

# Religion at the Service of Nationalism

## An Analysis of Sangh Parivar Politics

by

Madhu Kishwar

*"I will not sacrifice truth and ahimsa [non violence] even for the deliverance of my country or religion. This is as much as to say that neither can be so delivered."*

*Mahatma Gandhi, Young India, Jan. 21, 1927*

THE obsession of the Sangh Parivar (a combination of the BJP, RSS, VHP, Bajrang Dal and other similar groups) with building a new Ram mandir at Ayodhya is interpreted by secularists as promoting excessive religiosity. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The priest of the disputed Ram mandir at Ayodhya accuses them of embezzling crores of rupees which they collected through donations in the name of Ram. He is

reported to have said that none of the Hindutvavadi VHP RSS leaders had ever "made a single offering nor had they ever prayed in the temple."

This is not surprising considering that many of the Parivar leaders belong to sects that did not confer upon Ram the status of a divine god. Moreover, the RSS-BJP support base of activists and leaders in the north comes largely from an Arya Samaj background. This nationalist reform

movement, which began in the late nineteenth century, sought to purify Hinduism of "evils" like idol-worship and make it resemble Islam and Christianity. But today many Arya Samajis are enthusiastic supporters of the campaign to install one more idol of Ram Lalla at Ayodhya - not because they have suddenly become devotees of Ram but because they hope to use Ram as a symbol to unify all Hindus as a political community.

The present day Hindu-Muslim conflict is not really a religious conflict, nor is it rooted in medieval history, as is often assumed. Political conflicts between the likes of Aurangzeb and Shivaji and religious persecution of the Hindus by certain Muslim rulers notwithstanding, India does not have a history of devastating, centuries-long religious denominational wars, as does Europe, nor do we have a history of Hindu-Muslim riots in pre-British India. Following the period of Islamic invasions, the conflict with the invading Afghani, Mughal, and Turkish Muslims came to be settled rather creatively in India.

Among the many other attempts at accommodation, the Bhakti movement, within the Hindu fold, and Sufism within the Muslim fold, built enduring bridges between the two contrary faiths and softened some of their confrontations on many theological issues. Kabir, Nanak, Rahim, Ravidas, Tukaram as well as many Sufi saints challenged the religious bigotry and tyranny of those claiming to speak in the name of God, and created a corpus of shared beliefs between the followers of Hinduism and Islam by preaching that a life of piety and love was the true religion - not sectarian rituals or following the priesthood blindly.

Almost all the saints, bhakts and Sufis had followings among the Hindus, Muslims and the Sikhs. They influenced the language and belief system of popular religion and helped evolve humane norms for co-living. Despite all the bloody Hindu-Muslim conflicts of the twentieth century, it is noteworthy that none of the prominent disputes are of a theological nature. The contemporary Hindu-Muslim conflict is primarily the product of late nineteenth and twentieth century politics.

### **Hinduism Has No Fundamentals**

The ideology of the Sangh Parivar is often described as an example of



**Advani's rath yatra: using Ram as a vote gatherer**

Hindu communalism or Hindu fundamentalism. Those who claim to believe in secularism, including Congressmen, socialists, and leftists attempt to counter the Sangh Parivar's ideology by emphasising the need to keep religion out of politics, presumably in order to inculcate the true spirit of nationalism.

The Sangh Parivar cannot be considered Hindu fundamentalists because the Hindu faith does not base itself on any fundamentals. There is no one text or set of commandments which can be projected by any Hindu religious authority as representing *the* fundamentals of the Hindu religion for all the diverse communities that come within the Hindu fold. The vast multiplicity of gods and goddesses held sacred by different communities in India make it

impossible for any one religious deity to be accepted as *the* chosen deity of all Hindus. For instance, most Shaivites do not worship Ram, an avatar of Vishnu, and vice versa. The Ramayan itself has hundreds of living versions created during different historical periods by different communities. In some of these versions, Ram is not provided the halo of divinity and in some others, he is not even the hero of the epic. The existence of multitudinous sects among Hindus, each with its own set of do's and don'ts, as well as gods and goddesses, make it impossible to devise a set of fundamentals acceptable to all Hindus. In their attempt to unite all Hindus around the Ram mandir issue, the Sangh Parivar is trying to semiticise Hinduism and to make it resemble those aspects of Christianity and Islam which, in the Sangh Parivar's view, helped Christianity and Islam become globally powerful and contributed to the evolution of strong nation states.

### **Are they Communal?**

Similarly, there is a problem in describing the Sangh Parivar as communalist. Outside of India, communalism is ordinarily defined in one of the following ways:

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- A theory or system of government in which virtually autonomous local communities are loosely bound in a federation;

- Belief in or practice of communal ownership of goods and property;

- Strong devotion to the interests of one's own ethnic group rather than those of society as a whole.

It is noteworthy that, in the West, the word communal is mostly used in a positive sense but in India it is almost always used as a pejorative term to denote a person with a religious bias.

The Sangh Parivar is not communal even according to the Indian usage of the term because most of its members are not serious about religion. A religious person would want to retain the autonomy and sanctity of religious institutions. The manner in which the Parivar has brought politics into the religious sphere and hijacked religious symbols for electoral and other political purposes shows that their concern is not religious at all. Nor are the Parivar's leading lights well versed in religious texts or theology.

Given the well known bias of the Sangh Parivar for a centralised authoritarian polity, controlled by a strong Centre, it cannot be called communal according to the first definition of the term. Nor does it believe in the communal ownership of property. If one studies the Parivar's own literature seriously, it comes out clearly that it cannot be called communal even by the third definition - that is, they do not believe in being devoted to the interests of one's own ethnic group as opposed to devotion to the interests of the nation as a whole.

The last thing the BJP-RSS-VHP combine wants is that people remain committed to their respective ethnic identities based on caste, language, race or religion. The Sangh Parivar leaders are not comfortable with the

fact that different linguistic groups feel a ferocious sense of loyalty to their respective languages and are not willing to accept the one *rashtra bhasha* the Parivar wishes to impose on them. Even while the Parivar itself articulates the aspirations of certain upper caste groups far more than those of its new found lower caste supporters, it is uncomfortable with caste-based loyalties because they come in the way of "uniting" all

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Hindus. Likewise, regional identities are opposed by the Parivar, as for example, the Nagas demanding autonomy for Nagaland. The Parivar's agenda is to remould the people of this country into one monolith called 'Indians' (also called Hindus). The assumption behind the Sangh Parivar's homogenising effort is that once people become "proper Indians", they will have overcome other multilayered, contending loyalties and learnt to put the "nation before self.

### **Be Indian, Think European**

The Parivar is embarrassed about the people of India as they are and want Indians to be "modernised", that is, Europeanised. It is no

coincidence that the uniform of the RSS is not a *dhoti* or any other local dress but khaki knickers which was the uniform of British Sergeant Majors. They think that homogenising the varied people of India is a precondition for building India into a strong modern nation state modelled after twentieth century west European nations. In their view, India failed to become "strong and mighty" because we were not a monocultural people. They consider the existing diversity of cultures, religions, regions and languages as the cause of India's weakness. They want us to get over this fatal flaw by "becoming one" as they imagine Germans, Jews or Japanese to be "one people".

