

HISTORY OF FASCISM IN INDIA

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The current spate of attacks against Christians by Hindutva groups, particularly in Orissa and Karnataka, has shocked the conscience of many citizens. It coincides with the arrests of a large number of Muslim youths, who are accused of being responsible for bomb blasts in several parts of the country without any concrete evidence. It is also alleged that they are members of SIMI or the Indian Mujahideen. *However, the state applies a completely different standard when members of the Hindutva groups attack Christians and Muslims with impunity.* While the organs of the state and the media hold the Muslims responsible for all the acts of terror in the country, and blame the Christians for religious conversions, the crimes committed by those belonging to the VHP, Bajrang Dal and other Hindutva outfits are often downplayed. *This is contributing in a very significant way to the growing polarisation of our society along communal lines.* It is therefore hardly surprising that Muslims, Christians and perhaps even other minorities feel besieged. Are we witnessing the emergence of fascism in India? This is the question that I would like to address.

What does fascism really mean? It certainly has a negative connotation as it refers to a form of totalitarianism. However, it is distinct and must not be equated with all forms of totalitarian systems. It is for example different from the military dictatorships that existed in Pakistan and also some of the Latin American countries. **In very simple language, fascism is totalitarianism with a mass base.** The military dictatorships rarely have a mass base and history has shown that they can be defeated by the struggles of the people. *Fascism on the other hand, with its mass base which is usually provided by the middle classes, is much more enduring and therefore dangerous.* The best known examples of fascism are the Nazi rule in Germany, led by Hitler from 1933 to 1945, and the rule of the Italian fascist party led by Mussolini from 1922 to 1943. In both cases, the

primary support came from the middle classes, also referred to as the small bourgeoisie. Both German and Italian fascism unleashed a reign of terror on their opponents and seemed invincible till the events of the Second World War led to their defeat.

It is widely felt that the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by a frenzied Hindutva mob on 6 December 1992 symbolised the emergence of fascism in India. *This reprehensible act should not be seen in isolation, but rather as the culmination of a long process that began with the formation of the RSS in 1925.* The conceptual foundations of Hindutva were laid by Savarkar, the founder of *the Hindu Mahasabha*, and Golwalkar, a former chief of the RSS. According to Golwalkar, “the non-Hindus in India must accept Hindu culture and language, and if they don’t, then they don’t deserve any rights, not even citizen’s rights.” **This was and still is the RSS’ vision of the Hindu Rashtra (Hindu Nation).** Four years ago, Ram Madhav, the national spokesperson of the RSS said: “Our conception of our nation is based on our culture, not on the concept of statehood or nation state... The idea of one culture encompasses diversity in caste, religion and language.”

The RSS has over the decades spawned many organisations for achieving the Hindu Rashtra that it envisages. These organisations are collectively known as **the Sangh Parivar**, which is like the mythical multi-headed hydra. The head that it rears at any given time is the one which it perceives to be the most propitious for achieving its objectives at that time. **The BJP** for all intents and purposes is the political wing of the RSS. **The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP)** was set up in 1964 to propagate the ideas underlying the Hindu Rashtra, i.e. Hindutva, among the Hindu masses including Dalits, Adivasis and OBCs. At the founding ceremony of this organisation, its then secretary, S.S. Apte declared: “The world has been divided into Christianity, Islam and Communism. All of them view Hindu society as very fine rich food on which to feast and fatten themselves. It is necessary in this age of conflict to think of and organise the Hindu world to save it from the evils of all the three.” **The Bajrang Dal** was created in 1984 at a time when the Sangh Parivar was gearing up for its Ram Janmabhoomi campaign. It is touted as the youth wing of the VHP, but in reality it acts as the stormtroopers of the Sangh Parivar.

The 1980s marked a turning point for the Sangh Parivar. During this decade, the VHP emerged from relative oblivion and made its presence felt in the national scene. Starting with the Ekatmata Yatra in 1983 to the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign, the VHP and the Bajrang Dal with the unreserved support of the RSS and the BJP launched *a massive communal campaign to win over the hearts and minds of ordinary Hindus.* The BJP leader, Advani, went on a “Rath Yatra” from Somnath to Ayodhya to gather “volunteers” for building the Ram Temple in Ayodhya. In a manner reminiscent of Goebbels, the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, the Sangh Parivar indeed made a concerted effort to convert the communal prejudices against Muslims into a well-entrenched communal consciousness. Apart from propagating myths and slanders, the Sangh Parivar brought in bogus arguments like the appeasement of Muslims and other minorities by the Congress government to win support for its cause.

