

Review: The Communal Base to Indian Nationalism

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## The Communal Base to Indian Nationalism

David Hardiman

*Essays in the Social History of Modern India* by Ravinder Kumar; Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1983; pp 306, Rs 130.

THIS volume brings together essays written by Ravinder Kumar in the late 1960s and 1970s. Their reappearance in this form will be welcomed with enthusiasm by all those who, like me, owe much in their understanding of modern Indian history to the lucid and penetrating writings of this author. In these essays he covers a wide range of important themes, such as the rise of the middle classes and rich peasants, working class organisation, the social base to Indian nationalism, the historiography of the nationalist movement, and the whole phenomena represented by Gandhi. In this review I shall not attempt to deal with all of these topics; rather, I shall concentrate on what I feel to be the most important contribution of this set of essays, namely Ravinder Kumar's study of solidarity in Indian society and the communal base to Indian nationalism.

In the essay titled 'Class, Community or Nation? Gandhi's Quest for a Popular Consensus in India', Kumar starts by discussing the British colonialist argument that the Indian sub-continent could never be united except under British rule because it was divided into a bewildering variety of different castes, communities and linguistic groups. This argument is not to be dismissed lightly, for although it was in an important respect refuted by the history of the nationalist movement after 1918, it is clear from the events of 1947 and subsequent separatist movements in South Asia that the problem of national unity has yet to be solved in a satisfactory manner. Kumar therefore poses the question: what exactly was the basis of the 'national unity' forged by Gandhi in the period after 1918?

This question can be answered at two levels. First, we can examine localities, such as cities or rural districts, to discover the solidarities underlying the movement at that particular level, and, second, we can take India as a whole and try to discern some pattern to the broader solidarities which emerged during the movement. Ravinder Kumar looks at both of these levels in these

essays. To start with, let us see what he has to say about solidarities at the local level.

In 'The Rowlatt Satyagraha in Lahore', he describes how a peaceful protest launched by Gandhi in 1919 gathered force with such power and unity that the city of Lahore was freed from British control for a period of about four days. In the end, troops had to be brought in to 'pacify' the inhabitants. This was in spite of the fact that the population was divided sharply along lines of caste and religion. How did such unexpected unity emerge in 1919?

### COMMUNAL SOLIDARITIES

Kumar answers this question by examining the evolution of popular ideas, beliefs and solidarities in the decades preceding the upsurge of 1919. He finds that on the whole the loyalty of the people was to their community. Two such 'communities' were particularly important — that of the Hindu middle classes and the Muslims. The former group, which made up about one-third of the population of Lahore, dominated trade, business and the professions in the city. Although there was considerable differentiation in terms of wealth, this group possessed a strong sense of community. Rich and poor were to some extent bound together by ties of caste. But just as important in moulding a community identity was the Arya Samaj, which exerted a powerful influence over the Hindu middle classes of Lahore.

The Muslims, who made up over half the population of the city, were, by contrast, for the most part poor artisans and workers. Their sense of community, engendered by a common economic plight, was cemented by their identification with Islam. Their great cultural event was the *mushaira*, at which poets such as Iqbal gave recitals. The poems, which glorified an assertive form of Islam, were recited afterwards at street corners, reaching even the poorest and most illiterate Muslim workers. Likewise, the rabidly pro-Muslim writings of popular journalists

such as Zafar Ali Khan were disseminated by readings and word of mouth.

In the years preceding 1919, these two major communities became increasingly dissatisfied with British rule. The Hindu middle classes were alienated by the autocratic government of Michael O'Dwyer, who saw himself as the champion of the Punjabi peasant and scourge of the 'parasitic' middle classes. The Muslims were angered by Britain's hostilities with Turkey, for they regarded the Turkish Sultan as their spiritual leader. To this explosive mix was added the rapid inflation of the latter period of the First World War, which made it extremely hard for any but the rich to make ends meet. When, therefore, O'Dwyer's government tried to suppress hitherto peaceful demonstrations in April 1919 in a clumsy and heavy-handed manner, the city exploded in a display of united opposition to British rule. From the 11th to 14th April, the British lost control of the old part of Lahore. The nationalist leaders of the city were taken by surprise, and had little idea about what to do with the power which was now in their hands. They tried to call off the agitation, but the people would not hear of it. In the end, the protest was quelled by troops.

