

Right wing populism in India

The New Agenda team interviewed C.P. Chandrasekhar, currently Professor at the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, India, and Jayati Ghosh, a development economist who is Professor of Economics at the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning in the School of Social Sciences, also at Jawaharlal Nehru University. They were in South Africa to attend an IDEAs conference on Work and Wellbeing in the 21st Century, in which the team from the Institute for African Alternatives's New Agenda was participating.

NEW AGENDA:

What stands out for you about the Narendra Modi [Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)] government's since it came to power in 2014?

C.P. CHANDRASEKHAR:

It is a government that has been deeply committed to neoliberal reform in rhetoric and practice. This has reached the extent where you have increasing leniency in taxation combined with austerity. Very strict targets are being set to fix the fiscal deficit. It has essentially meant that the role of the state, in terms of being able to facilitate any kind of welfare is undermined.

The second aspect of this government is that, far more than any former government, it has encouraged large corporates. There is this nexus between big capital, big business and the state which, given the framework of parliamentary democracy, you had tried to camouflage. Now it is all out in the open. This led to an adoption of policies, including policies that led to the sale of resources, which engineered a steep redistribution of income in favour of big business.

If you as a government are unable to engage sincerely in any kind of welfare [because you are] stuck in austerity and neoliberal policy, and you want to encourage big business, you need to do something else to try to get yourself legitimacy in the framework of liberal democracy. That took two forms: a deeply divisive agenda, identifying 'the other' which is principally Muslim and other smaller religious denominations. Second, engaging in acts which involve shock and awe. A typical example is demonetisation, which is to take out of circulation 87 percent of the currency at any given point in time. Demonetisation has badly damaged the informal sector, small-scale industries and agriculture. You basically do these kinds of things to divert attention away from the fact you are on a trajectory which is deeply unequalising and cannot do much for most of the population.

JAYATI GHOSH:

Modi will be remembered for demonetisation. This was an extraordinary move because it was done in such a completely undemocratic way with absolutely no regard for the suffering of the people or the impact it would have on the informal economy, which has still not recovered. In fact, we don't have the data on employment,

but a report which was carried out by our national statistical organisation in terms of a live sample survey was suppressed by the government. We eventually got a leak from a newspaper, which the government does not deny is the correct report. It shows that open unemployment is at a historic 45-year high, that the labour force participation overall has fallen in a time where the economy is growing at seven or more percent, where regular work has fallen as well. It is an extraordinary story of a massive attack on employment and livelihoods, beyond neoliberalism. It is bad enough to have neoliberal fiscal policies, privatisation and a lack of provision of essential public services but then to go beyond that with a massive attack on livelihoods for no particular reason.

The difference between India and other standard neoliberal regimes in a developing country is a deep lack of responsibility, a complete lack of respect for any established norms, conventions or democratic institutions and a willingness to break anything. In addition to the economic issues I've mentioned, there is the major crisis in the agricultural sector.

[The government] has also been trying to control inflation. So, when global food prices rise, the government tries to prevent exports of crops. When prices go down then they try to import more. Farmers get really messed around and there have been huge protests. Another indication of farmer distress is suicides by farmers.

The other thing that the government does, after having failed on all these economic fronts, is suppress the data, like unemployment, farmers' distress, environmental indicators, or they manipulate the data as with GDP.



All of this is combined with a politics that relies on hate and demonising ‘the other’, which in this case are Muslims or the lower caste minorities.

There is also a patriarchal ideology that is aggressively anti-women. It’s a politics that relies on creating divisions and sowing discord. [The BJP] got into power by engineering communal or what we call religious rights between communities. Now that it is clear that his [Modi’s] promise of development has failed, his party has fallen back on these very divisive, polarising tactics. It leaves a terrible legacy. The poison has entered society.

C.P. CHANDRASEKHAR:

Yes, there has been a brazen attempt to undermine democratic institutions – the judiciary, the election commission, the bureaucracy, the investigative agencies, the central bureau of intelligence. This is what authoritarianism does.

