

By AMITA KANEKAR




Crushing dissent, Yesterday and Today
There are many memes on social media that refer to today's political situation in India as

fascism. But, if this is fascism, most of it is not exactly new. The Hathras case, horrifying as it is, is not the first such case of brutal violence against people belonging to Dalit or Adivasi or other discriminated-against communities. It is also not the first time where people in government office - expected to uphold the law - have made efforts not only to derail the investigation, but to hound, arrest, and file draconian cases against those demanding justice and those supporting the family of the victim. Nor is it just a matter of the BJP; the Congress too has presided over brutalities as terrible, as at Khairlanji, and with the same callous disregard for both the victims and the truth, and a hammering of those who protested.

Yes, there is a brazen and ruthless bias in the functioning of the authorities today, which can be seen all over the place. Hathras saw Section 144 imposed on the victim's neighbourhood but not that of the accused, with even those just wanting to meet the victim's family and report their story being arrested, while those who gathered in vocal support of the accused were not even dispersed.

This is like the Delhi riots investigation, in which many involved in the anti-CAA protests, as well as some of the riot victims themselves, have been arrested, even while those seen instigating violence during the riots are untouched.

And, of course, the Bhima Koregaon case, where again those charged with having directly fomented the violence are free, while people who were not present anywhere in the vicinity have been arrested, most of them coincidentally well-known human rights defenders, widely recognised for taking up the cause of the oppressed. The latest to be arrested in this list is Stan Swamy of Jharkhand, on charges of being connected to Maoists. A Jesuit priest and long supporter of the Adivasi struggle to preserve their community lands and livelihoods from being swallowed by corporates, Stan Swamy is 83 years old and in poor health. Plus India is in the middle of a pandemic, when seniors have been advised to stay at home. But none of this stopped the National Investigating Agency from arresting him at night, and sending him to Mumbai where a court remanded him to custody till October 23. The whole thing has as usual caused quite a lot of public outrage, and yet no surprise at all, because this is a government that has arrested many others, in similar situations.



But is this new? Some anti-caste writers have criticised liberals (usually of the dominant castes) for suddenly discovering fascism now, when Dalits, Adivasis, Pasmanda Muslims and others have been living with it for decades, facing local and social violence on a daily basis, battered by policies like Salwa Judum in Chattisgarh (launched under a Congress government at the centre), murdered in pogroms, arrested under draconian laws, held without charges, tortured in prison. The liberals did not see fascism all these decades. Anti-caste campaigner Martin Macwan has pointed out that the Hathras kind of sexual assaults would happen all the time in the villages of Gujarat just a few decades ago, but the terror was such that the world outside never even heard of them. The liberals did not see fascism then either. Nor, most importantly, do they see it in their own privilege and monopolising of resources and opportunity, while even the most basic right to life and dignity is denied to others.

Even in Goa, where people are today up in arms against the government's determination to implement projects guaranteed to destroy fragile livelihoods, the natural environment, as well as our collective future, whether through a coal hub, or power lines, or IITs, or marinas, or now a new city next to Panjim, we know that this destruction-as-development drive is not new. Every government, at least since the 1980s, has tried to make a killing through land-grab, by driving traditional farmers, fisherfolk and other communities people out of their lands in the name of development, and by wooing all kinds of questionable 'investments', even if this investment meant a further hammering to the lives, livelihoods and environment of ordinary Goans. Many of the elite castes and classes benefited from this destruction-as-development as well, and made not a whisper of protest.

So, yes, fascism can hardly be called a new arrival here, for, probably right from the start, the dominance of the privileged sections has been unchecked and ruthless.

But some things are different. One is the targetting of dominant-caste liberals, journalists, human-rights defenders, university professors, etc, who have been critical of government policies and vocal about the rights of the marginalised. Such targetting was rarely seen before. The other is the openness of everything. As Martin Macwan adds, the era when unspeakable violence happened without the world knowing is over. Not only does the news of atrocities get out - perhaps delayed, perhaps first on social media, perhaps unreported by the commercial media - but government actions, or lack of them, are revealed at once too, to be followed by public reactions. Almost every day reveals not just outrageous acts by the

authorities, but also opposition to these, even if scattered and in small numbers, or even restricted to social media and online petitions, or even just memes.



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The openness has also resulted in the opposite: strongly support for the authorities from some quarters, always in the name of nationalism. In that sense we live in a time of extremes, government-as-criminal for some and government-as-god for others. The clash even includes governments themselves, like in Jharkhand where CM Hemant Soren has strongly criticised the Centre in the past, and now again with the arrest of Swamy.

Yes, fascism is not new, but it is spreading its net. And, while there may be worse to come, the battle is increasingly out in the open.

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