They apparently do not realise that truly monocultural States are only possible within tiny homogeneous areas like Denmark. Even western European nations could become only somewhat less multicultural after exterminating or driving out ethnic minorities like the Jews. But in India, exterminating Muslims will not achieve the task they have set themselves because we have inherited numerous other diversities. Pakistan's rulers drove out almost all Hindus but that did not succeed in uniting the wide diversity of peoples in Pakistan. East Bengal revolted and finally seceded, much to the applause of the Parivar.

Being 'Indian' can not be a communal identity. It is a political identity. In India there is no community called 'Indian' except perhaps a microscopic section of the English-educated elite. But even this national elite retains its separate communal identity for the purposes of marriage and social bonding. Unlike ethnic identities based on caste or language, this political identity can be changed by political acts. For instance, many Muslims born in Uttar Pradesh became Pakistanis during the Partition merely by migrating across

the newly created border and accepting the jurisdiction of the government of Pakistan. Similarly, all those who migrate out and accept the citizenship of other countries lose their Indian citizenship.

The Sangh Parivar leaders clearly admit that for them *rashtra dharm* (that is, nationalism) stands above their religion. To quote a popular theme of the Parivar:

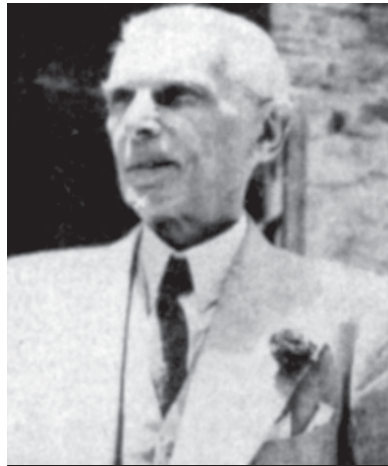
“Muslims who value their religion more than their nation, they can never be nationalists. And Hindus who treat religion as a personal matter can never be communalists... because those who give pride of place to their nation over their religion cannot be communalists.” (Extracted from one of Rithambara’s recorded cassettes).

### **Hate Soaked Nationalists**

The Sangh Parivar is selectively using gods from the Hindu pantheon while destroying or undercutting the religious and spiritual core of Hindu *dharma* and forging a hate-filled ideology of nationalism. The Advanis and Jinnahs get mistaken for religious fundamentalists, simply because they draw on select religious symbols of the people they seek to mobilise. But that is because of the compulsion of all nationalists to make this alien western ideology appear indigenous.

Nationalism has caused more bloodshed and hatred than any other ideology in recent times. The two world wars as well as all the other devastating twentieth century wars, including the current bloodshed in Eastern Europe and the erstwhile Soviet Union, have been rooted in nationalism, as was the war between Iran and Iraq, both Muslim nations.

Before the fifteenth century, modern type nation states were extremely rare. Nationalism as an ideology emerged as a major force in seventeenth century Europe and achieved maturity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Since then, it has become



**M.A. Jinnah**

the most dominant ideological force the world over. In India the Sangh Parivar has succeeded in giving it a more virulent form in recent years.

Like all nationalists, the Sangh Parivar manipulates history to serve its present political purposes. It wants us to believe that every notable Hindu god, king, intellectual figure or warrior in our history or mythology - from Ram, Krishna, Arjun, to Vikramaditya, Chanakya, Shivaji and Rana Pratap - was a nationalist, even though they all lived at a time when the geographical entity called India was not a nation state. The tragedy of the

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Muslim nationalists of Pakistan is even greater. They dare not allow an honest study of the pre-1947 period, nor look into the early periods in the history of their land, before Muslim invaders came into the subcontinent, because that would debunk the very foundation of Pakistan as a nation state. A friend from Pakistan told me that the Archaeological Department of the Government of Pakistan has put a signboard at the entrance to Mohenjodaro, the famous excavated site of a very early settlement on the Indian subcontinent, saying something to this effect: “This is what Allah does to infidels - reduce them to ruins.”

### **Nationalism versus Patriotism**

The excessive respectability accorded to nationalism in Third World countries is due to the legitimacy it enjoys in the hegemonic West, which is the homeland of this ideology as well as its association with the patriotism evoked by anti-colonial movements.

However, anti-colonialism (freedom from foreign rule) and patriotism (love of one’s people and the land in which one is born) are not identical with nationalism. For instance, Gandhi’s patriotism was very different from the nationalism of Jinnah and that of the RSS. Gandhi’s politics focused on ending colonial rule as well as strengthening the rights of the poor and vulnerable. Jinnah’s politics was not anti-colonial. He was known to be pro-British and only too eager to make opportunistic deals with colonial rulers in order to weaken the Indian freedom movement. His politics were elitist and showed little concern for redistribution of power and wealth in favour of the poor within the Muslim community. He confined his battle to strengthening the power of the Muslim elites against Hindu elites. Jinnah was not even remotely religious and did not observe basic Islamic religious tenets. He merely

used and manipulated certain religious identities to mobilise Muslims to declare themselves a separate nation. He cannot be called a patriot for he deserted voluntarily the land of his birth in western India for a new nation state and jeopardised the safety and well being of millions of those he called his own people, and not just Hindus, by forcing a bloody partition on the country. All those Muslims who were left in India after 1947 are living precarious lives because of the manner in which the Hindus were forcibly driven out of Pakistan by Muslim nationalists. Yet Jinnah succeeded in presenting himself as the sole spokesman of Muslim nationalism even though he harmed the interests of Muslims as well as his Hindu countrymen.

On the other hand, Gandhi, despite being a devout believer in the Hindu faith, stood against the idea of a Hindu nation. He sacrificed his own life defending the rights of Muslims to stay in India as equal citizens even after the Muslim nationalists drove out almost all Hindus from Pakistan because he rightly thought of Indian Muslims as a part of his own people. Gandhi was a patriot because to him the well being of all his fellow countrymen was more important than the interests of the Indian state. He was not much of a nationalist even though he sometimes used the vocabulary of nationalism. It was Gandhi, not Jinnah, who was killed by a RSS member as a traitor to the nation because Gandhi insisted that India provide safety and equality to the Muslims living in India, and also deal honourably with those living in the newly created state of Pakistan. The final provocation which cost him his life was his insistence that India honour its pledge of giving a certain agreed upon sum of money to the Pakistan government as part of the process of creating the two nation states.

**Gandhi put *manav-dharm* above *rashtra dharm* because he recognised that those who insist on putting the nation before all, ended up building societies based on violence and strife, as did Jinnah.**

The nationalist credo is: "My nation (meaning the nation state) right or wrong". Gandhi's credo was to insist on doing right and opposing wrong even if it went against the supposed interests of the nation state. He put *manav dharm* above *rashtra dharm* - humaneness above nationalism - because he recognised that those who insist on putting the nation before all ended up endangering and sacrificing the lives of their followers at the altar of mythical ideals and build societies based on violence and strife, as did Jinnah.