The response of a large number of middle class Hindus to this propaganda was quite overwhelming. Riding the crest of a communal wave, the supporters of the Sangh Parivar went on to destroy the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 in the presence of some of its prominent leaders. *The decade of the 1980s exposed quite clearly the fascist character of the Hindutva movement.* Communalism by the end of that decade was no longer limited to a few pockets of the country – **it had become a mass phenomenon.** *The Sangh Parivar had successfully depicted the Muslims as “the other”.* Indeed the fascists always need to create “the other” against whom the people can rally under their leadership. This is precisely what happened in Nazi Germany. The Jews were made into “the other” through a strong vilification campaign by the Nazis.

There were large-scale riots in many parts of India after the destruction of the Babri Masjid. In Mumbai, the rioting took place in two phases – the first in December 1992 and the second in January 1993. The role of **the Shiv Sena** in fomenting and executing these riots, particularly the second phase, is well documented in the Srikrishna Commission Report. *The riots and their aftermath further worsened the communal divide and the Sangh Parivar and its ally the Shiv Sena were the beneficiaries.* The Shiv Sena came to power in Maharashtra after winning the 1995 elections. The BJP’s electoral performance steadily improved from 1996 to 1999. It headed a coalition

central government for the first time in 1996, but that government lasted only 13 days. The BJP became the largest single party in the general elections of 1998 and 1999, and it again headed a coalition government at the Centre from 1998 to 2004.

In his classic study on fascism, “Fascism and Dictatorship”, Poulantzas remarked: **“Fascism comes to power, formally at least, in a perfectly constitutional manner...,”** ‘respecting’ the forms of the parliamentary democratic state and within the juridical norms which every liberal state has in store for situations of critical class struggle.” This holds true not just for the forces of Hindutva, but has been historically borne out in the case of the Nazis as well. After coming to power, the BJP could not implement its full blown Hindutva programme as it was part of a coalition government. But it did whatever it could to propagate its ideology within the limits of this constraint. *It made the rewriting of history one of its central objectives.* To this end, the National Council on Educational Research and Training (NCERT) under the leadership of its pro-Hindutva Director, J.S. Rajput, changed school history textbooks to advance the communal agenda of the Sangh Parivar.

The India Council of Historical Research (ICHR) was reconstituted and pro-Hindutva historians were put in control of it. This enabled the scuttling of the “Towards Freedom” project that was aimed at writing a history of the Indian Independence Movement. The ICHR stopped the publication of two volumes that were contributed by two eminent secular historians, Sumit Sarkar and K.N. Pannikar. The most probable reason for this action was that they exposed the lack of participation of the Hindutva organisations in the Independence movement and their collusion with the British colonialists at certain times. S. Gopal, a distinguished historian and the series editor, condemned this as “a clear violation of the terms under which the project was conceived and executed” and “an infringement of the academic rights and freedom” of the concerned historians. A statement issued by 30 academics, including three former heads of the ICHR, described this action as “the grossest form of censorship”. The BJP-led government launched many other assaults on the educational system, including the introduction of astrology in universities. *Indeed, one can expect this phenomenon to worsen if the BJP comes to power on its own.* The Sangh Parivar like most fascist movements

clearly understands that **a strong ideological state apparatus is a prerequisite for the establishment of its notion of a Hindu Rashtra.**

The rule of the NDA coalition government at the Centre, headed by the BJP from 1998 to 2004, witnessed a large number of riots. Large-scale communal riots broke out in Suratkal and Mangalore in December 1998 and continued into early 1999. The Sangh Parivar and the mainstream media claimed that they were a spontaneous reaction to the harassment of Hindu girls by Muslim boys. However, the findings of human rights activists suggest that *the origin of the riots was in the blatant anti-Muslim propaganda by the various constituents of the Sangh Parivar.*

Communal politics in Karnataka is not just limited to Suratkal and Mangalore. It actually finds one of its strongest expression in **the Sangh Parivar's Baba Budangiri campaign**, which began assuming ominous proportions from 1998. This campaign is led by the VHP and the Bajrang Dal. The Sufi shrine in Baba Budangiri, situated 30 kilometre from Chikmagalur, symbolises an integral part of Karnataka's syncretic traditions. However, in the words of a prominent leader of the Bajrang Dal, "the Islamisation of the shrine must stop". Pravin Togadia, the International Secretary of the VHP, and Anantha Kumar, a BJP leader from Karnataka, have both declared that *they intend to make Baba Budangiri the Ayodhya of the South.* It is therefore not surprising that the Sangh Parivar has demanded that the character of the shrine be changed and that Hindus should have exclusive right to it. It is heartening that a coalition comprising several secular organisations has emerged and that it is consistently opposing the communal propaganda of the Sangh Parivar.

