

COMMUNAL FASCISM IN INDIA

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During the last two decades India has witnessed a strange political scene. *The discourse of politics has been made to shift from the struggles and travails of the poor and exploited (revolving around bread, butter, housing, health and education) to various issues supposedly related to 'faith'*. Our society and its democratic and secular values are threatened by the rise of communalism and new social and political forces based on 'religion'. **Hindutva has gained much ground.** Though rooted in some social segments since many decades, its social visibility has considerably grown. While deriving its name from Hinduism and giving at first the impression of being some sort of religion, **it is basically a political ideology.**

The Hindutva ideology has raised afresh the questions of nationality, community and identity, and a host of other social issues. *The Hindutva movement claims to be building a strong nation on the tenets of 'Hindu Dharma', Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation).* While pursuing its political agenda, it has brought to the fore a number of precepts and popularised a new version of history, which looks at the past through the parameter of religion. **The Hindutva phenomenon, its new concepts and value system, and its social base and constituency need to be properly understood.**

Historical Insights

The Hindutva movement is spearheaded by a plethora of organisations, the patriarch of which is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the real controller of its other organisations. It was founded in 1925 against a specific backdrop. With the entry of Mahatma Gandhi into the political arena in 1920, the anti-British movement got tremendously galvanised. People of all

religions, castes and creeds joined the struggle and the Brahminical domination in the Congress started declining. In order to reassert their hegemony on the political and social scene, the Brahmins and the upper castes supported by *Jamindari* and *Bania* elements, came up with the idea of a religion-based national organisation, the RSS.

Slightly prior to this, Savarkar had put forward **the idea of "Hindutva as the basis for politics, which stood for Nationalism based on Hinduism"** (Puniyani, 51). At that time the Non-Brahman movement was peaking and threatening to shake the social power of the Jamindar-Brahmin nexus. At the international level, the racial Nationalism of the Nazis (Germany) and Fascists (Italy) was on the ascendance. *This was the main inspiration for the 'Nationalism' of the RSS.* As Golwalkar wrote: "German national pride has now become the topic of the day. To keep up the purity of the race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by purging the country of the Semitic races – the Jews. National pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown to the world how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures having differences going to the roots, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindusthan to learn and profit by" (27).

Marzia Casolari, an Italian researcher who has studied the roots of Hindu Nationalism, concludes that "(a) the main historical organisations and leaders of Hindu Nationalism had a distinctive and sustained interest in fascism and nazism; (b) *fascist ideological influences on Hindu Nationalism were present and relevant*; (c) to a certain extent, these influences were channelled through direct contacts between Hindu nationalists and members of the Italian fascist state" (37). The RSS decided to keep aloof from day-to-day political struggles and began to train young boys into the doctrine of Hindu Rashtra. **This is the core ideology of the RSS:** "*Hindus and Hindus alone constitute the Indian Nation, since they are the original inhabitants and sole creators of its society and culture. Hinduism is uniquely catholic and tolerant and hence superior to other faiths... The subsequent entry and takeover by foreigners created an illusion that India was a land of many different and equal cultures... Only a 'truly secular' Hindu Rashtra will afford protection to non-Hindus*" (Basu, et al., 37)

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The initial concern of the Hindutva movement (the RSS and *the Hindu Mahasabha*) was to counter the politics of the Muslim League and to influence the Congress in a pro-Hindu direction. The RSS was mainly focusing on training volunteers and *the Hindu Mahasabha* on electoral politics. After Independence the number of RSS cadres greatly increased, and *the Hindu Mahasabha* gradually went into oblivion. One of the ex-pracharaks of the RSS, Nathuram Godse, murdered Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 and the RSS was banned for some time. *Meanwhile, RSS volunteers kept on infiltrating the army, bureaucracy, media and educational institutions. And multiple RSS-controlled organisations came up.*

The RSS undertook some campaigns to ban cow-slaughter in the 1960s, but the response was lukewarm. It became very active with its anti-communist propaganda during the India-China war and projected its 'patriotic' fervour. Its political wing, the Jana Sangh, undertook the campaign 'Indianise Muslims' in the late 1960s. The spreading RSS ideology and increasing urbanisation were then key factors in intensifying communal violence. The RSS gained higher respectability through the Jayaprakash Narayan movement in 1974. Its political wing joined the Janata Party, came to power, got vital ministries such as External Affairs, Information and Broadcasting, and used the opportunity to further enter the bureaucracy. It however left the Janata Party on the issue of dual membership, its members refusing to leave the RSS. The Janata Party split and the Jana Sangh re-emerged as the BJP, on the plank of 'Gandhian Socialism'.

