

Hindutva Politics and the Indian Economy: An interview with Prabhat Patnaik*

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Question 1

In one of her recent lecture, eminent Historian Romila Thapar, said that the Indian Republic is teetering on the border line. On one side of the border stands the secular Indian Republic and on the other side the Hindu Rashtra. Do you endorse this point of view?

Yes, I agree that the Republic is teetering on the cusp of a momentous transition; but I see the two sides of this cusp somewhat differently. On one side is a secular, democratic, federal republic where citizens are free of fear and enjoy a set of political rights defended by an independent judiciary; on the other is an authoritarian-fascist State where fear is pervasive and all institutions are subservient to the executive that uses Hindutva as its vote-catching device, but works essentially to further the interests of big capital, both domestic and foreign.

“Hindu Rashtra” is not a Hindu State, in the sense of promoting the interests of the Hindus. It is an authoritarian-fascist State which suppresses not just Muslims but workers, peasants, petty producers, tribal people, oppressed castes, artists and intellectuals, the bulk of whom are Hindus; and promotes the interests of a corporate-financial oligarchy. Its electoral plank is Hindutva, but Hindutva never filled anyone’s belly; it calls its goal a “Hindu Rashtra”, but that is a misnomer.

Question 2

Perhaps, the most powerful example of the oncoming Hindu Rashtra is the picture showing Prime Minister Narendra Modi lying prostrate before the image Ram in Ayodhya. Was this public display of devotion at all necessary?

A Prime Minister like anyone else can have his personal religious beliefs, but to project the picture of his lying prostrate before the image of Ram is to appeal to people in the name of religion. This political use of religion is necessary for Modi precisely because his government cannot deliver on bread-and-butter issues that affect people’s lives.

The country, even before the pandemic, was facing the most acute economic crisis since independence: between 2011-12 and 2017-18, per capita real consumer expenditure in rural India declined by 9 per cent, which is so massive and unprecedented that the government suppressed the NSS data showing this. The pandemic has added greatly to this crisis.

The government’s own panacea for the crisis is to make fiscal transfers to the corporates, suppress workers’ rights, privatize public sector assets, make land acquisition easy, and so on, which the corporates relish without making an iota of investment. Investment depends on the growth of demand; but demand will actually shrink because of these measures, since a rupee transferred from the poor to the rich

reduces overall consumption demand. Public display of religious devotion becomes necessary in this context.

Question 3

With due deference to the Supreme Court, could it be said that the verdict delivered was also somewhat partial. You condemn the demolition of the Babri Masjid as criminal act, but in the same breath you grant the demolishers the right of building a grand temple in the disputed place, and you fling the Masjid to a remote, unknown corner. Is this example of righteous justice?

The verdict rewards vandalism. If the Masjid had not been demolished, the Supreme Court would not even have entertained a petition regarding the ownership of that land, just as it would not if some people claimed that the Raja Rani temple in Bhubaneswar stood on land belonging to their ancestors? It is the Masjid's destruction that gave post facto pertinence to this issue of ownership of that land. The Supreme Court verdict therefore actually rewarded vandalism which it simultaneously condemns as a criminal act.

Question 4

Will the Hindus or better put Sangh parivar demand the demolition of similar "mixed" shrines in Kashi and Mathura?

Since religion is being used for political purposes, the demolition of mosques in Kashi and Mathura will be effected if it becomes politically necessary, for instance if the electorate becomes restive because of the accentuating economic crisis. It is not the "Hindus" who "demand" any demolition. It is the "Sangh Parivar" that raises these demands to instigate a section of the majority community. It does so for political mileage, so that its blatant but counterproductive pro-corporate policies escape the electorate's fury.

Question 5

How could there be a return to the reality of the secular republic from the border line? By unleashing peoples movement and by positing a united opposition of the political parties?

The political parties by and large have not escaped the carrot-and-stick methods of the Modi government. I do not expect them to take the lead in organizing resistance. I put my faith in the innumerable young men and women who deeply abhor what is going on and who can initiate resistance, as became clear during the anti-CAA movement. I also expect an upsurge of movements of workers and peasants because of their extreme hardships.

Such upsurges will then overcome the paralysis of political parties, forcing them to come together on a common minimum programme that must be not just political but also economic. The Left will have a big role to play in fashioning such a programme and forging political resistance against the spectre of fascism.

** A version of this was published in The Telegraph on September 3, 2020.*