

## **Countering the Corporate-hindutva Narrative on the Nation\***

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The kisan agitation has become more than simply a fight for MSP or against the corporatization of agriculture. Through its practice, it is recovering a narrative that is opposed to the hegemonic narrative promoted under neo-liberalism. And as the Modi government's skulduggery for breaking the movement intensifies in the coming days, this recovery will become more and more comprehensive, clear-cut, and oppositional. Let me illustrate the point by referring to the narrative about the 'nation'.

The concept of the 'nation' crystallized with the emergence of the bourgeoisie in seventeenth century Europe and acquired particular prominence with the rise of finance capital in the late nineteenth century. Rudolf Hilferding had noted that the ideology of finance capital was the glorification of the 'national idea'. Finance capital glorified the 'nation' because it simultaneously propagated the view that the 'nation' was synonymous with itself, that the 'nation's' interests were identical with those of finance capital. Thus alongside a glorification of the 'nation' there was an identification of the 'nation' with its finance capital which the latter used in the struggle against finance capitals of other countries during the period of intense inter-imperialist rivalry.

A corollary of this identification was detaching the 'nation' from the people. The 'nation' became an entity placed above the people, for which the people only made sacrifices but which was not particularly concerned with mundane and practical issues like the material conditions of life of the people. Its concern was only with power and glory, not with calorie intake or health of the people.

This concept was completely different from the concept of the 'nation' that emerged in the third world during the anti-colonial struggle. Colonialism was oppressive for the 'nation' because it oppressed the people; there was thus an identification of the 'nation' with the people. The agenda for 'national' liberation spelt out in the 1931 Karachi Congress Resolution in India and similar documents in other countries dwelt at length on improving the condition of the people.

The reason for this difference from European 'nationalism' lay in the fact that while the latter had been championed and promoted by finance capitals engaged in inter-imperialist rivalry through the media they controlled in their respective countries, by contrast the class-base of the anti-colonial struggle incorporated the workers, the peasants, the petty producers, and the small capitalists, apart from the big capitalists who had also felt constricted under colonial rule.

With neo-liberalism however we had a conceptual counter-revolution. 'Nationalism' of the European kind where the 'nation' was apotheosized, placed above the people, and made identical with the corporate-financial oligarchy was promoted in third world countries, including India, in the era of neo-liberal capitalism. True, inter-imperialist rivalries had got muted, but European-style 'nationalism' was still useful for the interests of finance capital.

Promoting the identity between the 'nation' and the corporate-financial oligarchy was done originally by pretending that this oligarchy brings about economic growth that

benefits everyone. And as this claim began to wear thin because of the crisis of neo-liberal capitalism, a new way was found to establish this identity, without of course abandoning the claim. This was by invoking an alternative metaphysical concept, the 'Hindu nation', that again stands above the people, for which the people are again called upon to make sacrifices, and in whose eyes again the living conditions of the people are of minor significance.

This has been the dominant narrative for the last six years, spun by the Hindutva votaries and pushed assiduously by the corporate media, reflecting the ascendancy of the corporate-Hindutva alliance that came into being during the period of crisis of neoliberal capitalism. Narendra Modi leaves no one in any doubt about what he means by the 'nation' when he calls the corporate-financial oligarchy the 'wealth creators' of the nation. This description implies that if the 'nation' is to prosper then these 'wealth creators' must be kept happy; the nation's interest in short is identical with the interest of this oligarchy. The so-called Hindu Rashtra propounded by the RSS is in reality a dictatorship of the corporate-financial oligarchy, and even within it of a handful of oligarchs, run exclusively in their interest.

The move towards a unitary State is part of this agenda. A federated State where state governments have significant resources and decision-making powers, allows scope for dispersed development with small local bourgeoisies, small household units or even state government enterprises, also developing alongside large units owned by the corporate-financial oligarchy. But if resources and hence decision-making are centralized then the scope for such dispersed development gets increasingly snuffed out. The handful of members of the corporate-financial oligarchy favoured by the central government because they in turn are the financial backers of the central government get a free run, as was the case with the shinko zaibatsu in Japan in the 1930s. The immense centralization of resources and powers under Modi is the counterpart of the dominance of a handful of monopoly houses. And now the farmers are being sacrificed for completing this dominance.

But centralization does not only mean a strengthening of the central government against the state governments. It also means a centralization within the central government, where all power gets concentrated in the hands of a "leader" who becomes all powerful, who knows what is good for the people, and who can do no wrong. The 'nationalism' of the corporate-Hindutva alliance necessarily deifies the 'leader' as the symbol of the 'nation'. It is no surprise that organs of the State such as the National Investigating Agency consider any lampooning of Modi to be 'anti-national', and hence deserving of arrest.

The practice of the kisan agitation has not only questioned this concept of the 'nation' but also brought back to the centre-stage the alternative concept of the nation as being identical with its working people. Their very rejection of Modi's claim that the three laws in contention are good for them is a blow against the notion that the 'leader' knows best, a core belief of the corporate-Hindutva concept of the 'nation'. Many have criticised the Centre for not listening to the kisans or talking to them meaningfully; listening however is fundamentally antithetical to this concept of the 'nation', which believes not in building national unity through negotiations but in a prior immanent existence of 'national' unity, reflected in the 'leader', questioning whose wisdom is ipso facto either "anti-national" or rooted in naivete arising from lack of knowledge

The call given by the kisan movement to boycott Ambani's Jio; the burning of effigies of the Modi government together with those of the Ambanis and the Adanis; are all indicative of an awareness of the spurious identification of the 'nation' with a few business houses which Modi has been pushing in the name of 'wealth creation'. Ironically just the day before the kisans' Jio boycott call, Ambani had announced the launch of Jio 5. This was showcased on every TV channel as a big 'national' achievement. The kisans' call to boycott the Jio products is not just a specific tactical move; it runs counter to this entire narrative that sees the 'nation' as being identical with a few corporate houses.

But the kisans are not just countering this narrative; they are providing an alternative and diametrically opposite narrative, thereby recovering the real nationalism of the anti-colonial struggle. A common slogan at the sites where they have gathered is: Jai Bharat, Jai Kisan, which has a dual significance. On the one hand, it identifies the 'nation' with the kisans, that is, the working people. On the other hand it is significant for what it does not say, namely Bharat Mata Ki Jai. Presenting the 'nation' as a mother-figure is a means of apotheosizing it, of placing it above the people who are then expected to make only sacrifices for it. This is typical of the 'nationalism' propagated by the corporate-Hindutva alliance which wants people to make sacrifices for the corporates for the good of the 'nation'. Likewise the kisans' insistence on using slogans in Punjabi and other languages rather than remaining confined to slogans only in Hindi, is a recognition on their part of the unity in multiplicity of the country's regional-linguistic nationalities, as distinct from a single centralized 'nation'.

Symbols speak loudly. The symbols used by the kisan movement, the nature of the stand taken by it against the government, in short its entire practice constitutes an emphatic rejection of the 'nationalism' propagated by the corporate-Hindutva alliance, and a recovery of the real nationalism that underlay the anti-colonial struggle and provided the foundation for free India.

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