In two essays on another city, Bombay, Ravinder Kumar finds similar communal solidarities. His excellent essay on 'The Bombay Textile Strike, 1919' is not concerned directly with nationalist politics, but it sheds much light on the relationship between the middle class nationalists of the city and the working classes. The Bombay working classes had been recruited largely from villages in the Konkan and Maharashtrian Deccan, and they still, in the city, retained a peasant outlook on life. They grouped themselves around jobbers, who acted as a type of substitute village headman. Kinsmen from particular villages often shared accommodation in the crowded tenements of the city. Their work in the factory generated an additional and novel sense of community. Religion also provided a focus for their loyalties, be it Islam or Marathi Hinduism.

There were, however, no organisations, such as trade unions, acting as spokesmen for the workers, and it was not therefore possible to describe this as a class in the formal sense, that is, as a group "tied to each other by the common role they perform in the process of production, by their conscious-

ness of this role, and by the reflection of this consciousness in political behaviour" (pp 238-39). Despite this, the workers of Bombay launched a powerful strike in January 1919 which won substantial wage increases in the face of strong opposition from the mill-owners. There was no formal organisation behind the strike; large groups of workers merely marched from mill-to-mill persuading their fellows to stop work. In a day, almost all of the mills were empty. As yet, the workers had not yet even formulated their demands! In a telling analogy, Kumar likens this action to a peasant *jacquerie*, taking the millowners and government by surprise, and spreading as it did with remarkable speed and force.

In a later essay, 'From *Swaraj* to *Purna Swaraj*: Nationalist Politics in the City of Bombay, 1920-30', Ravinder Kumar shows how the working classes threw their support behind the nationalist movement in 1920-21, but withdrew it subsequently under the leadership of the communists. In 1930 they gave hardly any support to Gandhi's salt satyagraha. This was not because of any newly-developed class consciousness. In May 1932, Hindu and Muslim workers attacked each other with unbridled ferocity in the communal riots of that month. The sense of community — this time of a religious variety — still reigned supreme.

As a result, the chief strategy of the nationalists in Bombay was to try to forge an alliance with as many communities as possible. Originally it was very much a movement of Gujaratis of the city, but in 1920-21 Gandhi managed to win over the Muslim and Maharashtrian communities to his cause. The Muslims were attracted by Gandhi's support for the Khilafat movement; the Maharashtrians by the fact that their hero, Tilak, had just died, and Gandhi had promptly filled the vacuum. The agitation took a very communal form during its most militant phase. In November 1921 the followers of Gandhi fought on the streets with Parsis, Christians and Europeans, the communities most closely associated in Bombay with colonial rule. In 1930, on the other hand, Civil Disobedience was mainly a movement of the Gujarati and Marwari middle classes. In Ravinder Kumar's telling phrase (p 268): "The satyagraha camp at Vile Parle exuded a strong flavour of that extra-ordinary mixture of piety and wealth which characterised so many men and women

who formed a part of the Mahatma's intimate circle."

#### CLASS AND COMMUNITY

Through these studies of Lahore and Bombay, Kumar reveals in a convincing manner that the chief form of solidarity at the local level was that of community rather than class. This does not mean that he is opposed to the use of class analysis. In fact, he has a very subtle understanding of the relationship between class and community. As he says on page 239:

In practice ... classes rarely exist beyond the community of roles in the process of production; the social consciousness of class, and its reflection in political behaviour, are phenomena which the social historian encounters very infrequently, if he encounters them at all. This is so because of the institutions and solidarities which mediate between the individual and the class to which he ideally belongs, shape his social loyalties, and mould his political behaviour. Such institutions and solidarities are more useful in exploring political behaviour and social action than the concept of class, since they possess a contextual relevance and a concrete quality which the abstract concept of class totally lacks. Yet they do not make class a superfluous concept. Instead, they render it a more flexible and sophisticated tool of analysis for the historian. The utility of class as a heuristic device remains inviolate. The historian's skill lies in the subtlety with which he relates it to the values and the environment of the individuals or the social groups which interest him.