### **Their Agenda is Secular**

The Sangh Parivar ideology is secular in so far as its concerns are

thisworldly and political rather than spiritual or religious. The Parivar wants to build a strong nation state on the European model. This vision is shared even by most of those who oppose the Parivar, including the leftists, secularists and the liberal nationalists. They too keep harping on the primacy of the Indian nation state and want people in this country to 'be Indians first and foremost.' The Parivar ideology has acquired unprecedented influence because we are witnessing a new and ferocious wave of nationalism the world over. Its agenda is an internationally respected agenda.

Barring the Sangh Parivar's obsession with the demolition of certain mosques to rebuild the mandirs that are supposed to have been destroyed by Muslim invaders, their various grouses against the Muslims are unfortunately shared by most people in India today, no matter what shade of political opinion (or lack of any) they proclaim. Let us look closely at the grievance list of the Sangh Parivar given below. It was synthesised from themes frequently repeated in a variety of its media efforts, including its political organ, *The Organiser*, its propaganda



**Mahatma Gandhi with villagers in Bengal**

leaflets, and the recorded cassettes of its celebrated *pracharaks*.

- Muslims are traitors because they forced the Partition of India. To quote a VHP propaganda cassette, "Those who severed both the arms of Mother India...For those hypocrites there is no place here. This Hindustan is not theirs..."

- Since the vast majority of Hindus were driven out of Pakistan, and later even from Bangladesh, the Congress party led by Mahatma Gandhi betrayed the nation by insisting that Muslims should not likewise be driven out of India.

- Muslims living in India are not loyal to this country and harbour pro-Pakistan sentiments.

- Muslims put their religion above the nation, and the Koran above the Constitution. The refusal of Muslims to accept a common civil code, and their insistence on being governed by their religious personal laws, are touted as proofs of their lack of nationalist spirit.

- Muslims are inherently intolerant and obscurantist and do not allow even reasonable criticism of Islam.

- Pakistan is constantly attempting to destabilise India by fanning secessionist movements in Punjab and Kashmir. Muslims of India are willing pawns in the games played by Pakistani rulers.

- The Congress party has followed a policy of appeasing the Muslims by submitting even to their unreasonable and anti-national demands. Muslims behave like "a virtual nation within a nation" (*Organiser*, April, 1992); a people who assert their right to be above the law of the land. The passing of the Muslim Women's (protection) Act under pressure from Muslim fundamentalists, thereby putting Muslims beyond the pale of some laws governing other citizens, is cited as one of the examples of this



**The temporary Ram Mandir at the site of the demolished Babri Masjid**

appeasement. Other examples cited are the special status given to minority institutions and the provisions allowing the Muslim majority state of Jammu and Kashmir separate provisions in the Constitution and a few separate personal laws.

- Muslim invaders and rulers who persecuted Hindus, such as Aurangzeb or Mahmud of Ghazni, are not criticised in the name of secularism while Hindus are constantly expected to criticise and suppress their own heritage to prove that they are modern and secular. One of the Sangh Parivar's war cries is: *Garv se kaho hum Hindu hain*. (Say with pride, we are Hindus.) They are resentful that Muslims continue to honour even those rulers who persecuted Hindus. This is cited as another proof that Muslims are anti-national.

- The large scale one-way flow of Muslim Bangladeshi illegal immigrants into India is jeopardising the security of India and putting a great strain on the Indian economy, as well as upsetting the demographic balance. They accuse Muslims of using their electoral clout with the Congress in order to prevent strong

steps from being taken to stop the continuing persecution of Hindus in Bangladesh which is forcing a large number of them to flee to India.

- The mullahs do not allow Muslims to accept birth control measures. This, together with the right of Muslim men to have four wives encourages a higher birth rate creating the danger of the Hindus being swamped by the Muslims.

- Muslim leaders try to dictate on foreign policy matters to the Indian government. For example, they succeeded for a long time in keeping India from having full diplomatic relations with Israel and making India tilt in favour of Palestine and other Arab nations which are seen as inherently hostile to India because they are Islamic countries.

- India is being surrounded by hostile and troublesome Muslim nations, including Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, Afghanistan, the Middle Eastern and Gulf States, and the new Muslim States which have emerged after the breakdown of the Soviet Union. They are all threats to the security of India. The supposed extra-territorial loyalty of Indian Muslims adds to the threat

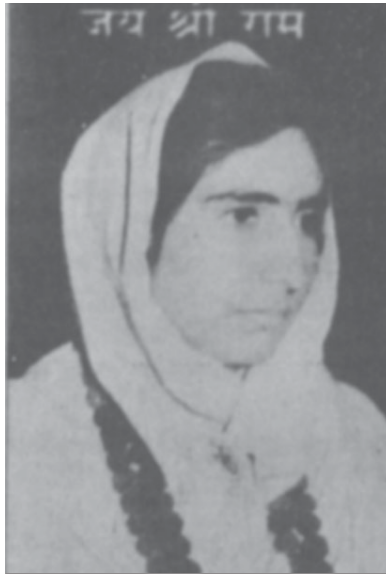
as their presence amounts to having an enemy within.

A large number of these charges are based on half truths, outright lies and paranoid fantasies. For instance, the supposed Islamic invasion from Bangladesh is nothing more than the influx of economic refugees, both Hindus and Muslims, who are driven, by poverty, to cross a remote and poorly regulated international boundary line. As the poorest of the poor, they are providing services in Indian urban centres such as scavenging, picking up waste products and recycling them, and working as domestic servants and rickshaw pullers for low wages. There is no evidence that the birth rate among poor Muslims is higher than that of Hindus living in similar states of poverty. Except for Pakistan, no other Islamic country is contemplating strife with India. Some Islamic countries have offered jobs and business opportunities to millions of Indians, including many Hindus. The continuation of Muslim law does not seem to have encouraged a higher rate of bigamous marriages among Muslims. The report of *The Committee on the Status of Women in India* (1975) indicated a rate of 5.8 percent bigamous marriages among the Hindus and 5.7 percent among the Muslims.

However, even where the Sangh Parivar's grievances are based on facts rather than fantasies, for instance, concerning the flow of Hindu refugees from Kashmir and Bangladesh, the political conclusions they derive from these facts are wrong. India cannot solve any of its problems by driving out the Muslims. That would amount to carrying forward to its logical conclusion the disastrous politics set into motion by Jinnah.

### **Their Ram is not a Hindu God**

It is noteworthy that there are hardly any religious issues in this list



**VHP pracharak Rithambra**

of grievances. The Sangh Parivar adds the religious flavour when it brings in the demolition of temples and the persecution of Hindus by Muslim rulers in medieval times - but even that historical conflict has been given a

### **Sangh Parivar's Ram is a national hero and not a Hindu god.**

new contemporary political colour. The obsession with building a Ram temple at the site of the Babri Masjid and reclaiming what the Parivar calls Ram janmasthan is not being justified on religious grounds but is presented as a struggle between nationalist and anti-nationalist forces. In its view, the Babri Masjid had to be demolished because it was built by an invading outsider after he supposedly destroyed a Ram temple. Ram is presented as a national hero and not as a Hindu god. The propaganda speeches of its leaders forever emphasise: "Announce it boldly to the world that anyone who opposes Ram cannot be an Indian." The Sangh Parivar is not saying that a Ram opponent cannot be a Hindu. VHP

propaganda insists that "every person who lives here will have to

flow with the tide. Ram-Krishna will have to be accepted as the national ideals", not, it should again be noted, primarily as *religious* ideals. Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray congratulated his followers for playing a leading role in the Babri Masjid demolition for that proved their nationalist credentials. Likewise, he is reported to have justified the participation of his party cadres in large scale anti-Muslim violence saying: "If nationalism is a crime, I will commit it a thousand times."

