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India

India and anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act: Modi Might Have Finally Gone Too Far

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Over the past few weeks, protests have erupted across India, in perhaps the most extensive challenge to the Modi government since it came to power in 2014. The state has responded with brutal force, as dozens have now died in police violence aimed at protesters. The spark for the protests was the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act, pushed through the Indian legislature by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The act introduces discriminatory religious qualifications into citizenship laws. Achin Vanaik has been involved in the protests in Delhi, and has been writing about both the Indian right and the Indian left for decades. Thomas Crowley spoke to Vanaik for *Jacobin*.

Thomas Crowley (TC) To start, can you give a brief overview of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)?

Achin Vanaik (AV) The act enables fast-track naturalization of certain people, under the guise of their being persecuted minorities from three neighboring states, all Islamic: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. And it very explicitly excludes Muslims. By excluding Muslims, it excludes Hazaras, Baluchis, and Ahmadis — Muslims sects that are also persecuted within Afghanistan and Pakistan. It's notable also that there are a number of persecuted minorities in other neighboring states who do not come under the terms of the act, for example, Rohingyas. So this is clearly, deliberately creating a distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim minorities, and promoting the idea that India is the "natural" home of Hindus.

TC How is this act related to larger debates and developments around citizenship in India?

AV The act is the prelude — and this is very, very clear, it's been announced — to having what is called a National Register of Citizens (NRC) on an all-India level. There's no need for such a thing. Unlike the ten-year census, when they carry out the National Register of Citizens you will have to prove your citizenship according to a very restricted list of documents. Now the burden of proving one is a citizen is not on the accuser, not on the government, it's on the person. What if you are not able to prove it? For example, most births are at home, not in hospitals, and such households have no birth certificates. All those who are not Muslims can opt for being "persecuted" under the new act and can be fast-track naturalized. What will happen to Muslims? They will be sent to detention centers. This is the aim.

Let me point out that the 1935 Reich Citizenship Law first moved citizenship away from German Jews, and then sent them to concentration camps. And it happened in 1982 in Myanmar. Rohingyas were excluded from citizenship. So this is really part of a systematic attempt to exclude Muslims. They are not going to be expelled, because the neighboring states are not going to accept them. So what's going to happen to them? They're going to be in detention centers. And detention centers are already being set up in different parts of the country.

The NRC has already been implemented in one state, in Assam. What they've found is that in a state of thirty-three million, initially four million didn't have the required documentation. Then after a period of time it was reduced, but it was still nearly two million. The people already in detention centers have suffered badly. Some have committed suicide. All kinds of things have taken place. And given the huge numbers that are likely, with an all-India NRC, what will certainly happen is that a part of them will be in detention centers. But for those not in detention centers, all kinds of rights will be taken away from them: the right to vote, the right to hold land or property. In other words, a systematic effort to reduce them to second-class citizens. This is clearly the plan.

TC How have the protests against the CAA and NRC unfolded?

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AV There's been a huge upheaval against them, by three categories. First, there have been many Muslims. Then there are many others, who are very deeply concerned about this violation of the secular principle that rights should not be connected to affiliation with one specific religion. And finally, you also have a large section in the Northeast, in the state of Assam, who are protesting for reasons which have a positive and a negative dimension.

The positive dimension is, insofar as you have a large number of non-Muslims supporting the protest, at least it comes across that it's not just a small minority of so-called secular-minded people and Muslims who are upset about it, but a very large number of Hindus and others. The negative aspect is a regional chauvinism that's also connected to the concerns of the Northeast against migrants from other parts of India, especially from West Bengal.

As for these current demonstrations, they are really being spearheaded by students, up and down the country. And you will notice that there has been very considerable brutality against students in two universities in particular: Jamia Millia Islamia University and Aligarh Muslim University (AMU). Now these are what are called Minority Educational Institutions. These institutions were historically set up to enable religious minorities, primarily Christians and Muslims, to get tertiary degrees and improve their condition. They have a much larger proportion of Muslims and Christians, respectively, but they are, like all the universities, open to all comers.

