

Book Review (India): What a genuine leftist response to the Hindutva challenge should look like

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A review of 'Nationalist Dangers, Secular Failings: A Compass for an Indian Left' by Achin Vanaik, Aakar Books (2021) pp. 205.

The book is a must-read for those who feel that what is happening in India today is a complete undoing of the vision and goals it was envisaged to achieve.

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AFTER his 2017 magnum opus [Hindutva Rising: Secular Claims and Communal Realities](#), writer and social activist Achin Vanaik, former dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Delhi University and one of India's foremost Marxist political scientists and commentators, has come out with another book titled [Nationalist Dangers, Secular Failings: A Compass for an Indian Left](#). The book has come at an opportune time when the Hindutva forces led by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) combine are attempting to overturn Indian politics for the worse.

The book consists of five powerful essays written in a crisp style, with loads of conviction and deep ideological anchorage.

Marxism and nationalism

The first chapter, 'Marxism and Nationalism', is a *tour de force* of the most complex idea of modern times— nationalism. Vanaik shows that the idea of nationalism is a particularly modern phenomenon. Any attempt to root this idea in the pre-capitalist past is an inherently faulty exercise. He argues that *"the very fact that nations look to history to present some characteristic as unique and therefore defining themselves as a distinct people, in itself reflects a modernist outlook and sensibility."*

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The statement is true because in the times of kings and their empires, it was the history of the ruling family that was glorified and written about. The 'people' of the king's realm were 'subjects', not 'citizens' and their history as a stable political unit did not matter at all.

After engaging with a broad spectrum of writings on nationalism, both within and outside the Marxist tradition, Vanaik posits that, pared to the bone, a nation is a political entity. He defines it as *"a cultural entity lodged above all in consciousness striving to become a political fact."*

In the second part of the essay, he engages with the legacy of the [Bolshevik Revolution](#) on the question of nationalities. He rightly enumerates Russian revolutionary, politician and political theorist Vladimir Lenin's contribution to the 'national question' which was the burning question in the era of formal imperialism and colonies.

Unlike the chicanery of former United States president, politician and academic Woodrow Wilson and imperialist-liberals of the early twentieth century, Lenin's vision of revolutionary, anti-colonial nationalism was based on the following premises: the need to distinguish between the interests of oppressed classes and the notion of 'national interest'; the need to distinguish between oppressed, dependent and subject nations and the oppressing, exploiting and sovereign nations; the need for Communist parties to aid revolutionary movements among dependent and 'underprivileged nations' such as, for instance, the American blacks and the colonies; the need to subordinate the interest of the proletarian struggle in a country to the interests of the proletarian struggle internationally; the need for the proletarian movement to retain its independent organisation whilst fighting with the bourgeoisie the battle of anti-imperialism; last but not the least, Lenin strongly emphasised and warned about the lurking danger of *"big nation chauvinism"*.

After the death of Lenin in 1924, the later functioning of the Soviet Union diverged from the path set by Lenin. The definition offered by his successor, Soviet politician, political theorist and revolutionary Joseph Stalin that *"a nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make up manifested in a common culture"*, was wanting in more aspects than one, argues Vanaik. For instance, multilingual states like Switzerland and India wherein more than one language are spoken did not qualify as nations under Stalin's schema.

The Soviet Union, until its collapse, continued to carry the medallion of being the only state that bore no reference to a nation, people or a territory. Despite this, force was indeed used *"as a shortcut to political unity"*. One of Lenin's last battles was against the idea of '[Great Russian chauvinism](#)' which became rife towards the end of his life.

Vanaik points out that the Constitution "betrayed its elitist character by placing some principles concerning socio-economic justice in the non-justiciable section of the directive principles, not in the binding fundamental rights." And this, more than anything else, has been the biggest rationaliser of the Constitution being status-quoist than an instrument of positive change.

Lenin energetically [campaigns against](#) the forceful integration of Georgia into the Transcaucasian federation. Later, under Stalin, when a conscious push was given to '[Great Russian Patriotism](#)' to act as a *"social cement"*, even the 16th-century grand prince of Moscow Ivan the Terrible was [accommodated and glorified](#) as part of the attempt to shore up Russian nationalism. Cumulatively, all this was a great undoing of Lenin's glorious legacy.

Vanaik argues that the break-up of the Soviet Union could not solely be expressed in terms of the *"pent up anger of the nationalities"* since there were other structural forces at play, but Soviet and Russian politician Boris Yeltsin's deliberate discarding of even a truncated Soviet Union minus the Baltic Republics, Georgia, Armenia and Ukraine, and the decision to go ahead solely with a Russian Federation, was a reflection of the same lingering 'Great Russian chauvinism' coupled with Yeltsin's ambition to become its first President.