Ravinder Kumar also shows through his two case studies how the strength of the nationalist movement in any particular locality depended very much on the degree to which alliances of disparate communities could be patched together. In the essay 'Class, Community or Nation? Gandhi's Quest for a Popular Consensus in India', he goes on to examine the implications of this finding for the Indian nationalist movement as a whole. The theme of this essay is that Gandhi was the first nationalist leader who understood that an effective all-India movement could be built only on the basis of such alliances. Kumar writes on page 51:

Since most of Gandhi's predecessors and his contemporaries assumed the existence of a homogeneous political society in India, they were unable to organise truly broad-based political movements. Because Gandhi had realistic picture of India as a loose constellation of classes, communities and religious groups, he was able to activate the peoples of the subcontinent in a way no one had done before, or has since.

Gandhi applied this technique first during the Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919, and its remarkable success took even him by surprise. In 1920, he made his pact with the Ali brothers, thereby gaining popular support from Muslims of all classes. He toured India, appealing to people on the basis of their caste and religion to support a movement to remove foreign rule. The appeal was sufficiently broad-based to attract men and women from virtually the whole spectrum of classes in India — from businessmen to workers, and from the rural rich to landless labourers. The result was a movement of formidable power.

Through this and subsequent campaigns of civil disobedience, Gandhi provided a focus of loyalty which united a whole range of disparate communities. Each group had its own understanding of what he stood for. Seen as saint or freedom fighter, millennial prophet or social reformer, Vaniya businessman or voice of the oppressed, Hindu hero or feminist, Gandhi served as the often unconscious champion of the hopes and aspirations of all types of people. During the periods of Gandhian agitation — that is, 1919-22, 1928-34 and 1939-44 — the Indian nationalist movement was not therefore under the control of any particular class; rather, it was an alliance of a whole range of groups under the leadership of a populist hero who was always his own master (however quirky or partial to bourgeois interests his strategies often were). Therefore, to understand the relationship between class and nationalism during such periods, what has to be elucidated is, on the one hand, the nature of the political demands of particular communities (which often had a strong class content), and, on the other hand, the way in which certain class interests sought to lobby and control the leaders of the movement. During the periods of compromise — that is, 1923-27, 1935-39 and 1945-47 — the Congress served the class interests of the Indian bourgeoisie in a far less ambiguous manner.

#### A LONE VOICE

Ravinder Kumar's essays thus provide a framework for an understanding of the nationalist movement during the periods of Gandhi's ascendancy. Reading them again, after a lapse of several years, some loose ends and unsatisfactory elements can be pointed out. A more precise definition of the

term 'community' would be helpful, as it is used at a number of different levels in these essays. The study of the Bombay textile workers is highly suggestive, but it lacks the precision of focus on working class culture seen in the writings of Dipesh Chakrabarty on the jute-workers of Calcutta. In fact, Kumar is only too well aware (p 58) of the problem involved in understanding popular culture and consciousness, and he calls for studies of the quality of those carried by Oscar Lewis in Mexico. It is a pity, perhaps, that he himself did not follow this suggestion up. His belief that peasant *jacqueries* are spontaneous outbursts (p 215) needs to be modified after the appearance of Ranajit Guha's monograph, "Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India", which shows that from the peasant's own point of view there is nothing 'spontaneous' about such revolts. At times, Kumar uses rather elitist language, as on page 68, where he says that 'King Mob ruled over the city' (of Bombay) and 'primitive passions' were set loose. Why, one wonders, is it 'primitive' for workers to attack with ferocity those whom they see as their exploiters? Where the police also guilty of giving vent to their 'primitive passions' when they suppressed the rioters with lathis and bullets?