The gruesome events of Gujarat in 2002 have shocked every person who has an elementary sense of rectitude. *It is now widely recognised that the atrocities against the innocent Muslims could not have taken place without the active support of the state machinery.* This has been well documented by several human rights organisations who have carried out fact-finding in Gujarat under very difficult conditions. The role of the state in stoking the communal fire and abetting the criminals was so obvious that not only the opposition parties, but also some constituents of the NDA

demanded the resignation of the Chief Minister, Narendra Modi. The charade of Modi submitting his resignation and the party not accepting it was played out at the national executive committee meeting of the BJP in April 2002.

At a public rally, Vajpayee revealed his true face by declaring that "in Indonesia, Malaysia, wherever Muslims live, they don't want to live in harmony". He attributed the violence in Gujarat to the Godhra killings. He asked rhetorically, "Who lit the fire? How did it spread"? However, after the Supreme Court criticised the Gujarat government for attempting to deny justice to the victims of the communal riots, Vajpayee changed his position and said that what happened in Gujarat was a "tragic aberration". *The state-sponsored pogrom in Gujarat and the propaganda that accompanied it led to an almost complete polarisation of the Hindu and Muslim communities* and translated into a resounding electoral victory for the BJP in December 2002, which was repeated five years later in December 2007. **This realpolitik of the Sangh Parivar is cruel and inhuman to the core, but it has paid rich electoral dividends.** *The Sangh Parivar is so ecstatic about it that it hopes to replicate the "Gujarat model" in other states.*

The VHP from its very inception has targeted the Christians in addition to the Muslims. This is captured very well in its slogan, "Pehle Kasai, Phir Isai" (First the butchers (Muslims), then the Christians). In order to form public opinion against the Christians, it alleged that Christian missionaries are involved in the conversion of Adivasis and other under-privileged people to Christianity. According to a report brought out by the All India Federation of Organisations for Democratic Rights, "the Sangh Parivar cleverly chose the issue of "conversions" from Hinduism to Christianity. *In this fashion, Christians could be depicted as aggressors, using force or strewing foreign money to overpower the Hindu community.* By linking Christians with Christian missionaries and in turn with foreign countries, the Sangh Parivar attempted to strengthen the weak communal sentiment against the Christians."

The Sangh Parivar did not engage in large-scale violence against the Christians till the NDA government led by the BJP came to power at the Centre in 1998. *During 1998 and 1999 there was widespread*

violence against Christians all across the country – Gujarat, Maharashtra, Orissa, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and some other states. Churches and prayer halls were attacked and set on fire, many Christians were physically attacked and a Christian missionary, Graham Staines and his two minor sons were burnt to death in Orissa. The violence against the Christians in the Dangs district of Gujarat by the Hindutva groups lasted for several months. *This would not have been possible without the collusion of the then Gujarat government.*

The violent campaigns that took place in 1998 and 1999 have paved the way for the unprecedented attacks against the Christians that we are currently witnessing. **They are certainly not spontaneous as the Sangh Parivar would have us believe.** Laxmanananda Saraswati, whose recent killing sparked off the violence against the Christians in Orissa, went to Kandhamal in 1969 and for almost four decades was the face of the VHP in that region. *He led an aggressive movement that targeted the Christians by blowing the conversion issue out of proportion.* He and his followers were able to bring a large number of Adivasis into the Hindutva fold, thereby driving a wedge between them and a large number of Dalits who had converted to Christianity. From the early 1970s, *the VHP began propagating that Christians are not from India and that they should leave India.*

According to a people's tribunal, *“the community in Kandhamal had been peaceful and cooperative in the past. There was no enmity between the Hindus and the Christians. Going to each other's festivals and celebrations was part of normal social life.”* All this changed, however, because of the VHP's virulent anti-Christian campaign. **It was fascism at work.** Fascist organisations, as alluded to earlier, typically try to win over a particular group or groups by slandering another group which they portray as the enemy or “the other”. This is what the VHP has succeeded to do in Kandhamal. The majority of the Hindus there, including the Adivasis who have become part of the Sangh Parivar, see the Christians as “the other”.

