

Class, Race and Corporate Power

Volume 12 | Issue 1

Article 6

2024

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Recommended Citation

Das, Raju J. (2024) "The Right-Wing Attacks on the Academic Left in India," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*. Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol12/iss1/6>

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The Right-Wing Attacks on the Academic Left in India

Abstract

While right-wing attacks on the ideas of democracy and socialism in academia are a worldwide trend, in the remainder of the paper, I will focus on India, considered to be the largest democracy in the world. India has become a hotbed of right-wing politics, led by an authoritarian Hindu-nationalist government of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). There are various reasons why this has happened which this paper will not discuss (Das, 2020a; Jaffrelot, 2021; Vanaik, 2017). Suffice to say that the BJP is the political wing of the fascistic paramilitary organization called RSS (or, National Volunteer Corps) which, in part inspired by European fascism, aims to build a Hindu nation where religious minorities can live only as second-class citizens.

Keywords

Academia, India, Marxism

Cover Page Footnote

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A spectre is haunting the world – the spectre of right-wing or fascistic authoritarianism. All the right-wing groups, small or big, local/national or diasporic, have entered into a holy alliance to promote this spectre in the name of nationalism, tradition, culture, God, the indigenous, et cetera, et cetera.

This spectre is authoritarian, majoritarian, pro-market, pro-corporate, pro-private property, as well as anti-intellectual and post-truther. This spectre is not only the exact opposite of the spectre of Marx's communism.¹ It is also *against* what are simply progressive ideas and practices that any rational, democratic-minded and decent person with a sense of solidarity for fellow human beings would support: democratic rights; rights of religious minorities; social equality; secularism; state-led redistribution of wealth/income; regulation of private corporates in the interests of the bottom 80% or so; and commitment to reason and facts (Das, 2023a: chapters 5-7). Because the Marxist/Leftist thinking/action includes all these and more, the spectre tries to stridently exorcise these ideas/actions as a part of its attack on *all* progressive values.

An important stage on which the spectre plays its games is the education or, the realm of ideas, and especially, higher education (universities). Academic freedom, the soul of higher education, is increasingly under assault from authoritarian governments worldwide, often supported by right-wing student groups who act as vigilante-style provocateurs (Anand and Niaz, 2022; Sundar and Gowhar, 2020).

While right-wing attacks on the ideas of democracy and socialism in academia are a worldwide trend, in the remainder of the paper, I will focus on India, considered to be the largest democracy in the world. India has become a hotbed of right-wing politics, led by an authoritarian Hindu-nationalist government of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). There are various reasons why this has happened which this paper will not discuss (Das, 2020a; Jaffrelot, 2021; Vanaik, 2017). Suffice to say that the BJP is the political wing of the fascistic paramilitary organization called RSS (or, National Volunteer Corps) which, in part inspired by European fascism, aims to build a Hindu nation where religious minorities can live only as second-class citizens.

In section 1, I briefly talk about the overall situation in relation to academic freedom in India by using published quantitative data. In sections 2-3, using information mainly from newspapers, I discuss the right-wing attack on academia, including the academic left: section 2 is about the right-wing attack in its political and economic forms, and section 3 deals with the right-wing ideological attack. In the last section, I summarize the essay and briefly discuss the topic of what is to be done.

Shrinking spaces of academic freedom in India

Since the BJP captured power at the national level in 2014, India has dropped on the electoral democracy scale and is now labelled by V-Dem as 'an electoral autocracy.' (V-Dem Institute,

¹ Marx wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*: 'A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre'. (Marx and Engels, 1848). On a recent discussion on the *Communist Manifesto*, see Das (2024)

2023). Despite its public announcements to the contrary or euphemisms about being inclusive, the BJP has long believed that its cultural-political project has two enemies: minorities and especially, Muslims and Christians, and those – Marxists/leftists and many liberals -- who see the minorities as equal citizens under the constitution (Kesavan, 2020).