Interestingly enough, Kumar's essay on Lahore is free of such elitist language. This is probably because, as a Punjabi himself, he had a particular empathy with this subject. Unfortunately, in a more recent essay included in this collection, 'Nationalism and Social Change' (1978), such phrases appear in greater abundance. On pp 7-8 he writes that "... the peasantry, which was ignorant of the techniques of political organisation, was unable to give coherent expression to its hostility and often struck blindly at the social classes which appeared to be proximate instruments of its social misery". His statement on the volatile nature of the urban crowd (p 21) also compares poorly with his earlier writings:

Cities like Bombay and Calcutta housed rapidly growing working class populations whose relative deprivation made them a fertile recruiting ground for class politics. Below the workers, in the industrial cities, stood the lumpen classes, a shifting, anonymous mass of humanity, setting with discontent and ready to respond to the call of radical politics or communal violence.

To whom, one wonders, were these lumpen masses 'anonymous'. Not to themselves, one assumes!

These, however, are aberrations; and they should not distract us from the great qualities of the earlier essays. Also, we should bear in mind that for many years Ravinder Kumar was something of a lone voice in his field of study. His emphasis on communal consciousness and solidarity did not go down well with liberal-nationalist historians, many so-called Marxist historians whose understanding of class was extremely positivistic, nor with the proponents of Pareto-style elite theory who dominated the study of

modern Indian history in the West. Ravinder Kumar refused to accept these lines of thought, and as a result he was sometimes denigrated, more often ignored. In the past few years, substantial critiques have been developed of these various schools which to a large extent vindicate Kumar's pioneering approach. Subjects such as popular consciousness and populist leadership have become central to the writings of many young historians of today. The appearance of this set of essays will serve, therefore, as a timely reminder that this new generation of historians was not the first to grasp the importance of such topics.

## Indian Development

### A Different Soviet View

Ajit Roy

**The Role of the State in the Socio-Economic Structure of India** by O V Malyarov; Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1983; pp vi + 464. Rs 195.

ENLARGED English version of an original Russian study, published in 1978, this voluminous book is the product of work done in two countries, the USSR and India — under the auspices of the University Grants Commission in the latter.

After tracing the familiar ground of colonial evolution in general, the author briefly focuses on the specificity of the Indian development — "the development of Indian big capital and its transition into monopoly capital" — one of the peculiarities of the Indian monopoly capital being "their sectoral heterogeneity, the clustering together in a single group of enterprises belonging to a wide spectrum of industries, often quite unconnected technologically" (pp 39-40).

In delineating the immediate background of the transfer of power, the author, however, misses the specificity of the Indian situation. While he repeats that "no acceleration of capitalist development was possible without a sharp reduction in foreign competition and... a policy of consistent protectionism" (p 46), he entirely misses the real changes that had taken place during the World War II, such as a spurt, though within a circumscribed frame, in industrial production, rise of the Indian share to majority in many of the established industries and the emergence of a highly protected home market, all of which have been well documented by

Michael Kidron and other scholars of the related developments. While the author is generally right when he concludes this introductory chapter by noting that "though mass actions... played the decisive role in eliminating the colonial regime... the national bourgeoisie managed to keep the leadership of the movement in their own hands and to come to power after political independence..." (p 48). What Malyarov glosses over is the specific character of the political independence gained by the Indian 'national' bourgeois leadership, heavily influenced by the monopoly capitalist stratum — an independence significantly qualified by various survivals of the old regime and specifically fashioned to suit the purposes of safeguarding and developing the monopoly capitalist interests.

But it is to the credit of Malyarov that lacking though he is in a well articulated theoretical viewpoint, his attention and adherence to observed phenomena serves to redeem much of this weakness and he is able to capture many of the characteristics of the socio-economic evolution in post-independence India.

After the Indian bourgeoisie had come to occupy the seas of power, expansion of state capitalism was undertaken as a matter of course. Not only did the National Planning Committee set up by the Indian National Congress under the chairmanship of Jawaharlal Nehru after the formation of Congress