Rithambra, the celebrated pracharak of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad makes the point clear in all her speeches that the sadhu-sants who have joined the VHP bandwagon are not fighting a religious battle. They have not come to save the Hindu religion, but to "save the nation" because the nation is in danger as it has fallen into the hands of traitors - that is, Congressmen willing to barter away national interest in order to secure Muslim votes. I quote from a typical speech of Rithambra:

"The job of a sadhu-sant is to help the seeker of joy to acquire the store-house of happiness within. But today, India's sages have had to turn away from this to concentrate on the nation. It is not the duty of the sages to...worry about questions of nationalism, or the protection of India's borders, but today's compulsions have brought them amongst you... Merely to raise the cry of "Jai Sri Ram" is no sign of awakening. How much do you worry about the good of your country, your own future? ... India's sanyasis, sants have forsaken their spiritual practices and blown the bugle of Hindu rashtra and come to proclaim that India's youth, the aged and women need to be awakened. My brothers, get admitted to the Bajrang Dal. My mothers and sisters should join the

Durga Vahini, so **that the feeling of nationalism may awaken in you and we may be able to change India's condition**, which is wretched today...

We are truly secular because we have accepted the national religion. We removed the Jinnahs and we removed the Jaichands... We will do Bharat Mata's archana with our very lives which will bum like lamps", [emphasis mine]

### Hitierian Sons of Bharat Mata

That is the crux of the matter. The most sacred deity of the Sangh Parivar is Bharat Mata (Mother India). The Sangh Parivar insist that Muslims, Christians and people of other religions must learn to worship Bharat Mata and Bharat Bhumi more than they worship their own gods. The Hindus are also encouraged to put her above their sectional beliefs and gods. Even Ram and Krishna or Kali or Durga are sacred only so far as they lend themselves to the service of Bharat Mata. The national flag is more sacred to them than *any Ramdhvaj* or temple. The national anthem and Vande Mataram are in their view more sacred than any religious *bhajan*. One of their oft-repeated threatening slogans aimed at the Muslims is: "*Hindustan mein rehna hai to vande matram kehna hoga*" that is, Muslims will have to say *vande matram* (salute to Mother India) if they want to stay in India. They are not insisting on Ram bhajans because they themselves do not care as much about the latter.

While the Hindu religion does not have the tradition of being presided over by a jealous god, as do Christianity, Judaism and Islam, the nationalist Hindus make very jealous devotees even though Bharat Mata herself is presented as giving and nurturant. Since Muslim feelings towards Pakistan are ambivalent, they can never be trusted to be loyal to Bharat Mata. The occasional bursting of crackers by a few Muslims in the event of Pakistani victory in a cricket

match between India and Pakistan becomes incontrovertible proof that Muslims in India are at heart Pakistanis and traitors to Mother India.

Bharat Mata is not a religious deity but a secular symbol. Loyalty to her requires that her devotees put her worship above that of all other deities and gods. She came into existence during India's struggle against British rule. Her origin derives from a benevolent primeval, nurturing mother goddess. Unlike goddesses such as Kali, Bharat Mata is benign. It is not she who punishes people for wrongdoings or betrayals. Instead, her worshipping sons mete out punishment to anyone lacking in their devotion to her. A worshipper would not need to fear Bharat Mata as would a worshipper of Kali, but would need to fear her sons who can easily become Hitierian in their zeal to protect her honour. She remains mostly a vague idea to most, given concrete expression only in school plays whereby an older girl in the school dresses up to resemble Lakshmi. She is positioned in such a way that her shadow is cast on an outline map of India. Her classmates would stand in a formation also resembling the map of India and sing songs of devotion and praise.

Only in recent years has the Vishwa Hindu Parishad tried to get Bharat Mata accepted as an all India deity, as a part of ritualising Hindu nationalism. In 1983, the VHP undertook an Ekatmata Yajna (sacrifice for unity) which travelled throughout India performing sacrifices to Bharat Mata and Ganga Mata. They have also built a temple dedicated to Bharat Mata in Hardwar. It enshrines various deities, warriors, "martyrs" and satis, gurus and saints, all of whom are interpreted through the Sangh Parivar version of history, religion and culture within the framework of Hindu nationalism.

### Their Religion: Nationalism

The fear of the Sangh Parivar that Muslims are loyal only to their religion and consider the Koran more sacred than the Indian Constitution or Mother India, is unfortunately shared by many Hindus across the political spectrum, including those in the Left parties. In Bombay many secular-minded people who bravely went against the tide and condemned the killing of the Muslims, would confess to being very hurt by the behaviour of those Muslims who celebrate a Pakistani victory in cricket matches. The Hindus can easily be more tolerant in the religious sphere



**Bharat Mata on VHP's Ekatmata yajna, 1983**

because they are not used to jealous gods. But when Hindus learn to give *rashtra dharm* primacy over all other dharmas, they become as intolerant as any chauvinistic nationalist, and Advani becomes indistinguishable from Jinnah, their contrary religious backgrounds notwithstanding. We forget that people of Indian descent who have taken the citizenship of Britain or other foreign countries frequently celebrate India's victory in an England-India match. The fact that many Indian Muslims have relatives across the border makes it harder for them to think of Pakistanis as enemies, as many Hindus do. The ambivalence of Indian Muslims toward Pakistan is comparable to the predicament of the Mohajirs, Indian Muslims who migrated to Pakistan in or after 1947. They find themselves treated as unwanted aliens in the nation state of their own making. Their language (Urdu), their culture, their connections with relatives in India, their lingering emotional attachment to the land of their birth and ancestors, are all suspect and hence under attack from the dominant Punjabis as well as from the Sindhis, the Baluchis and others in Pakistan. This is not a sign of their being traitors but rather a proof, if further proof were necessary, that the Partition of the subcontinent was unrealistic and unsound. Our prejudice does not allow us to realise that many Indian Muslims are anti-Pakistan because they feel that the makers of Pakistan jeopardised the safety of millions of Muslims who chose to continue living in India, and thanks to Partition became a despised and mistrusted minority.

What makes the ideology of the Sangh Parivar so powerful today is that it has been able to convince large sections of the population that it alone is serious about building a strong nation state to defend national honour, unity and integrity. The genuine disgruntlement of the people

with the unscrupulous politics of the Congress Party, playing group against group, is being used by the Sangh Parivar to present the Muslims as traitors within India.

### **Pendulum Swing**

At the time of Partition the Hindus had reason to be hostile to the Muslims, and yet leaders like Gandhi, and even Nehru, were able to prevail upon the people of India to agree that the Muslims had a right to stay in India even after the Partition. They thus managed successfully to marginalise the politics of the Sangh Parivar.