Not surprisingly, the government attacks academic freedom. Since 2014, all aspects of academic freedom began to decline strongly (The Wire, 2023). In the Academic Freedom Index report published by the V-Dem Institute in 2022, India had received a score of 0.38 on a scale of 0 to 1, where 1 indicates the highest level of academic freedom. India was in the bottom 20-30% bracket (V-Dem Institute, 2023). In a 2023 update, the V-Dem Institute noted that India was among 22 countries and territories out of 179 in the world, where institutions and scholars enjoy ‘significantly less freedom today than 10 years ago.’ (ibid.) (See Figure 1 below). India was ranked below countries such as Libya, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Chad, Bhutan, Ukraine, and Palestine. In the 2024 report, ‘India is further pushed to the 10-20 % category placed between Rwanda and South Sudan’ (Kalidasan, 2024).

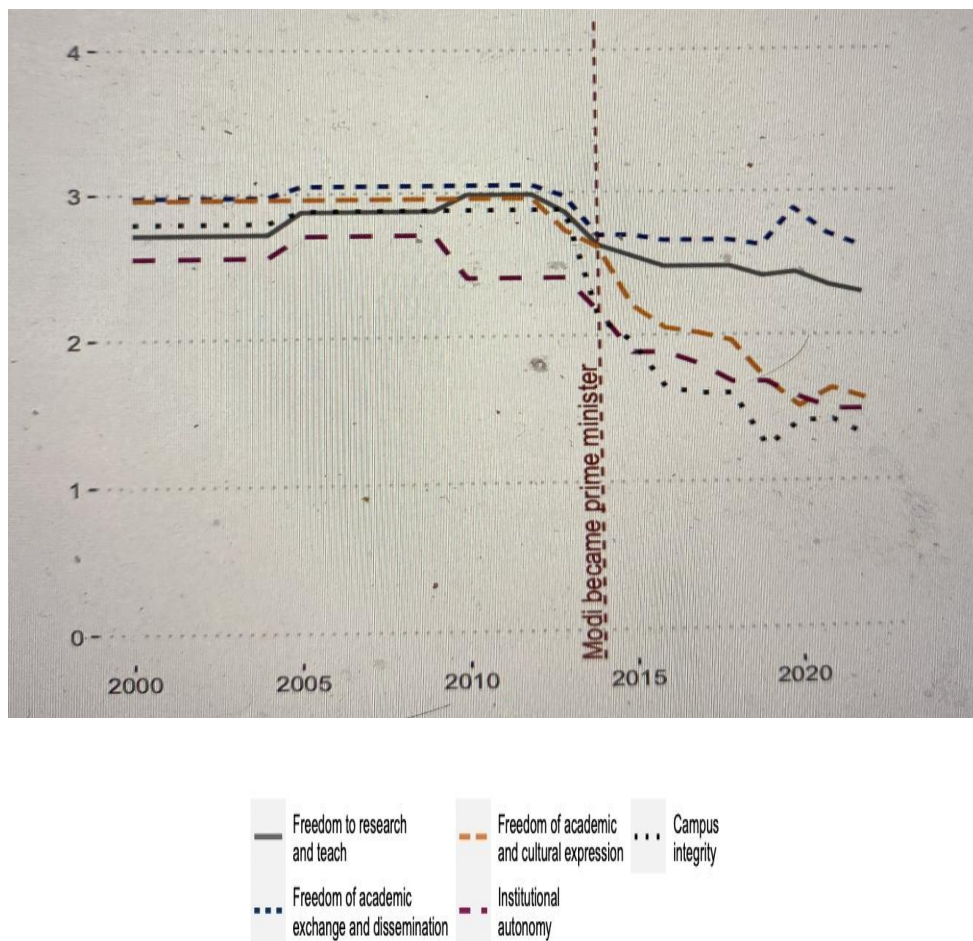


Figure 1: Decline in multiple aspects of academic freedom in India
Source: V-Dem Institute (2023).

The target of Right-wing attacks are the actions and ideas of liberals -- including religious believers who do not harbor animosity towards other religious groups, and Marxists/leftists in academia. And the methods of right-wing attacks are right-wing *action* and *thought*: the right-wing movement, including its government, physically or politically/administratively as well as ideologically attacks progressive ideas and actions.

Right-Wing Action against Academia, including Marxist Academics

Violent repression

Violent repression has taken many forms. These include: criminalization, militarization, intimidation, coercion, observation and vandalization.

