on double-speak and misrepresentation. It has so far based its political project on religious identity and aggressive nationalism – the cultural and political pillars of hindutva. But its nationalism is not anti-imperialists. During the not anti-colonial struggle, it collaborated with colonialism and it is ideologically quite comfortable with liberalisation and globalisation. It derives its nationalism not from an opposition to colonialism or imperialism but from an opposition to the domination of the Muslims of the medieval past.

Given that the 'barbarians' have crossed the gate and captured state power, in however unprincipled a manner, the question of meeting the threat of communal fascism has become the crucial political issue. In India today the Left is the most committed and sincere force opposing Hindu fascism. But how the Left would make this opposition a stronger and more effective force to actually halt the march of fascism needs considerable thought.

Aijaz had said, though before the electoral success of hindutva in 1998:

To the extent that the fascist offensive is against the most cherished aspects of our national compact as such, the refounding of the Communist movement must include the defence of this compact; and to the extent that Indian Communism has had a long and complex history intersecting with that of liberal democracy itself, communists must help the liberal centre in reconstructing those premises of Nehruvian social democracy and independent national development which are so much a target of the fascist attack today (p 266).

Aijaz had then refrained from detailing what he meant by "refounding of the Communist movement". Now that the 'barbarians' are not only in the gate, but have actually crossed it and are poised to consolidate their power through nuclear euphoria and by re-invoking the Ram mandir, is it time to consider the formation of a national anti-fascist front which Aijaz had then (in 1993) thought not possible without the "simultaneous refounding of the Communist movement and the reconstitution of Nehruvian social democracy". And if it is possible and necessary today to constitute such a front who is to take the initiative and in what form? An answer to this question is germane to the future struggle against fascism.

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*See his 'In the Eye of the Storm: The Left Chooses', EPW, June 1, 1996.

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