Why is it that the anti-Muslim nationalism of the Sangh Parivar has

**The liberal nationalism of the early years of Congress rule could not be sustained for long because... it was more appropriate for the governance of an empire rather than of a democracy.**

become so appealing to large sections of the Indian population four decades after Partition? The political support base of parties like the Jana Sangh (precursor of the BJP) remained extremely narrow in the years after Independence. It was confined to some regions in urban north India and appealed mainly to sections of the trading community and small sections of the urban middle and lower middle classes. Even those communities that were victims of Partition, such as Punjabis from the areas that went to Pakistan, did not support the Jan Sangh in overwhelming numbers. Hindu Bengalis who were pushed out of Bangladesh, in fact, remained

indifferent to the politics of the Sangh Parivar.

But in recent years the Congress party has witnessed a serious erosion in its support base in favour of the BJP and Shiv Sena. This is particularly true among the urban educated elite, including the liberal intelligentsia. Even as late as the 1970s, when I was at the university, it was considered extremely low brow to be associated with the RSS or any of its allied organisations. Their support base among students and teachers was largely at that time confined to the low status institutions whose students were generally from lower middle class backgrounds. However, in recent years large sections of the English educated elite, including students, teachers, professionals and bureaucrats, have switched their allegiance to organisations associated with the Sangh Parivar. What are the factors responsible for the appeal of this brand of nationalism whose chief component is a virulent anti-Muslim sentiment?

### **Reasons for their Success**

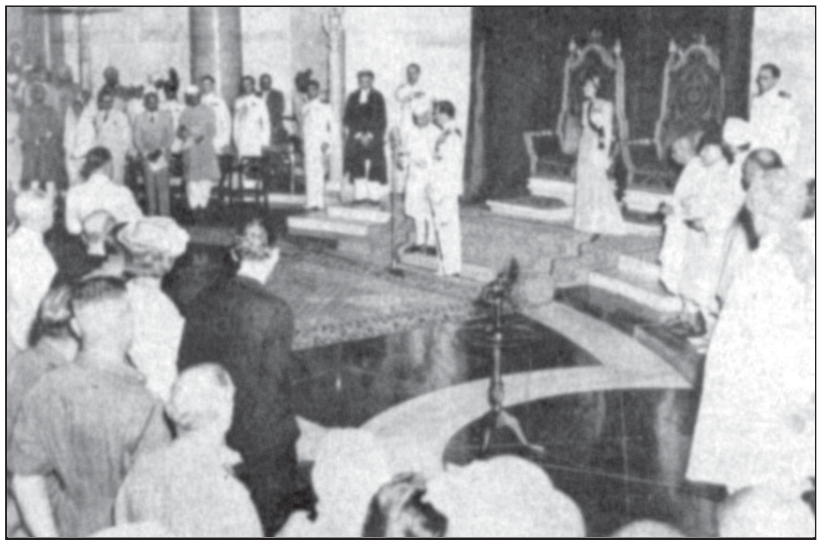
● The Congress party was able to marginalise the Sangh Parivar as long as it lived up to some of the expectations it had aroused during the freedom movement, and as long as it acted as a vehicle of patriotism. The fact that many of the RSS leaders were more often than not pro-British and had a history of opposing the anti-colonial movement led by the Congress party, isolated them from mainstream Indian political life. They were known to be actively hostile to Gandhi, who in popular imagination became synonymous with anti-colonialism. This kept the influence of the RSS limited at a time when the anti-colonial aspect of nationalism reflected the predominant mood of the country.

There are, no doubt, some differences between the liberal nationalism of Nehru and the

chauvinist, nationalism of the Sangh Parivar. But the liberal nationalism of the early years of Congress rule could not be sustained for long because a centralised, authoritarian state machinery emerged as the result of Nehru's policies. It was more appropriate for the governance of an empire rather than of a democracy. This top-down machinery controlled from the Delhi darbar uses the national bureaucracy as a vehicle for national unity and the implementation of national policies. This bureaucracy further estranges itself by choosing to use the alien English language. The hallmark of this machinery is its lack of accountability to the people it is supposed to serve. It allows them no participation in devising or implementing policy. This makes the Centre incapable of dealing with grievances both of the everyday variety as well as those that emerge in special crisis situations.

The nation state Nehru built destroyed whatever little was left of village, urban, and community based institutions of self governance after the depredations suffered during colonial rule. Democracy was reduced to a ritual enacted once every five years of casting ballots while all real power remained vested in a permanent bureaucracy controlled mainly by the rulers at the Centre. The national and, to a much lesser extent, the state capitals, became the all important nodes of power, with only the slightest of voice for those below. Politics and administration became a matter of loot and plunder by those who ruled.

Politics in our country has come to revolve around who is to occupy those offices of power which allow opportunities for unbridled looting. Most of the major confrontations the congress party has had with regional parties such as the Akalis, the DMK, the CPI(M) and the National Conference are due to its attempts to



**Transfer of power: The brown sahibs take over from the whites**

dislodge them from power in order to have the exclusive rights to plunder the country. The opponents of the Congress in these struggles often raise legitimate demands for reorganisation and decentralisation of Centre-state relations as a battle cry. However, they never consider the task as sufficiently important and are only too ready to abandon it when they are offered some share in the loot instead.

Those groups who find their grievances unattended in this system find that in order to get any kind of attention they must get shriller and shriller. The Congress party has built no real mechanisms for political settlement of the grievances of disgruntled groups such as the Akalis in Punjab, Jharkhandis in Bihar, various movements in Assam and Kashmir, or the anti-Tehri and anti-Narmada dam agitations. It tries to deal with each issue when it reaches a crisis point as either a law and order problem or as an occasion for a payoff to as narrow a group of those in the opposition as possible. Any time the opposition leaders refuse the payoff they are accused of destabilising the security and integrity of the nation state.

Repeated use of the trump card of nationalist rhetoric to put down

democratic demands has resulted in the Congress party veering further and further towards chauvinist nationalism. This is especially true in its dealings with movements in border regions such as Kashmir, Punjab, and Nagaland where a majority of the population is not Hindu and their demands can easily be targeted as being anti-Indian.

In addition, the Congress party has come to be increasingly identified with factional fighting for narrow personal advantages, widespread corruption and its patronage of anti-social elements. This transformation is symbolised by the way the Gandhi cap and *khadi* have been portrayed in Hindi cinema. In the films of the 1940s, 1950s and the early 1960s, a man in *khadi* wearing a Gandhi cap was a symbol of honest, selfless social work. However, in recent decades, the same dress is used to depict a corrupt and hypocritical goonda politician. The Congress party's involvement in shady foreign defence and business deals that brought it huge kickbacks, has made people cynical about its "nationalist" credentials. The genuine disgruntlement of the people with the Congress party has been encashed by the Sangh Parivar through

presenting itself as incorruptible militant nationalists. As the nationalism of the Congress party got increasingly divorced from social justice and democracy, it came to rely more and more on “nation in danger” gimmick, thus becoming indistinguishable from the chauvinism of the Sangh Parivar.