Vanaik also ruminates on the relevance of capitalism and nationalism today. He argues that the *"trans-nationalisation of social relations and the consolidation and juridical sharpening of territorialised sovereignty went together."* This is precisely because of the unique character of capitalism wherein the economic and political realms are separate, and the capitalist class do not have the *"time, compulsion, or interest in organising the political terrain even at the domestic level, let alone at the international level"*. The state managers, political parties and bureaucracy play the role of arbitrators. And on this crucial hinge hangs the world of bourgeois politics, which slaloms between different forms of authoritarianism, Hindutva being one of its variants in India.

India's Constitution: How democratic, how just?

The second chapter titled 'India's Constitution: How Democratic, How Just?' critically interrogates the nature of our Constitution. Vanaik begins his questioning by pointing that the Constitution *"betrayed its elitist character by placing some principles concerning socio-economic justice in the non-justiciable [section of the directive principles](#), not in the binding [fundamental rights](#)."* And this, more than anything else, has been the biggest rationaliser of the Constitution being status-quoist than an instrument of positive change. Being true to the spirit of bourgeois-liberal democratism, the Constitution placed the right to *"acquire, hold and dispose property"* into the fundamental rights but subject to reasonable restrictions in public interest.

From the beginning, despite the rhetoric of socialism by the representatives of the Indian national movement, Indian courts have played a yeoman's role in putting down progressive and redistributive legislation. For instance, on June 5, 1950, the Patna High Court [struck down](#) the Bihar Management of Estates and Tenures Act, 1949 that aimed at taking over the estates of the zamindars without compensation. Similarly, the Allahabad High Court issued restraining orders prohibiting the state from acquiring landlord-held lands under the Zamindari and Land Reforms Act, 1951.

The [First Constitutional Amendment](#) which, among other things, allowed for the government to take land for redistribution without judicial intervention, was a radical move but soon lost its actual revolutionary purpose. Despite the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's radical posturing in calling for the need *"to save the Constitution from purloinment by the lawyers' and to rescue it from the rigidity of the written word"*, realities on the ground such as an unreformed society, and the widespread political participation of agrarian capitalists and landlords at the grassroots-level placed insurmountable impediments for the first amendment to become the 'first revolutionary act'. On the contrary, it initiated the practice of amending the Constitution to bypass judicial decisions that came in the way of government priorities.

Article 25 should have mentioned that "the state shall intervene in throwing open of Hindu religious institutions of public character to 'all' classes and sections", and not just Hindus. This would have disallowed the room for discriminatory practices against non-Hindus entering Hindu religious shrines as part of tourism, excursion, and a general interest in art and history.

In the penultimate section of the essay, Vanaik looks at the Indian model of secularism as enshrined in the Constitution and its subsequent political practice in India. He argues that in the Constitutional Assembly debates, Dr B.R. Ambedkar defined religious freedom as *“entailing only the freedom to worship and excluded all practices outside of that act”*. However, the final definition of religious freedom in Article 25 of the Constitution reflected a compromise as it enshrined the freedom to *“practice and propagate religion subject to public order, morality and health”*. The wide latitude of interpretation of this clause allowed *“Brahminical diehards to get a complete ban on cow slaughter at the same time smuggling an emphasis on the need to protect cows into the Directive Principles of State Policy under the cover of animal husbandry.”*

Similarly, [Article 25](#) (freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion) of the Constitution, in a sub-clause, also enumerates that *“freedom of religion shall not prevent the state from making any law for throwing open Hindu religious institutions of a public character to all classes and sections of Hindus”*. In reality, the practical operability of this clause has been regularly hindered by the forces of Hindutva.

Most recently, the [Sabarimala verdict](#) of 2018 is a case in point. An all-out [furore](#) was caused by the RSS-BJP and its acolytes against the Supreme Court’s judgment of allowing women into the *sanctum sanctorum* of the shrine. One of the most vocally ardent opponents of the verdict, lawyer J. Sai Deepak (who has been constantly attacking constitutional secularism) received thunderous cheers when he [declared](#) that *“a temple was not a secular place”* and thus not amenable to ‘secular’ interference. In arguing so, Sai Deepak seems to have forgotten the fact that the Sabarimala temple is part of India, is within the territory of India and thus very much subject to interference, nay secular interference, which fulfils the real objective of the sub-clause.

The problem with the sub-clause is that it only mentions ‘Hindu’. It should have mentioned that *“the State shall intervene in throwing open of Hindu religious institutions of public character to ‘all’ classes and sections”*, and not just Hindus. This would have disallowed the room for discriminatory practices against non-Hindus entering Hindu religious shrines as part of tourism, excursion, and a general interest in art and history. For instance, non-Hindus are not allowed in the Jagannath Temple at Puri. Such practices are better suited for theocracies like Saudi Arabia, not for a secular and plural state like India.

The sub-clause also mentions that *“reference to Hindus shall be construed as including a reference to persons professing the Sikh, Jain or Buddhist religion.”* Vanaik argues that this smacks of the influence of Hindutva’s assimilationist project. He writes, *“a similar assimilationist echo is found within the Sangh Parivar; it is common to find references to Sikhs as protectors of Hindus as against Mughal and Muslim oppression.”*

It is ironic that the last guru of the Sikhs, Guru Govind Singh, fought 21 battles in his life, out of which only three were against Mughals or Muslims, and rest against the Hindu hill *rajas* or chiefs of the north. The first battle of the Guru’s life was the [Battle of Bhangani](#) against the Hindu raja of Bilaspur.

