Anti-national Economics*

Jayati Ghosh

As the air in India grows thick with accusations of being "anti-national", it is worth taking a step back to consider what this means in political economy terms. After all, to characterise someone as "anti-national" you must first define what a nation is. Doing so in any meaningful way makes it clear that a nation is much more than territorially defined: a nation is ultimately its people. The nation remains the terrain on which rights of citizens can be demanded of the state, even though obviously the notion of universal human rights extends much beyond national boundaries. And the construction of the nation is dependent upon social contracts that are forged by the will of its people and their interactions over time.

Once you recognise that, it becomes evident that nationalism – and indeed anti-nationalism – must have deeper and more nuanced meanings than the more trivial attributes typically ascribed to it. To begin with, a person cannot be anti-national. Rather, whatever goes against the interests of the people (especially in terms of the defined social contract) is anti-national, which in turn means processes and policies can be anti-national, not individuals.

The nation of India may be nearly seven decades old, but it is still a nation in the making in terms of meeting the social goals defined in our Constitution. That remarkable document, for which Dr Ambedkar is justly venerated, was also very much the product of the freedom struggle that defined nationhood in a positive, inclusive sense in contrast to the divisive categories utilised by the colonial power. So in looking for the essence of the Indian nation, it is worth examining the Preamble to the Constitution, since the framing of the goals defined there can be seen as providing the essential building blocks of the idea of India.

Consider, then, what the Preamble of the Indian Constitution promises. It declares that this nation will ensure for its citizens four essential features. First, justice – in social, economic and political terms. Second, liberty – of thought, expression, faith, belief and worship. Third, equality – of both status and opportunity. And finally, fraternity — expressed first in terms of ensuring the dignity of the individual and then in terms of the unity and integrity of the nation. These, then, are the essential building blocks of our nation, which explains why it is still a work in progress.

If this is accepted, then working towards achieving these goals is nationalist. And policies and processes that undermine these goals are anti-national, since they are against the idea and the promise of our nation.

Seen in this light, it becomes evident that many policies of the recent past can be described as anti-national. Let us examine only the economic content of some of these.

Economic justice can be defined in many ways, but whichever way you slice it, it is relatively easy to identify its opposite. And there can be no denying that our society is rife with a myriad forms of economic injustice. Some of these are very old indeed, as the histories of caste and gender oppression and their economic ramifications will testify. But recent economic policies and processes have greatly added to such injustice.

For example, the proportion of workers without any form of formal contracts, which was already an obscenely high 95 per cent of the work force, has actually increased recently. The share of wages in national income and in the value added of industries has come down sharply over the past two decades. Migrant workers are routinely robbed of their rights because so much public provision remains residence-based, and typically face terrible living and working conditions. Yet the NDA government seeks to bring in legislation that will further reduce the bargaining power of all workers, and relies on cynical subcontracting and

other subterfuges (such as not considering women anganwadi workers and ASHAs to be workers) to deny workers their basic rights even in public employment.

Farmers reeling under the adverse effects of agrarian crisis have yet to receive the minimal economic justice due to those who work towards ensuring the food security of the country under risky and increasingly adverse conditions. Meanwhile, the lip service paid to their needs actually rubs salt in their wounds because the policies of the government actually make cultivation less viable.

Other self-employed workers in non-agricultural activities are forced to function in extraordinarily difficult conditions, without access to formal institutional credit (of which they get less than 2 per cent) or basic infrastructure and facilities, access to technology and inputs or assistance in marketing. And they too face not just neglect by official policy but downright attacks on their livelihoods, because of state policies based on the belief that only large corporate players deserve incentives.

Millions of unpaid workers (dominantly but not only women) continue to be essential contributors to the economy and society, but without recognition, respect or remuneration. These conditions have been made much worse by cuts in public spending that deny people access to basic amenities and essential public services, forcing households to rely on more unpaid labour by family members, especially women and girls.

Then there is the injustice meted out to those who are displaced from their land, habitat resources and livelihood, not only by "development" projects like roads and irrigation schemes but also by urban spread and the expansion of luxury real estate. The NDA government has sought (unsuccessfully) to worsen such injustice by weakening the provisions of the Land Acquisition Act – and it has not bothered to implement the just provisions of the Tribal Rights Act.

The second promise – of liberty and freedom of expression, thought, faith, belief and worship – is being much discussed currently, and so there is no need to belabour the obvious point that such freedoms are hugely under threat in India today.

The third promise, of equality of status and opportunity, is in many ways linked to the first. It is also as hard, may be even harder, to achieve. Over millennia, Indian society has developed the most complex systems of hierarchy, discrimination and exclusion in the world, using caste, gender, ethnicity, religion and language among other criteria. Yet in some ways things may have got worse. The economic strategy of the past decade was in fact based on inequality, premised on the idea that incentives to large corporations would generate investment that would pull the Indian economy up by its own bootstraps. This meant that large capital was allowed and even encouraged to get natural resources and labour cheap, thereby generating both "scams" and greater inequality. Contrary to their own propaganda, the proliferations of scams has not diminished at all during the NDA regime thus far – and given the tendency to run roughshod over matters like environmental clearances and labour rights, matters are likely to deteriorate further.

Meanwhile, what is also notable about the NDA government is their distaste for any rights-based legislation or economic policies. The Prime Minister was open in his contempt for the employment guarantee scheme until quite recently; the government has ignored the need for speedy implementation of the right to food law; it is actively trying to scuttle or enfeeble the right to information act; after making promises on the right to health it has actually made massive cuts in the central health budget and offered in its stead a trivial sop in the form of health insurance for private providers. So one basic plank of reducing inequalities – the universal provision of good quality public services and basic goods – has already been dealt a big blow by the policies of this government.

This is particularly evident in education. Universal access to good quality education is not just good for the economy and society – it is critical for improving intergenerational social mobility and thereby reducing inequality. Yet this government is pushing young people to more privatised education, especially higher education, even as employment opportunities for graduates remain dismal.

Finally consider a major plank of the fourth promise: dignity. There are many aspects of ensuring dignity to the individual, and only some of them can be affected by state policies. But in so far as a government can indeed work towards ensuring greater dignity for all of the people, the performance of this government may actually be going counter to this.

One element of this is – perhaps surprisingly – in the move towards Direct Benefit Transfers (or cash transfers) as substitutes for public provision in essential areas. Across the world, wherever cash transfers have been successful in reducing poverty and improving dignity of recipients, they have been part of a strategy of increasing public expenditure on food, health and education – rather than reducing it. Yet this government seeks to cut such spending (passing off the responsibility to state governments that do not have anywhere near the required resources) and substituting public provision with direct transfers into bank accounts. Quite apart from the many difficulties of such targeted transfers, such as unfair exclusion or unjustified inclusion of beneficiaries, not keeping pace with price increases, and so on, this also attacks the rights-based notion that saw such provision as the right of every citizen. Instead of a government that must deliver on its responsibility to realise the rights of its citizens, we are back to the mai-baapsarkar, where anything that is provided must be accepted by grateful "beneficiaries" as a benevolent gift from the government. This also involves a fundamental denial of dignity to citizens.

By these criteria, then, the NDA's economic policies have been profoundly anti-national. Sadly, this form of anti-nationalism is not a crime; nor does it appear to generate the violent antipathy that is directed to dissenting opinions.

* This article was originally published in the Frontline, Print edition: April 1, 2016.