Criminal charges are brought against faculty members and students of (public) universities for their statements that are critical of Hindutva, i.e. militant political use of Hinduism in service of Hindu nationalism. Statements made by any academic that are critical of the deprivation of Muslim-dominated Kashmir of its autonomy (its Statehood), attacks on secularism and corporate-politicians nexus, and so on, are considered by the government to be defamatory or even 'anti-national' and therefore can and do invite punitive action (Guha, 2022). Charges are brought against research students for reading progressive books. According to Professor Apoorvanand of Delhi University: 'For hosting a seminar or a discussion, you can now have a petition filed against you, followed by charges and a FIR' (Sen, 2016).

A large number of left-leaning academics have been arrested or raided. In 2018, the official university residence of two academics, Dr. Satyanarayana and Pavana -- was raided by the police for the suspected Maoist links. The raid criminalized the two academics for possessing books on caste, feminism and Marxism. A large number of student organizations in the State of Telangana (and elsewhere) have been banned on the grounds of alleged Maoist links. Professor Saibaba of Delhi University, who is on wheelchair because of his physical impairment, was illegally jailed for 10 years or more: the main evidence against him was his possession of Marxist literature.

Universities have become militarized and policed quasi-war zones. 'The government seems to be engaged in a form of counterinsurgency on universities, which is remarkably similar to the one it has waged [against Maoists] in places like Chhattisgarh [State]'. Just as the government has located paramilitary camps across India where it suspects Maoist movement, it has embarked on a plan of police surveillance and military control of university campuses. Some campuses are being militarized proposals for tanks and towering flags and police bands playing frequently. Police presence on university campuses is common now-a-days with the aim of crushing potential or actual dissent from progressives (Neelambaran, 2022). 'The desired end result is a populace which is too scared or tired to resist.', says, Professor Sundar, a well-known sociologist teaching in Delhi University (Sundar, 2021). As well, army generals are considered experts on historical topics; even the police personnel think that they can decide what PhD students must read (ibid.).

‘Surveillance is growing with CCTV cameras and biometric attendance being set up across campuses. In 2020, the police have been tasked with keeping a watch on campuses, infiltrating student WhatsApp groups and ‘organising frequent visits of students to police stations.’’ (Sundar, 2021). The political system is watching who from which institutions of higher education are taking actions such as signing petitions (Lem, 2022). If academics publicly criticize the government, they are called into meetings with university officials who warn them to be careful about what causes they support (ibid.). University officials, in some cases, reprimand academics for speaking out against the policies of the government (ibid.).

Physical attacks against faculty and students of Indian universities have become common (See Figures 2-3 below). Right-wing students led by organizations such as ABVP (All India Students’ Council), the student wing of the fascistic RSS, openly hurl threats and abuses at university teachers and students (Chaturvedi and Levine, 2023). In the most serious cases, scholars on the Left who have opposed the extremist ideology of Hindutva have been murdered (ibid.)

Right-wing goons attack students, faculty at India’s Jawaharlal Nehru University

Masked goons, allegedly members of the right-wing Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, beat up students of left-wing organizations and vandalized hostels on Sunday. The police refused to take any action

January 05, 2020 by Peoples Dispatch



Jawaharlal Nehru University Students Union president Aishe Ghosh was attacked by right-wing goons on Sunday.

Figure 2: Right-wing physical attacks on university students

Source: <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2020/01/05/right-wing-goons-attack-students-faculty-at-indias-jawaharlal-nehru-university/>



Figure 3: Right-wing physical attack on professors: Professor Prasanta Chakravarty of Delhi University beaten up

Source: <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/delhi/story/abvp-clash-ramjas-college-delhi-university-professor-prasanta-chakravarty-962726-2017-02-26>

Mention must also be made of the fact that ABVP vandalises the portraits or statues of Karl Marx and Lenin and also of progressive and democratic thinkers and activists in universities as well as outside (Dhar, 2023) (see Figure 4). On the other hand, there is widespread display of anti-Marxist graffiti (see Figure 5).



Figure 4: Two statues of Vladimir Lenin were brought down by a right-wing mob in South Tripura, India

Source: <https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-2-lenin-statues-brought-down-in-tripura-cpm-blames-bjp-2591368>



Figure 5: Anti-communist graffiti on the Jawaharlal Nehru University campus

Source: https://twitter.com/aishe_ghosh/status/1627728679987195905/photo/3

Administrative/political repression

Administrative/political repression, like violent repression, takes multiple forms. These include prohibition, cancellation, devaluation; de-politicization; and Hinduization.