● The unscrupulous manner in which the Congress party cultivated Gandhi bringing peace at Naokhali after the anti-Hindu riots Muslims as a vote bank has encouraged the growth of an equally unscrupulous leadership among the Muslims. Dubious concessions, such as the enactment of the Muslim Women’s Protection Act, and the banning of Salman Rushdie’s book, have strengthened the stereotype of Muslims as a dangerously intolerant community which supposedly is being pampered by the “pseudo-secular” politics of the Congress party. The policy of keeping certain obscurantist Muslim leaders happy by throwing them occasional crumbs in lieu of providing their vulnerable community real security or opportunity has created the misleading impression that the Muslim minority has unfair political advantages over the Hindu majority.

● The Muslim leadership has seldom fought for the Muslims’ rights as citizens. They have failed to take up basic issues of anti-Muslim discrimination and terror. The excessive emphasis they have placed on their special rights as Muslims, even while consistently failing to claim many of their rights as citizens, has contributed a great deal to the increasing estrangement and political vulnerability of the Muslims in the larger society. As a result, an ever increasing number of India’s other communities have come to view the Muslims with contempt, and see them as backward obscurantists who are hurdles in the way of India’s progress.



**Gandhi bringing peace at Naokhali after the anti-Hindu riots**

● From Indira Gandhi’s time onwards, the Congress party has systematically destroyed the more rational and progressive leaders among Muslim politicians in order to keep the captive Muslim vote bank as a ghettoised, fearful minority. Muslim politicians who do not want to act as spokesmen just for other Muslims and have tried to take thoughtful forward-looking positions on various issues concerning the Muslim community have been systematically bypassed and

neglected in favour of the more obscurantist leaders. At the time of the Shah Bano controversy, for example, certain prominent leaders within the Congress Party opposed the Muslim Women’s Protection Bill. Nevertheless, the party yielded to the pressures from the Shahi Imam, Shahabuddin, and leaders of the Muslim League, thereby making it seem as if these were more genuine Muslim leaders than the others.

● The preference of large sections of the Muslim leadership and westernised Muslim intelligentsia for a Nehruvian brand of westernised secularism and their rejection and ridicule of Gandhi’s ideas and his use of certain Hindu symbols, proved very harmful for Muslims in the long run. It strengthened the feeling that the Muslim leadership is innately hostile to the Hindus who do not disown their faith and is comfortable only with westernised Hindus who are contemptuous of their own culture and faith.

Gandhi’s approach to Hindu-Muslim amity was influenced by the Bhakti and Sufi traditions. He drew on centuries long traditional bonds whereby people of various

**Gandhi mistrusted the use of the army and the police to guarantee the rights of minorities or other vulnerable groups... In his vision, decentralised traditional community-based organisations were better able to promote peace and security in India.**

communities evolved humane norms of co-living based on the notion of enlightened self-interest and strove to attain mutual safety on the basis of neighbourhood or village solidarity (*mohelledari* and *gaon bhaichard*).

Gandhi mistrusted the use of the army and the police to guarantee the rights of minorities or other vulnerable groups. He saw the modern state machinery as rooted in violence and therefore incapable of ensuring safety for the local communities. In his vision, decentralised traditional community-based organisations were better able to promote peace and security in India. He emphasized the importance of people taking responsibility for each other rather than depending on an external police force. He knew that enduring social peace could not come from the government-controlled police, but only from community based vigilance.

Nehruvian secularism relied almost exclusively on the state machinery to provide protection to the minorities. One of the key limitations of this approach is that it assumes that the state machinery is neutral, whereas in actual fact this is rarely the case. The Nehruvian brand of secularism misled the Muslims into believing that as long as they had a certain clout with the government and the latter mouthed secular slogans, their interests were safe. Just as Jinnah had bargained on the British government providing for the safety of the Muslims against the Hindus, post-Independence Muslim leadership focused exclusively on extracting "concessions" from the government (mostly phoney ones) while allowing themselves to be continually estranged from the Hindu majority and other communities. The Congress party encouraged this estrangement in order to cultivate them as a vote-bank too frightened to look elsewhere.

●Even during normal times, ours is a fairly lawless government. The police and administrative machinery are often found protecting criminals rather than honest citizens. During communal riots, its tilt in favour of the criminals and the rioters of the majority community is inevitable. Yet riot after riot, the Muslim leadership has focused all its energy and ire at the government for failure to provide it protection, making demands such

**Muslim leaders have created a misleading stereotype of the Muslims as a monolithic community with one standard set of interests no matter which region, occupational or linguistic group they belong to.**

as proportional representation of the Muslims in the police force, but has paid scant or no attention to the growing communication gap between the Muslim community and the rest of the people. This gap has made the task of the Sangh Parivar easier.

●In their attempt to become the sole spokesmen for the Muslim community, leaders like Shahabuddin have tended to articulate the grievances of the Muslims in a Jinnah-like manner. They thus tend to evoke nearly hysterical responses from the Hindus who fear more and more partitions of the country if the Muslims are allowed to have greater influence on national politics. They have created a misleading stereotype of the Muslims as a monolithic community with one standard set of interests no matter which region, occupational or linguistic group they belong to. This tendency has helped the Sangh Parivar's efforts to get all Hindus to act like a monolith in relation to the Muslims. The Hindus have become paranoid that the Muslim minority can veto everything that the majority wants to do in the



**Special Reserve Police beat up a Muslim in Dharavi, Bombay**

same way as Jinnah came to have a veto during certain periods of the negotiations for Independence. Many see an urgent need to "put the Muslims in their place."

● Even though leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru were able to prevail upon the people to agree that the Muslims had a right to stay in India after Partition, the failure of the ruling elites in both Pakistan and India to make a definitive peace with each other, to work out decent norms of coexistence as neighbours rather than resorting to phobia-building among their respective populations, has allowed the nightmare memory of Partition to remain alive, especially in the north. The ruling elites in both countries have defined their nationalism largely in terms of uncompromising hostility to the other nation state. There is a very thin dividing line in the two countries between being anti-Pakistani and being anti-Muslim or between being anti-Indian and anti-Hindu. The Pakistani rulers need to paint India as a monster because they are afraid of Indian democracy. The Indian ruling elite allow its phobias to get the better of them because of U.S. support to the military dictators of Pakistan just as the Pakistani government increasingly feared India due to its receipt of Soviet military support. These superpower interventions kept the two nations from a more realistic assessment of each other's capacities, as the basis for negotiating terms for peaceful coexistence.

● After the collapse of the Soviet Union the political perceptions of the U.S. and other western powers have swung dramatically in a different direction. Now that Pakistan and certain other Muslim countries are not needed as buffers against communism, the West has created a new bogey. The very same Islamic fundamentalism that the US and its allies kept fanning and supporting in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq as a counter to

communism is now being projected as the new evil to be fought and kept under check. Western intellectuals and politicians are now busy convincing the world that the genie of Muslim fundamentalism has become the chief threat to world security, as was communism at one time. This has given anew moral high to anti-Muslim sentiment in India, especially since India is surrounded by Islamic nations and Indian Muslims can easily be portrayed as anti-national elements because some have connections to Pakistan or to other Middle Eastern countries.