In retrospect, **it is clear that the Hindutva groups had made preparations for a massive attack against the Christians, not just in Kandhamal, but in other parts of Orissa as well.** As soon as the news of the murders of Laxmanananda and his associates

broke out, the Sangh Parivar launched an all-out attack against the Christians in many parts of Orissa, rejecting the claims made by the Maoists that they carried out the killings. *The police in general turned a blind eye to these attacks and in some cases even refused to lodge First Information Reports from some of the victims.* It took them a month to collect the medical report confirming the rape of a Catholic nun and they did that after widespread criticism of their dereliction of duty. While describing the rape of the nun as shameful and barbaric, the Chief Minister of Orissa, who is also the Home Minister, has done little to win the confidence of the Christian community of Orissa.

A large number of Christians in Orissa have lost faith in the BJD, the leading partner in the Orissa government. *It is clear that the BJD's alliance with the BJP is the reason why the government is not taking any effective step against the VHP and the Bajrang Dal.* The situation in Orissa continues to be tense. Tens of thousands of Christians from Kandhamal have taken shelter in the forests and refugee camps. They are too terrified to return to their homes for fear of their lives. *The Sangh Parivar has openly declared that they will have to “reconvert” to Hinduism if they return.* It is currently engaged in large-scale “reconversion” of the Christians who are still in Kandhamal, in clear violation of the conscience of those whom they are “reconverting” as well as the law. The “reconversion” of the Christians is not approved by the Collector of the district as required by the law but rather by a VHP official.

The violence against Christians in Karnataka came close on the heels of the horrific events in Orissa. There had been some sporadic attacks on Christian schools and churches in Bangalore and Dakshina Kannada about ten years ago, and they erupted again in September of this year on a much larger scale. 14 churches were attacked and religious symbols destroyed on 14 September in the districts of Dakshina Kannada, Chikmagalur and Udupi. When some Christians protested the next day in Mangalore, they were beaten up by the police. *The disproportionate use of force by the police has been widely reported.* Mahendra Kumar, the President of the Karnataka chapter of the Bajrang Dal, claimed that his organisation was responsible for the attacks, but said they were in response to the forcible conversions by the Christian missionaries. Even so, the Chief

Minister and Home Minister categorically denied the involvement of the Bajrang Dal. While the Sangh Parivar had engaged in communal violence against the Muslims earlier in Karnataka, its overt hostility to the Christians is relatively new. This new reality has clearly driven a sense of fear and insecurity among the Christians of Karnataka. The Sangh Parivar has also carried out attacks against churches recently in Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and even Delhi.

The Sangh Parivar is currently attempting to build a broad Hindu consensus against the Muslims and Christians at the national level. It has therefore launched an intensive propaganda to hold Muslims responsible for every act of terror and also to accuse Christians of forcible conversions. This coupled with the US-led global war on terror has led to Muslims being linked to every act of terrorism in India. Indeed this propaganda is so effective that it seems to have permeated into the consciousness of most people. The police arrests Muslim youths in different parts of the country and claims that they have confessed to being members of either SIMI or the Indian Mujahideen and accepted responsibility for various bomb blasts. The dominant sections of the Indian media keep repeating this information without any independent verification. Given this situation, the central government finds it expedient to accept it as well. It has all but agreed to the Sangh Parivar's demand for more stringent terror laws, knowing full well that such laws have been used in the past against many innocent persons, particularly Muslims.

On the other hand, the Centre dithers when it comes to taking action against the VHP and the Bajrang Dal, even though there is incontrovertible evidence of criminal actions by these organisations in Orissa and Karnataka. **This certainly will embolden the Sangh Parivar to further its fascist agenda.** With the next general elections due in about six months, *the BJP seems set to make terrorism the major plank of its campaign.* There is a very real danger that it may succeed in deflecting public attention from issues related to communalism to terrorism. In addition, it will in all likelihood continue to inflame the passions of the Hindus by blaming the Christians for indulging in forcible and fraudulent conversions. It has already begun calling for a central law to check conversions, while at the same time engaging in illegal reconversions in Orissa.

What we are witnessing in India is the gradual emergence of communal fascism. The Sangh Parivar has come a long way since the formation of the BJP as a political party in 1980. From winning just two seats in the 1984 general elections, it went on to lead a coalition government in the Centre from 1998 to 2004. It won 183 seats in the 1999 general elections. *Its support base has grown considerably during this period and that has led to a growing communal polarisation of the Indian society.* A number of so-called secular parties that have had alliances with the BJP and those that are still allied to it are partly responsible for this state of affairs. Their support was crucial for the BJP in implementing certain aspects of its Hindutva agenda both at the Centre and some of the states like Orissa. The Sangh Parivar clearly seems to be paying heed to Hitler's words: "Democracy will be overthrown with the tools of democracy." **For those who stand for secularism, the time is now ripe to get to grips with the fascism of the Sangh Parivar and think of imaginative ways of countering it.**