A large number of progressive books have been withdrawn from university syllabi or even from public distribution because of the perceived insults to the dogmas and prejudices of the majority-religious group (Guha, 2022). Studies of poverty, caste discrimination, women's rights, Dalit politics, progressive social movements, and history of Muslims and Christians are viewed as direct threats to a perceived glorious Hindu history; these studies are seen as anti-national and seditious, and are increasingly prohibited (Chaturvedi and Levine, 2023). Syllabi are censored to remove histories, texts, and ideas that do not promote Hindutva (ibid.). Rasal Singh, a member of the academic council of Delhi University, says that there has been an attempt to 'impose a leftist ideology on students' and 'All these materials' such as the books, syllabi, etc. that the right-wingers want to get banned, 'are anti-RSS and against nationalism' (India TV. 2019).

Professor Apoorvanand of Delhi University has complained that a sense of fear is being created in universities, to the extent that events that right-wing student groups may not like are being cancelled (Sen, 2016). 'There are fewer and fewer university teachers who are not worried', according to Rukmini Nair of the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Delhi (ibid). Many seminars organised by students or faculty members have either been cancelled by the authorities or disrupted by right-wing political agitators (Guha, 2022).

In January 2023, the government deployed emergency powers to ban the recently aired BBC documentary *India: The Modi Question* because of its criticism of the prime minister's role in the infamous 2002 Gujarat riots. When students at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi organized a screening of the film on campus, the university administration cut the electricity, and the students were attacked by thugs associated with the Hindu right. At other campuses,

including at Delhi University, students were detained or suspended for watching it (Chaturvedi and Levine, 2023).

The long hand of the Indian state has been stretched to the diaspora. Pressure from Hindu nationalist groups and supporters of the Indian government threatens to undermine academic freedom on American campuses, creating a hostile environment for those specializing in India and South Asia (Masih, 2021). Hindu right-wing groups wish to ‘silence any empirical, fact-based, analysis and critique of Hindutva by the scholars’, Professor Esposito of Georgetown University has said (Naik, 2021). In her Congressional briefing in 2021, Audrey Truschke, a professor of South Asian history at Rutgers University, discussed ‘the threat that this hateful political movement, also known as Hindutva, is posing, in real time, to academic freedom in the United States’ (Truschke, 2021). Many professors in the West – including Audrey Truschke herself -- frequently receive hate mail laced with death and rape threats from Hindu nationalists for their views on Muslim rulers of India (Masih, 2021). To give public lectures, Professor Truschke requires armed protection. Her main fault, in the eye of the right-wingers, is that: ‘My scholarship explores the truth about Indian history—that South Asia has always been a diverse place where many cultural and religious groups coexist, and this basic historical fact poses a huge challenge to the political project of Hindu nationalism’ (ibid.).

Universities are being rendered irrelevant – and devalued -- by the organised spread of pseudo-factual information about society and its history on social media, ‘designed to promote a Hindutva worldview’ (Sundar, 2021). Information posted on social media is given the same status as the views of academics.

The right-wingers also call for disconnecting education from politics (Datta, 2017). The call to de-politicise students is another means of covertly creating the space for the right-wing hateful political activity to take over, without opposition, the space to be vacated by left and left-of-centre political formations.

The government has been replacing administrators and academics who object to Hindutva with those who support Hindutva or who at least do not object to it. Since 2014, a large number of heads of research institutions or universities have been appointed with inadequate qualification; the main criterion for their appointment is their loyalty to the RSS’s agenda of Hindu nationalism (Sundar, 2021). If an institution does not fall in line, it is closed down, as demonstrated in the case of the prestigious Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi.

The right-wingers want the *right* kind of students on campuses. An entrance examination for a post-graduate course at JNU (Jawaharlal Nehru University) included questions to test whether students support Hindutva or not (Wilson-Bhattacharya, 2018.). ‘Routine vigilance clearances for appointment to high-level administrative positions have started to involve questions like rating ... the government’s performance’, an academic said in an interview (quoted in Lem, 2022).