NEW AGENDA:

Can you take us through the depth and range of the assault on India’s democratic institutions?

C.P. CHANDRASEKHAR:

We know that one of the big pillars of democracy is the judiciary. The current government has tried to ‘pack’ many of the high courts or supreme courts with their own political appointees.

The other institution, which is not exactly an official institution but underpinned the vibrancy of Indian democracy, was the media. The government has allowed and actively promoted the corporatisation of the media, in particular the television media but also sections of print media.

It got to the point where something like 90 percent of the media sounds like propaganda. There is one channel, the NaMo channel [NaMo is short for Narendra Modi], or Namotv, which doesn’t have a licence, hasn’t gone through any of the clearances, but contains Modi’s speeches, talks, hagiographic biographies.

When it is criticised, the election commission claims it is not a regular channel, but that it is an advertising channel. The consequence of that is that it doesn’t fall under the same laws as a news channel.

JAYATI GHOSH:

The bias is obvious. The national TV channel only follows Modi’s rallies, and does not cover the opposition parties, [except for] maybe a two-minute slot at most. The election commission has declared the Congress election video not acceptable because one sentence refers to corruption. The election commission has not allowed that, but is allowing all kinds of things to be done by the ruling party. It’s going on as we speak, the destruction of the election commission.

India had a robust and independent statistical system set up by a great mathematician in the 1950s and was developed for an economic system that was largely informal. It was the pride of the developing world and looked upon by everybody as ‘the way to do’ [things], or the way to collect statistics in a developing economy. Of course, there were difficulties but overall it had a degree of respectability, reliability and integrity because it was at arm’s length.

For us, the institutional attack that we have experienced the most is at the universities. We work at a public university. They are places that encourage independent thinking and are therefore the home of a lot of dissent. We see this as a good thing. We like to think that we produce citizens who question and hold the government to account. It is a small and relatively elite university. In fact, the elite are alumni of JNU, which is where we both teach, so lots of judges, bureaucrats, people in the army, lawyers, are all from JNU.

However, as someone pointed out, this is a government that hates universities in general. They do not like people who question or think. They want believers. Though they hate universities in general there is a special place in hell for JNU because a lot of people had been writing about the chief minister of Gujrat, Modi’s role in the pogroms and the complete failure of the Gujarat model of economic ►



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development. JNU was then considered a Marxist place. But there is a complete spectrum of views at JNU. It is not only Marxist and socialist. It is a lively place for intellectual discussion and activity.

For the last three years there has been a systematic attempt to destroy the university. It has happened essentially by putting in a VC [Vice Chancellor] who is a member of the RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh] which is a shadowy, dangerous, terrifying, right-wing organisation that is essentially the backbone of this government. More than half of the cabinet, including the Prime Minister, is a member of the RSS. It was this organisation that assassinated Gandhi and it has proliferated over the years.

There have been systematic attempts to terrorise the student body, like arresting them for trumped-up charges like being anti-nationalist. This was a completely false claim, [which was] then projected by the compliant media. Three of our students, including the president of the Student Union, were arrested and jailed for several months and it was difficult to get them bail. Also, there was a massive public mobilisation against the students and against JNU as anti-national. It reached a fever pitch, to the point where people who invited scholars from JNU to speak were suspended from their universities because they were inviting 'anti-nationals'.

Last September, it was decided that the faculty would not get leave because they were not following orders. We were denied leave, even to attend to important academic commitments. We had to refuse various conferences because we couldn't take leave. A colleague couldn't take leave to get married. Another colleague couldn't accept a prestigious prize, which was \$100,000, because she wasn't given leave. The only reason the two of us could be in South Africa today is because we had to fight a court case. It's like that.

There is a general attack on universities. The idea is to kill public universities especially ones that have produced good quality dissent and push people to private universities where you have your own methods of control. And in general, decry science or any kind of analytical approach.

NEW AGENDA:

How did Modi come to power, what explains his broad support within the Indian population?