● The open help and support being provided by Pakistan to secessionist movements in Punjab and Kashmir, as well as the sight of Hindu Kashmiris being pushed out as refugees because of threats from Kashmiri Muslim militants, confirm the deep seated fears among Hindus that the Muslims will continue causing the breakup of India unless "taught a lesson." In their bid to take over Kashmir, the Pakistani government is thus actively endangering the lives of Indian Muslims by funding those terrorist groups who wish Kashmir to secede to Pakistan.

● Negative stereotypes about the Muslims became far more easy to legitimise after Partition because it was mostly poor Muslims who were left behind in India after large sections of the elite and the middle classes migrated to Pakistan. Up to my parents' generation middle and upper class Hindus in many regions knew Muslims who were their equals; often they knew Muslims in superior status positions to them. There was also a great deal of everyday interaction with Muslims. In contrast, the upper and middle class Indian elite of the post-Independence generations either know no Muslims at all because many of them are poor and the poor are ghettoised, or know them only as menials. In such a situation it is far easier for unsavoury stereotypes to be offered as

indisputable portrayals of the entire community, and for prejudices and phobias to grow unchecked.

● In recent years the growing prosperity among a section of the artisan groups within the Muslim community stemming from jobs in the Gulf countries as well as from their branching out into small scale home based industries in India's cities has given these Muslims new avenues of upward mobility. The new found wealth of some working class Muslims, who were once easier targets of contempt due to their poverty, is an important factor in the new hostility against them among poor Hindus, especially the dalits, who have traditionally lived in close proximity to them. In riot after riot dalits living in adjacent areas to the Muslims have been in the forefront of mobs attacking Muslim homes and looting their property. A common refrain of the attackers is "*In par bahut charbi chad gayi hai.*" ("They have accumulated too much fat on their bodies" - fat being used as a symbol of prosperity.) •

● The post-Independence generation of young Muslims are beginning to get more assertive about their rights and are desirous of moving out of the ghettos. This assertiveness frightens many Hindus who then try to push them back through the use of violence. The Gulf connection has also brought in a new fervour for the Middle Eastern version of Islam. The flow of Gulf money for mosques and other Islamic institutions has strengthened the fundamentalists among the Muslim leadership who are trying to wean the Muslims away from their Indianised Islam towards a more Middle Eastern version of the faith, removing from it practices which built cultural bonds with the neighbouring Hindus. Even the Urdu they advocate is heavily Persianised and Arabicised. Many Hindus have begun to fear the new religious fervour among the Muslims as a worldwide Islamic conspiracy to overrun India.

●Earlier, politicians who instigated riots had to keep their involvement somewhat of a secret. The increasing criminalisation of politics, along with the willing endorsement of violence against the Muslims by the middle class and the elite sections of our society, have made the politician hoodlum nexus brazen and open about engineering riots.

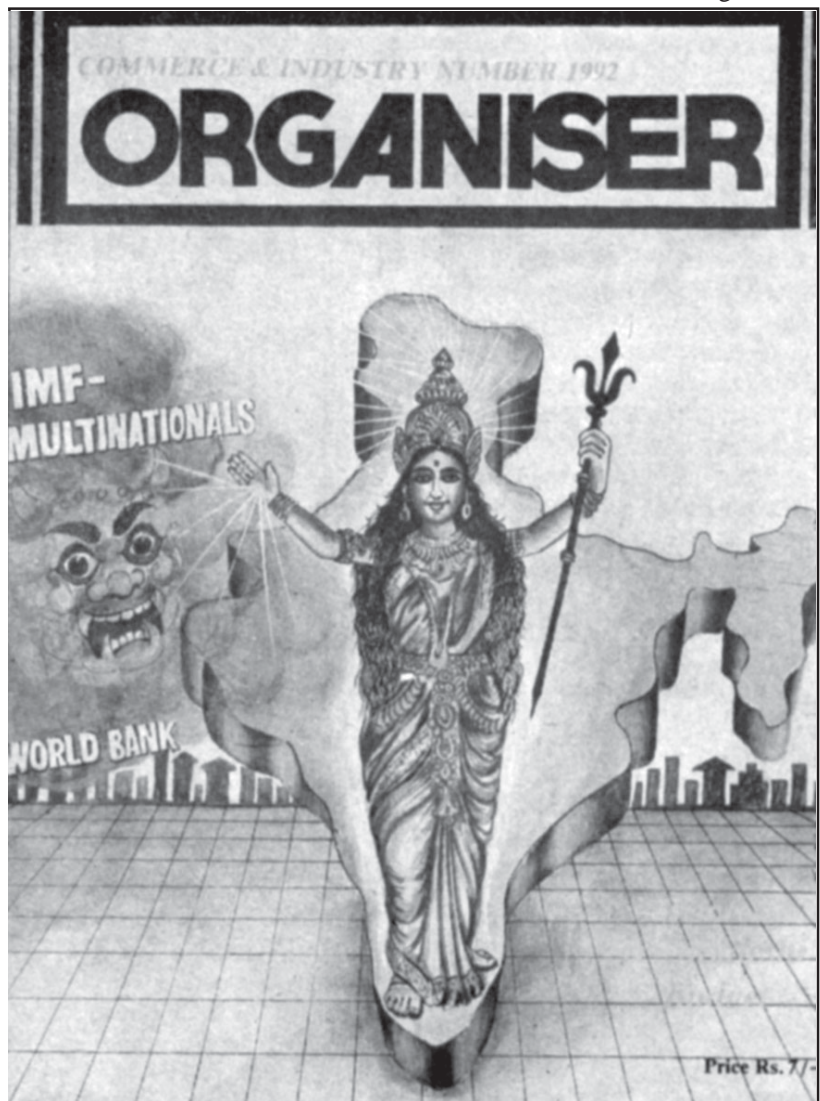
●The criminalisation of politics has given a further fillip to the criminalisation of the government machinery. The open protection and support provided by the police and other government functionaries to rioting mobs of Hindus has made the confrontations between the Muslims and the Hindus more and more unequal. Traditionally, the Hindus and Muslims evolved certain workable norms for living together despite their respective biases against each other. This was based on the recognition that acting out their prejudices through aggressive acts was a risky proposition. You had to risk getting yourself hurt in such attacks when the other community retaliated. The tradition of neighbourhood solidarity is in part founded on avoiding acts of violence through rational recognition of your own enlightened self-interest. However, the intrusion of political forces from the outside with police and government protection provided to the majority community (Hindus in India and Muslims in Pakistan) makes the power balance hopelessly unequal for the minorities. The majority does not have to fear retaliation for the violence inflicted on the powerless minority, and therefore has escalated the attacks manifold.