Material Deprivation

This process occurs at the level of individuals and institutions. Some professors have not been allowed to take up teaching jobs to which they had been appointed; some have had to forcibly resign because of political pressure (Guha, 2022). It is not uncommon for university scholars to be dismissed as biased or plain wrong when they try to correct the Hindu nationalist narratives (Sundar, 2021). For example, in March 2021, under political pressure, Ashoka University ‘nudged’ Professor Pratap Bhanu Mehta to resign from the leadership position (Apoorvanand, 2021). Professor Mehta himself said: ‘My public writing in support of a politics that tries to honour constitutional values of freedom and equal respect for all citizens, is perceived to carry risks for the university.’ (Indian Express, 2021).

Academic institutions funded by the national government are usually among the best. But central government funding is rapidly decreasing, which is justified in the name of giving more autonomy to the universities (Jayal, 2019). Economic deprivation of higher education is a method of causing slow death of progressive academic thinking.

Right-Wing Ideological Attacks on Academia, including Marxist Academics

The liberal and left-learning or left ideology is very much opposed to right-wing ideology, and this is partly behind the right-wing economic political and physical attacks on academia.

A right-wing fighting tactic against academic freedom is its view that: academia (and especially those who teach social sciences and humanities) and wider civil society have been full of Marxists/leftists who have not allowed any alternative view (=right-wing view). Certain universities (e.g. JNU) are accused by right-wingers of being the hotbed of Marxist/leftist activities in India and providing an academic cover for Maoist and Islamic violence, in league with like-minded political parties and left-friendly media (Sathye, 2021). So the right-wing is now justified in attacking the Marxist intellectual monopoly, even by using administrative and/or physical force.

The right-wingers’ ideological attack on Marxist and left-leaning academia in India has been assisted by ‘the invention of categories of abuse’ – a distinct right-wing vocabulary -- for their opponents, to convey ‘why such people should not be trusted to have India’s interests at heart’ (Subramanian, 2020). ‘Sickular’ and ‘pseudo-secular’, born of the opinion of the fascistic RSS, refer to the fact that Indian secularism is a demented version of minority appeasement (ibid.). The right-wing people and the government refer to progressive university teachers and students in JNU (and elsewhere) as the ‘tukde-tukde’ gang, a group seen as a threat to the unity of the nation.² ‘Urban Naxals’ and ‘intellectual terrorists’ are widely used to refer to academics and activists who fight for the poor and who defend democratic rights.³

² Tukde tukde means: breaking/cutting something into small fragments. This is used by the right-wingers to refer to those who in their eyes divide the country.

³Naxalite or Naxal refers to the Maoism-inspired movement in India that originated in a place called Naxalbari in the State of West Bengal. On India’s Maoist movement, see Das (2020: chapters 8-9).

Certain universities such as JNU *have been* secular and left-leaning with some Marxist scholars/students in them (Subramanian, 2020). JNU's student politics – and to some extent faculty politics -- has been allied with national communist/left parties (ibid.). The term 'JNU type' is another right-wing category: it refers to leftists of every stripe – from Maoists and other types of Marxists yearning for a type of 'popular' democratic revolution, to moderates who abhor Hindutva. The JNU types are slotted into the mother category: 'anti-national' (ibid.). Anti-national is the most fundamental of the right-wing categories of abuse: any comment from an academic (or indeed anyone else) that is critical of the BJP government or of the majoritarian attacks on minorities is considered anti-national.

Then there are hybrid categories (e.g. urban-naxal-jihadis) of abuse which the right-wing uses for academics: 'The emergence of the Marxist-Islamist alliance is a central fact of current perspectives [in academia]', says a right-wing ideologue, Punj (2016). The state perceives universities, including those based in the national capital, 'as hubs of a ...criminal conspiracy run by a network of urban-naxal-jihadis (Sundar, 2020) .

In the right-wing view, Marxism is simply wrong for a variety of reasons. Today's right-wingers, whose predecessors mostly sat out the anti-colonial movement, accuse Marxist academics of colonial mentality, one that 'distorts local cultures, histories, and values' (Sathye, 2021). Hinduism is a way of life and not a religion at all, according to the right-wingers. So, the application of the Marxist framework to Hinduism and Hindutva is necessarily flawed. As if to counter the charge that the right-wing movement is Hindu supremacist, its ideologues and supporters say that the Marxist dictatorship of the proletariat is per se a supremacist ideology that has led to the subjugation of those branded as bourgeois (ibid.).