The early 80s saw a great turmoil in Indian society. The conversion of some Dalits to Islam was projected as a major threat to the country. In 1984, the operation blue star, which evacuated the golden temple from Khalistani militants, was followed by the assassination of Indira Gandhi and a massive anti-Sikh pogrom in which many a Congress worker led the assaulting mobs. The RSS ideologue then wrote a document subtly supporting Rajiv Gandhi for turning a blind eye to the ongoing massacre (Nanaji Deshmukh, 1984). To appease the Muslim fundamentalists, Rajiv Gandhi had a Bill passed in the Lok Sabha to reverse the Supreme Court verdict granting maintenance to Shah Bano. In the same opportunistic style, he went on to get the locks of the Babri Masjid opened. This emboldened the

Hindu fundamentalists to take up the Ramjanam Bhoomi issue and many Muslim leaders became quite insecure. *Both the Hindu and Muslim fundamentalist streams were on the ascendant.*

In 1990, V.P. Singh cleaned the dust of the Mandal Commission report and decided to implement it. This intensified the backlash of the upper castes who rallied around the Sangh Parivar, and the Rath Yatra got a tremendous response from these sections of society. *With the demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya on 6th December 1992, the BJP became politically more powerful. It got more seats in the Lok Sabha and also captured power in various state assemblies.*

The impact of religion in the social and political space was not considerable in the first decades of India's Independence. The RSS remained a fairly insignificant formation till quite late. Hindutva is the crystallised ideology of Hindu communal politics. It was built on the construction of Brahminism as Hinduism, which then formed the base for Hindutva politics. *Savarkar began to articulate the ideology of the Hindu elites (zamindars, Brahmins and kings) by integrating Brahminical Hinduism into nationalism, calling it Hindutva which further showed how to build the Hindu Rashtra.* His key sentence was "**Hinduise all politics and militarise all Hindudom**". *This ideology asserts that India is a Hindu Nation where Christians and Muslims are aliens.* There is no place for 'Western' concepts like secularism and democracy in the Hindu nation, as Hinduism itself is the most 'secular' and tolerant religion. This ideology has so far been consolidated on the hatred of Muslims, Christians and 'Western concepts'.

The impact of Hindutva in the social and political arena became stronger after India's development model brought about the rise of vast sections of the middle classes. The lopsided development resulted on one hand in the rise of rich farmers and on the other, of a vast mass of landless peasants totally bereft of any support system. In cities this was compounded by increasing unemployment and under-employment, linked to the growth of small-scale industries which act as suppliers and subcontractors to the main industries. Such industries result in the proliferation of small but prosperous industrialists and of workers whose wages and living

conditions are abysmal. This also results in the rise of affluent professional groups. *These middle sections have a peculiar type of existential anxieties and have been the strongest supporters of the communal ideology. They have also been strongly present in the social space since the 1980s.*

What is Hindutva?

Hinduism is a collation of multiple religious traditions developed in the Indian subcontinent. Both the religious streams and the cultures of people were diverse. Religion is only one of the markers of culture; there are many other components of culture which are similar amongst people of different religions in the same region. **We cannot equate religion with culture.** This is well exemplified in the cultural similarities between Hindus and Muslims, for example in Kerala. The culture of a Kerala Muslim and a Bangladesh Muslim is also very different.

The term **Hindutva** mainly came in usage from the second decade of the 20th century. There is some mention of the term in the 19th century, but it did not have a broad usage. **Hindutva** began to be used against the backdrop of the consolidation of Brahminism into Hinduism. *Savarkar initially formulated the politics of Hindutva: "The Aryans who settled in India at the dawn of history already formed a nation, now embodied in the Hindus... Hindus are bound together not only by the tie of the love they bear to a common fatherland and by the common blood that courses through their veins, and keeps our hearts throbbing and our affection warm, but also by the tie of the common homage we pay to our great civilisation, our Hindu culture"* (Savarkar, 94).

Thus, "Hindutva according to Savarkar rests on three pillars: geographical unity, racial features and common culture" (Jaffrelot, 26). Furthermore, all those who regard this land as their fatherland and holy land are the only ones who are Hindus, and thereby the people to whom this land belongs. Hence, the Christians and the Muslims, whose holy places are in Jerusalem and Mecca, are not on par with the 'Hindus'. Savarkar initiated the theory of '**doubting the patriotism of Muslims**' by writing: "Besides culture, *the tie of common holy land* has at times proved stronger than the chains of a

motherland. Look at the Mohammedans: Mecca to them is a sterner reality than Delhi or Agra" (Savarkar, 108).

These concepts were further refined by M. S. Golwalkar, the second supremo (*Sarsanghchalak*) of the RSS. His ideology was based on Brahminical Hinduism and the formation of the Hindu Rashtra. Drawing heavily from the Nazi ideology, Golwalkar went on to elaborate the ideas of Nation and *Hindu Rashtra* in his books, "*We or our Nationhood Defined* and *Bunch of Thoughts*. He was forthright in his criticism of the nationalism of the Congress and its 'amazing' theory that a nation is composed of all those who for one reason or another happen to live at the time in a country. As we saw (p. 190), the racial factor is crucial for Golwalkar's concept of nationhood. *Golwalkar is very candid in showing the 'other' races and those belonging to 'foreign' religions their place:* "The foreign races in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence the Hindu religion, must entertain no ideas but those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture, or may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment – not even citizen's rights" (52) .