So for example, at AMU and Jamia, maybe 40 percent of students will be Muslims (whereas Muslims are 14 percent of the overall population) but 60 percent of students are non-Muslims, and the majority of the staff and professors at these universities are also non-Muslims. And you had students — both Muslim and non-Muslim students — at these two universities, as well as other universities, come out in opposition to the act and in opposition to the NRC. But the brutality that has been visited upon these two universities in particular, because they are Muslim-minority education institutes, has been much greater than even the kind of brutality you've seen at other universities up and down the country. So students are protesting against this.

The fact that young people in India, students and others, are erupting in this particular way, gives me some hope, because electorally speaking, unlike in the UK and the United States, people in the eighteen-to-twenty-four age group voted disproportionately more for the BJP.

TC Why have protests exploded now, whereas one didn't see such a response to the ongoing repression in Kashmir?

AV What happened in the case of Kashmir is that the resentment was basically confined to Kashmir. You didn't have anywhere near the level of popular anger that you have now. In fact, for the Congress Party and even the mainstream left parties, their opposition to the annulment of Article 370 was not so much the fact of annulment, as much as the manner in which it was done. The Congress Party, after all, has a whole history, well before the BJP, of unconstitutionally and shamefully eroding the autonomy that was initially given and promised to the Kashmir Valley.

The current protests, on the other hand, have been everywhere. It's not been localized. And it is not an eruption that's been instigated by political parties, but by students in different universities and then joined by different protesters. There is a clear recognition that the government is really out to attack Muslims.

Now since this government is also determined to eliminate or subordinate all other political parties, the other parties are recognizing that for their own survival they have to oppose the BJP. So their motives are not pure, but they do recognize that for their own sake they have to do that. So interestingly, a number of BJP-allied parties, which supported the CAA, are now saying, do not go in for the NRC.

TC In your earlier work, in the 1990s, you were wary of describing the Hindu nationalism of the BJP as

fascism, though you noted it certainly had fascistic tendencies. What has changed since then? Has the BJP gone from a potentially fascist to an actually fascist formation?

AV The Indian left has for a long time debated the fascist or fascistic character of this force, which is clearly a far-right force. There were a number of liberal scholars who said, you know, India is a country that is so diverse, and if you really want to come to power at the center, you have to moderate. So this view is that there is always pressure for far-left forces and far-right forces to moderate, to move toward the center — something I long rejected. I've said that what's actually happened is that the far right has actually pulled the center of gravity of Indian politics to the right.

The theoretical question is: how do you understand fascism? Do you understand fascism as an organism, or do you understand it as a process? I've always taken the view, based on left traditions of understanding, that it's a process, it's something in motion. There's always a fascist potential. And the culmination of the fascist potential would be the fascist state. And the fascist state is one of the most class-autonomous forms. You have an extremely centralized and autonomous state. It's a one-party dictatorship with nothing to do with democracy, an imperial character and so on.

Many people were worried about a fascist state when the BJP first came to power in the 1990s. But I remember saying very clearly that even if it comes to power, the democratic state will not be lost. Now, most people recognize that there's not going to be a complete elimination of democracy. Instead, there's going to be a dramatic hollowing out of democracy, which means that you will continue to have elections because they provide legitimacy for many far-right forces and so on.

So I think one needn't make too much of the fascist debate. It's enough to recognize that this is a very, very, very dangerous force, with fascistic characteristics, and the important thing is to not get too hung up on theoretical differences. Much more important are programmatic differences that may follow from theoretical disagreements. And what I mean by that is: is there a straight line from saying that it's fascistic to a kind of programmatic statement of how to fight it? Is there a straight line from saying it's fascism to how to fight it? And you find that there's no straightforward line. So I think one should not get too hung up about this, but should recognize the importance of agreement on the long-term perspective of how to fight, and also understand that compared to any other far-right force, anywhere else in the world, this is the most powerful and most dangerous. Can I just elaborate briefly on why that is the case?

TC Yes, that would be great. How would you position the BJP and other Hindu nationalist organizations — particularly the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) — in terms of other global right-wing forces?

AV First of all, unlike your Marine Le Pens, your Dutertes, your Bolsonaros, this is a force that has a continuous existence for over ninety years. I'm talking here not just about the BJP or the RSS, but the whole association of Hindu nationalist organizations that are part of what is called in India the Sangh Parivar, the family of the Sangh. Which other far-right force anywhere in the world has this?