There is no space here to refute the right-wingers' accusations against Marxism, which more or less echo those of their liberal cousins. With its characteristic intellectual deficit, the right-wing movement is not expected to have a proper understanding of the complex and powerful body of thought that has come to be known as Marxism (Das, 2020b). Their intellectual deficiency is visible especially when it perceives Marxist monopoly in academia. As all serious Marxists know, the so-called liberals, most of whom are not-too-distant cousins of the right-wingers, have ensured that the academia is, more or less, free from 'Marxist pollution' (Das, 2020c; 2013).

Summary, and the Question of What is to be Done?

The authoritarian right-wing regime in India has a strong relationship to the fascistic RSS whose long-term goal has been the establishment of a Hindu nation. One of the major instruments for achieving this has been education, with the RSS seeing cultural hegemony as more foundational than political control (Bhatty and Sundar, 2020). As a result, academic life in Indian universities and freedom of progressive thought in general are facing right-wing attacks in various forms: vandalization (of symbols of progressive thought); criminalization; militarization; observation (for surveillance purpose); cancellation (of academic events); prohibition (of certain texts); devaluation (of progressive ideas); intimidation; coercion; de-politicization (threatening left-wing student politics); Hinduization (of academic personnel); termination (of employment of progressive academics), deprivation (of funds for higher education); and right-wing

ideologization. Indeed, an academic risks violence or raids or other methods of harassment for one's democratic, secular and egalitarian views. If one is a Marxist academic, one can immediately be labelled a Maoist and be behind bars for years without bail.

Ideas and politics, or right-wing ideological and political attacks on academia, cannot live on thin air. They have a material origin. The system has no answer to the massive problems of inequality and poverty, which prompts opposition from below. This opposition is aided by, and is expressed through, Marxist/leftist/progressive views from academia and from civil society. So the system must crush dissent and normalize society's problems. To do this and to justify its repressive acts, it creates a space where political forces make use of religion and hyper-religious-nationalism, etc. through which it tried to divert attention of common people from the failure of the system and to divide the common people based on religion (see Das, 2020a: chs 11-12; Das, 2023b).

It must be noted that the right-wing attacks on liberal and left-leaning professors and students do not go unopposed (see Figure 6). Academia is indeed a site of ideological struggle (Das, 2023c). Student unions affiliated with Left/communist parties are fighting student elections on the basis of a united front. They are organizing study groups on Marx and on Bhagat Singh, the Indian Marxist and atheist revolutionary hanged by the British. Sit-ins, teach-ins and occupations are perfectly legitimate forms of dissent that can and should be deployed. But these should be deployed in solidarity with struggles in cities and villages (Malhar, 2019):

These demonstrations cannot restrict themselves to the interests of universities. The need of the hour is to build solidarities with and fight alongside the peasantry, the industrial working class, unorganised labour and minority rights groups, and treat their struggles as our own (ibid.; Das, 2023c).



Figure 6: Academia's fight against right-wing authoritarianism

Source: <https://www.newsclick.in/TN-students-accuse-centra-university-suppressing-dissenting-voices-favouring-right-WIng-activism>

In this context, mention must be made of two points made by that Lenin – the *bete noire* of the right-wing movement in India and elsewhere (see Figure 4). Firstly, without democratic rights, Marxist intellectual and political work would be difficult. Secondly, therefore, it is a Marxist task to counter the attacks on democratic rights. Marxists must engage in fight against such things as:

the flogging of peasants, the corruption of the officials and the police treatment of the ‘common people’ in the cities’, ‘the suppression of the popular striving towards enlightenment and knowledge’, ‘the persecution of the religious sects’, the humiliating treatment of ...the students and liberal intellectuals’. (Lenin, 1902)

To significantly enhance the chances of success of the fight against right-wing hyper-nationalist authoritarian political regimes such as the one in India, Marxists, including Marxist academics, must engage in an ideological and political fight for these democratic rights on the basis of a united front as a part of their fight for socialist democracy and for a peaceful world.

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