Hindutva is thus a political, not a religious category. *It is a brew of (Brahminical) Hinduism with nationalism, the politics of Hindu religious nationalism. It is a political movement to build a Hindu Rashtra.*

Hindutva and Culture

The politics of Hindutva asserts that the Hindu nation has existed for 8,000 to 10,000 years in Hindusthan. And also that the Hindus should have a dominant role for the proper running of India. **Both these assertions are at the root of the Hindutva movement, and both contradict the Indian ethos and culture.** Despite the existence of various theories about the Aryans, one can roughly say that their original abode was somewhere in the northwest and that they migrated to different areas, interacting with several cultures in Iran, Afghanistan and the Indian subcontinent. The flowering of social life came from the interaction of the Aryans and the native tribes. Though this resulted in the caste system and other

social evils, the interaction caused the growth of many creative cultures.

As a reaction against a variety of social evils, Buddhism appeared as a new religion widely popular amongst the ‘untouchables’ and other sections of society. *This development greatly enriched Indian culture, which also benefited from the spread of Islam and Christianity.* India thus became a rich social field marching forward with the interaction of multiple cultural streams. During the Mughal rule, this syncretic culture reached a great height with the development of the Bhakti and Sufi sects. These were very popular for the simplicity of their appeals and the beauty and unity of their message. People like Kabir, Nanak and Tukaram enriched our nation’s life. *All this belongs to the Indian ethos and syncretic culture, which respects and loves all beings and ensures an equal treatment to followers of different paths and religions.*

In contrast, Hindutva politics is based on an upper-caste ethos and aims at the hegemony of one section of society and one religion. It theorises and promotes the subjugation of minorities to the upper-caste ethos. It does away with the affirmative action needed for the protection and advancement of the disadvantaged sections of society. *Hindutva thus contradicts the Indian ethos and syncretic culture and deeply negates the ‘spirit’ of Indianness.* It is thus very different from Hinduism, which includes several religious and cultural streams. *Hindutva now represents the political agenda of the upper castes and classes.*

Hindutva’s Goal

The Hindu Rashtra is not a religious state; it is a ‘modern’ phenomenon to impose the pre-modern social hierarchies on all sections of society. *The Hindu Rashtra is the goal of those who are the major beneficiaries of the current social privileges and the recent development process.* It was the goal of the zamindars and brahmins who were threatened by the social changes taking place in pre-Independence times – the champions of the status quo and the allies of the British in the economic and political fields. *Today, the Hindu Rashtra is the battle cry of the sections of society who want to uphold the status quo in the social position of women,*

workers, Dalits and Adivasis. It promotes the interests of the middle classes – the small industries, petty business and agriculture of the ‘Green Revolution’ type, and the professional and bureaucratic cadres.

On the whole, the Dalits, workers, women, and the secular section of the middle classes oppose the march of Hindutva. On their part, the major industrial houses have a unique relation with the Sangh Parivar. Whenever faced with crisis, the bourgeoisie is helped by the socially terrorising atmosphere created by the Sangh Parivar to wriggle out of the compulsions of the liberal ethos. The resilient, thriving fascism of the Sangh Parivar thus continues to throw up its different shades, sometimes terrorising the poor and the minorities, sometimes aggressing the neighbouring ‘enemy’ countries, and sometimes even appearing to collapse under the weight of its own contradictions. **But at the moment, the Hindutva march is on.** Its social roots or constitutencies are all for the support and continuation of the repressive capitalist regime. *The Sangh Parivar sustains the bourgeoisie’s aspirations, while continuing to pursue its own project.*

The Hindutva onslaught also draws some support from fundamentalist concepts. It culls out from the past selective values to impose them on the present. It uses religious imagery, glorifies the ‘golden past’ of the rule of Hindu kings, sees women primarily under patriarchal control and dictates their way of life, dress code, etc. It co-opts a variety of people to strengthen its political base and uses religion in a very effective way to create a nationalist hysteria. At present, the onslaught has achieved mammoth proportions in the north, but the south and east are comparatively unaffected by the paranoid aggression.

The reaction of Dalits, though fragmented, will definitely retard the march of Hindutva. The stand of ‘secular’ Hindus is also crucial. Deeply battered by the Sangh Parivar, the Muslims seem in a bind. They are attacked both Hindu fascism and Muslim fundamentalism. Their sufferings will probably force them to come out and resist the bear hug of the Sangh Parivar. How the latter reacts remains to be seen. Though mixed, the response of the Christian community has so far been strongly secular, defending the human rights of different sections in general and of minorities in particular.

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