Number two: it has the widest and deepest implantation in the pores of Indian civil society. It has over eight hundred NGOs doing all sorts of work. It has thirty-six affiliates and four pan-India bodies: the RSS, BJP, VHP (World Hindu Council), and Bajrang Dal (lumpen attack force). I mean, I can go on and on. There are millions of cadres and activists and so on. It gets its loyalty not just because of people who accept its ideology, but because it does all kinds of other things in terms of meeting the basic needs of people. It's a cadre-based organization that is institutionalized in various ways. It'll help with neighborhood or leisure activities, or help a family get a doctor if their child is not well. It'll help you with education. It has the largest private network of schools at a primary level. So it's all of these things, things that the Left used to be able to do when it was expanding as a cadre force.

The third difference is that unlike Brazil, the Philippines, France, and so on, the opposition here is so much weaker. You have more political competition in other countries, from other political parties, even if they are conservative, so that the far-right election force, which doesn't have a deep implantation, is also countered to a large extent by a number of other political forces which are very substantial electorally. Here you have a much weaker opposition.

And the fourth difference is, since 1947, this is the only major party in India that has never suffered a major split. The Congress Party has had splits, the Left has had splits. And I put this down to the specificity of its ideological foundations, which allows it also to be flexible. That foundation, of course, is its anti-Islamic character and its Hindu nationalism, which means that it can be flexible in rejecting its earlier economic nationalism and becoming gung ho about neoliberal economics. Of course, by doing that they have established a support base among the ruling classes and so on.

TC If this force has been ninety years in the making, what would have to happen to build a broad movement that could counter it?

AV Now here let's be very clear that one of the crucial elements of building an opposition to it would have to be opposition to this capitalist-neoliberal economic direction, which all the other major parties in one way or the other support. And this of course has created tremendous problems for them. You can't eliminate poverty, you have an increasing problem with joblessness, you have massive inequalities of income and wealth. So where is the force that is going to stand up against that?

Now in the short and middle term you do all kinds of things. You make tactical alliances with other political forces, with other social movements, you fight on specific issues of democracy and so on. But how do we build in the longer term a force that would be seriously committed to overcoming the reality of an expanding Hindutva? Which cannot be separated from a force that will fight to overturn neoliberal capitalism. Which in my view cannot be separated from a force that will be committed to the ultimate overthrow of capitalism itself. And the reason I say that is because I do not see neoliberalism, as a new system of accumulation, ever retreating and becoming an older form of social-democratic capitalism. I think that era is over. I used to think that the struggle to ultimately overthrow capitalism will have to pass through a reestablishment of a more humane capitalism. But I think we have to rule that out. If nothing else, climate change will see to that.

That doesn't mean that we don't fight for reforms that are social democratic, of course we do. But my basic point is that the long-term path to fight against Hindutva is the same as the long-term path to fight against neoliberal capitalism and therefore against capitalism itself, which means that you have to make a new kind of a left.

And how will that look, how will the Left emerge? It will of course come from splits and fusions and all sort of activities, creating activist leaders, ideologically committed cadres. It's long-term. Even as we have to fight at the electoral, political level, we have to fight to build a cadre force that can penetrate into civil society, in the way that even the mainstream left earlier did, at least in a few parts of India.

You can be sure that there are going to be all kinds of eruptions, from all kinds of problems. The problem of joblessness is very serious. The BJP is not guaranteed to avoid upheavals and disruptions against it. Unfortunately, even as these are going to happen, the direction that Indian politics will take as a result really depends upon living politics. Whether it's going to move in a rightward direction or left direction depends on what happens here, how we can take advantage of these struggles and upheavals. And that will require a much more organized political force.

TC What do you think will be the long-term fallout of the current developments?

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AV I would not want to make any definite predictions. India is a huge country. So one of the most dangerous things to do about India, even as I talk about the hegemonizing drive of the Sangh Parivar, is to see anything in the longer term as inevitable. India constantly surprises us by what happens. Maybe I'm taking a bit of refuge in optimism about the future.

Source: 22 December 2019 [Jacobin](#).

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