C.P. CHANDRASEKHAR:

There were multiple elements to it. He managed to build the image that he had converted Gujarat into this successful development experiment and that it was the best managed state in the country. The second is that he had won [the] support of big business. Many of them were given special concessions, for example, and allowed to set up factory plants in Gujarat where they would be subsidised for production. The third thing he did is to get the RSS to front *him* as the person who can actually help the BJP back to power.

Therefore, you had this grassroots support in campaigning through the RSS; support from big business; you appropriate a neoliberal agenda; and you build this whole story. But I think the real thing is that you manage to combine this really divisive agenda, this communal consolidation, with the charismatic image of a kind of 'do-er'.

But one of the problems that they [the BJP] face now is that it's clear that there is no more charisma, there is no more Modi-wave. So if you look at the arithmetics, they shouldn't be winning. But they are willing to go to any length to maintain power. They've fixed the election commission, and they tampered with the voting machines. {At the time of writing} they launched this attack on Pakistan based on a terrorist attack in Kashmir.



Economics convened by UNRISD [United Nations Research Institute for Social Development]. Jomo Sundaram had this idea that there should be a global group, and some of us were invited and this is where we decided to set this up. We just made ourselves this group!

Our purpose was to promote alternative approaches to analyse economic development, heterodox approaches, and disseminate those, specifically from a Southern perspective.

Our feeling was that the development economics knowledge comes from the North: we meet in Northern conferences, publish in Northern journals, everything is mediated by the North. We wanted to create a situation that was more direct. The structure of IDEAS reveals this. The executive committee members have to be resident in the South. For example, Jomo, when he moved to the UN, could not be on the executive committee. Those in the South have a different sense of the difficulties and approaches and the policies, contexts and struggles.

Even if you are the nicest and most enlightened person from the North, the South has a different sense. The purpose of IDEAS has been to promote, encourage, and disseminate thinking and knowledge in and from the South. Of course, we invite people in the North but it's driven by this agenda. It is also opposed to neoliberalism and neoliberal policies in general.

We have had funding issues like all progressive outfits. But we have a network and are very keen on interacting with other networks. We have had research conferences and capacity building workshops for young people, including academics, policymakers and activists. We have a working paper series, we have a website, we have an idea of developing curricula and pedagogic material.

NEW AGENDA:

We look forward to collaborating with you! **NA**

NEW AGENDA:

Communal, authoritarian and ethno-nationalist politics seems to be growing across the world. In South Africa we are no stranger to this phenomenon. There are agents in our political system who are using this rhetoric to garner support among the masses of people who are rightly angry about the slow pace of transformation. Having gone through this in India what advice do you have for progressives in South Africa? What can we do to fight this?

C.P. CHANDRASEKHAR:

It's also a period in which the Left is weak globally. It is a difficult time to be able to fight people who use obscurantist ideas, primordial connections and so on, to try and win support. For example, if you take BJP, they went to the north east of the country where there has always been inter-tribal and anti-migrant resentment for migrants from Nepal or Bangladesh. Since most of the migrants are from Bangladesh and therefore most are Muslims, they decided to combine the Hindu agenda with anti-migrant sentiment to the point where there is going to be a national register of citizens. On the other hand, they

passed a bill which says that if there are migrants who are Hindus who come from Pakistan or Bangladesh, then they have the right to claim citizenship.

What is required is the ability to change the discourse and to change it you need to restore a counter-discourse.

JAYATI GHOSH:

It is hard to know how to advise any other country. We are deep in it and we have clearly failed. I would argue that there is a way in which the pendulum swing has gone too far in countries like India. Ultimately, communal hatred only works maybe for a generation or two because it can't give you a job. Then people realise that a riot or instability is affecting their lives [negatively] too.

NEW AGENDA:

As representatives of IDEAS [International Development Economics Associates], tell us a little bit about your organisation. What kind of co-operation would you like to see with South African partners?

JAYATI GHOSH:

IDEAS actually started in South Africa in Cape Town at a conference called Rethinking Development