What led to the meteoric rise of RSS-BJP’s hegemony was the contradictory legacy of the Congress. A bad record in lifting the standards of living of the masses and the push towards neoliberalism led to a combustible situation which no other national opposition could make good of apart from the BJP.

As Sikh identity has crystallised with time, it has become a major issue for the community vis-à-vis the Constitution and now the forces of Hindutva which are in power. It is not surprising that the Sikh farmers protesting the farm laws were quickly [branded](#) as Khalistanis, for their intransigence was construed by the forces of Hindutva as a departure from being the *“saviour of the Hindus”*.

Two hegemonies, Modi’s second term: Hindutva marching ahead

The third and fourth essays, ‘Two Hegemonies’ and ‘Modi’s Second Term: Hindutva Marching Ahead’ cumulatively deal with the twin phases of the end of the Nehruvian order and its complete negation by Hindutva. Vanaik writes that the developmental promises of Nehruvianism had great appeal, but by 1967, those promises of bringing about *“a social democratic version of sustained capitalist progress had failed”*. The reasons were: the absence of radical land reforms which led to mass immiseration in the countryside; growing awareness among the neo-agrarian-capitalist layers of their mobilising capability at the provincial level that led to severing their ties with the Indian National Congress party and the splits in Congress into various factions, both at the provincial and the national level, which led to severe ideological incoherence.

The BJP, on the other hand, has never had a split, which is a testament to its ideology, centred around communal-fascistic legacies. This very lack of ideology within the Congress led Dr Ambedkar to remark that as a party it is *“open to all fools and knaves, friends and foes, communalists and secularists, reformers and orthodox, and capitalist and anti-capitalists.”*

What led to the meteoric rise of RSS-BJP’s hegemony was the contradictory legacy of the Congress. A bad record in lifting the standards of living of the masses and the push towards neoliberalism led to a combustible situation which no other national opposition could make good of apart from the BJP. It endeared itself to the Indian bourgeoisie whilst wooing the poor backward and lower castes, who were the greatest sufferers of neoliberal reforms, towards Hindutva.

Also read: [The Dravidian remedy to the inequities of Hindutva](#)

The question of organisation: Beyond Marx, the enduring legacy of Lenin

The last chapter ‘The Question of Organisation: Beyond Marx, the Enduring Legacy of Lenin’ addresses ‘the Organisation question’ pertaining to that section of the Left which still believes *“that it is necessary and possible to transcend capitalism by the pursuit of socialism and revolution”*.

Capitalism is the most ‘flexible’ yet most ‘constricting’ system of exploitation so far in human history. It is flexible because it allows for universal adult franchise (although capitalism did not give it willingly and it took a series of mass struggles to achieve it), protests, and a reasonably free media to aid freedom of expression, among other things. It is most constricting because under no other system is commodification and the subsequent dependence on market for daily reproduction so extreme.

To fight this, Vanaik reposes faith in a vanguardist party which is greatly attuned and open to all the different struggles that mark the contemporary era of capitalism. In defence of Leninism and the vanguard, he argues, to silence the critics of Leninism, that *“the vanguard is not a fixed sociological category but always a relational one to the broader masses”*. The vanguard serves as the most dedicated bloc of ‘shock troops’ on the ‘front lines’ in times pregnant with revolutionary eruption. This allows for the combination of workers’ self-activity with the highest levels of vanguardist consciousness, which then serves as an antidote to an oft-repeated situation wherein there exists the

“highest levels of class activity but low levels of class consciousness”. Sometimes the vice-versa is also true.

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On the question of organisation of the vanguard, which in the Leninist tradition is called ‘democratic centralism’, Vanaik argues that it is not about the vertical centralisation of power. It is, following Belgian Marxian economist, Trotskyist activist and theorist Ernest Mandel, *“a centralisation of experience, centralisation of knowledge and centralisation of conclusions drawn out of actual militancy”*. And these are the most crucial elements *“to generate the necessary wider consciousness to challenge the most formidable vanguard formation of the bourgeoisie— the bourgeois state.”*

Vanaik also warns that any attempt to wield State power should not be substituted for some woolly notion of societal change. For instance, in Poland during the 1980s, the trade union called solidarity was the strongest and most united working-class organisation. It lost its way because its leadership insisted that *“revolution was self-limiting and therefore solidarity would bypass the state to transform society— the end result was [military rule in 1981.](#)”*

The RSS in India has taken a very clever route. Since its inception, it has declared that it is committed to socio-cultural affairs whilst at the same time, it has always had a formidable political arm, first the Jansangh and now the BJP, which serves all its necessary political goals.

To sum it up, the book is a must-read for those who feel that what is happening in India today is a complete undoing of the vision and goals it was envisaged to achieve.

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P.S.

- THE LEAFLET. MAY 15, 2023:
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