●The increase in the incidents of the politically-inspired ethnic violence have made every community, including the Hindus, fearful and paranoid. The inefficient and corrupt law and order machinery makes even the Hindus unable to rely on it to operate consistently in their favour even as they manipulate it. This is because

there are no established procedures and rules for ensuring a measure of social safety. In the years after Independence, vulnerable groups such as the Muslims and the dalits tried to obtain a measure of safety through political alliances such as those they made with the Congress party over the decades. But as the Congress party itself degenerated into a loose alliance of crooks and hoodlums rather than political leaders, stable political alliances could not be made and relied upon. The general breakdown of the political system and its enforcement agencies makes people believe that

they have to join together with some gang or seek protection by supporting mafia-type leaders to ensure their own safety and survival. This fear has resulted in increasing reliance on paramilitary and armed groups, such as the Shiv Sena and the Bajrang Dal, as well as Mafia dons like Haji Mastan and Dawood Ibrahim among the Muslims, and militant groups in Punjab and Kashmir.

All of these groups offer a measure of protection to their supporters, not only from the supposed threats from other groups and communities, but also against the



**The cover of RSS mouthpiece *Organiser* (April 19, 1992) depicts Bharat Mata under threat from IMF-World Bank-Multinational combine**

fragmenting state machinery. All of these organisations teach martial arts to their followers and keep them in a state of readiness to engage in armed combat. Even the rich business elite now rely more and more on their own security systems and, personally hired gun-toting security guards rather than the law and order machinery. Nevertheless, they are forever nervous that anarchic violence will come to dominate and, therefore, they seek protection from politicians like Bal Thackeray.

●Unlike the Pakistani ruling elite who were insecure and neurotic from the start because the very foundation of Pakistan was based on a lie, the Indian ruling elite started off on a far more self-confident note due to Gandhi's influence and his vision of building a compassionate and just society. Hence soon after Independence it was relatively easy to build a consensus for the equal rights of minorities. But the confidence of the Indian elite lies shattered now due to their own mismanagement and misgovernance of the country. Today they find themselves grovelling before the I.M.F., the World Bank, and sundry foreign investors and donors. They know that the world views India with contempt for its failure to live up to its promises on the economic and political front. They hate themselves for it but do not have the courage to find a way out of this mess. This shame and self-contempt is being systematically manipulated by the Sangh Parivar. Even while the Parivarists themselves go about wooing western governments assuring them that foreign investments will be safe and welcome if they come to power, they never tire of playing on the fear that India is being sold to foreign powers and that it is in the danger of breaking up like the erstwhile Soviet Union.

A sensible way of dealing with our past failures would be to face our mistakes courageously and resolve to improve things for the better. But the

self hating ruling elite in India (as in Pakistan) lack the confidence to do so. They are only too willing to shift the blame elsewhere.

Just as a man who is ridden with anxieties about his "manhood" and "virility" tends to be more aggressive and violent in his relationship with his wife and constantly blames her for his inability to "perform", so with the Indian elite and middle classes. Having failed to put their act together, they are looking for a scapegoat for their shameful performance. The Sangh Parivar's ideology of projecting the Muslims as the source of all problems responds to this need. One commonly hears their cadres and sympathizers say that India would have been as successful as Germany but for the Muslims who are dragging us down.

●The Ram mandir campaign was devised as a counter to the job reservation policy announced by the Janata Dal government. Fearing the joint electoral might of the highly mobilised lower and backward castes' which endangers upper caste dominance, the Sangh Parivar is trying to unite all Hindus into a single force by projecting the Muslims as the main common enemy.

### **Nationalism Splits People**

In any multireligious, multilingual, multiethnic entity such as the Indian subcontinent, where among others, substantial differences exist among the cultures of various regional groups, people have a lot of cross cutting identities.

One cannot be an Indian without also being a Punjabi, Kashmiri, Malayali, Manipuri, Tamilian, and so on. A Punjabi would have several other identity layers - Punjabi from a specific region such as the Doab or even Lahore, while also maintaining an identity as a Punjabi Sikh, Hindu or Muslim. A Punjabi Hindu would have other sub-religious identities, such as Arya Samaji, Sanatani or Radhasoami. Then there could be the layers of caste identity such as Hindu

Khatri or Bania or whatever. Within each caste are the *jatis*, within them the *gotras*. Most important of all are the kinship and family ties and then, of course, age and gender.

A person may begin to assert one particular identity over others if that particular identity is threatened or conversely if any one of them begins to pay off politically or economically. For instance, the policy of job reservations for certain "lower" castes makes it advantageous to assert one's caste for those who can not otherwise gain access to those jobs. But for an upper caste boy who has studied in an elite institution such as St Stephen's College, his identity as a Stephanian gets to be often asserted more than caste identity, because the former is more lucrative for professional advancement.

### **When Sikhs became Nationalists**

In the political sphere the identity that gets to acquire primacy depends on a complex web of factors. The rise of Sikh nationalism has very important lessons to teach. We can only ignore them at our peril. The Sikhs of Punjab began asserting their separate identity in the nineteenth century in response to attacks on the Sikh panth by Dayanand and his Arya Samaji followers who initiated *shuddhi* campaigns to convert Sikhs to the Hindu fold. The next major wave of assertion came in the 1950s with the demand for Punjabi Suba because the Sikhs felt discriminated against as Punjabis, on account of the fact that the principle of carving States around linguistic boundaries was not applied to Punjabi speaking regions. The Punjabi Hindus felt threatened by the Akali demand for Punjabi Suba and went as far as disowning their linguistic identity and declaring Hindi as their mother tongue because they felt their Hindu identity would be politically threatened in a Sikh dominated Punjabi Suba. The Akali party, being gurdwara-based, provided little space for the

political aspirations of non-Sikhs. The result was a truncated state of Punjab for the Sikhs, with several areas going to form the States of Himachal and Haryana. The Sikhs were not the only ones to be check-mated. The Hindus too have lost out in Punjab by becoming a permanent minority and, therefore, they began to look towards "national" parties like the Jan Sangh and the Congress to safeguard their political interests.

When the Akalis launched a movement in the early 1970s demanding reorganisation of Centre-state relations and providing for decentralisation of political and economic power, they were asserting their regional identity as Punjabis and articulating the economic interests of the Jat farmers who constituted their political base. The Jat peasantry provided the thrust for decentralisation because of the manner in which the central government forced the Punjab peasantry to sell its wheat at artificially depressed government controlled prices. The freedom to trade across Punjab's borders, including the export of farm produce, was one of the key demands in the Anandpur Sahib resolution. The Hindus of Punjab deliberately undermined their regional identity as Punjabis and opposed the demand for regional autonomy because they felt that their political interests would be further threatened if Akalis got more power in Punjab. The inability of the Akalis to carry the Hindus (who are 40% of the voters of Punjab) along in their struggle for the much needed decentralisation of power was also responsible for the success of Mrs. Gandhi in claiming that their legitimate demands were "anti-national". It also set her on the path of repression and confrontation with the Akalis, culminating in Operation Blue-star.

This Army Operation caused such an unprecedented schism between the Hindus and Sikhs all over the country that many Punjabi Hindus, who have always worshipped the Granth Sahib,

supported the desecration of the Golden Temple by the Army. In November 1984, when thousands of Sikhs were brutally massacred by supporters of the Congress (I), many Hindus felt that the killings were justified and that the Sikhs needed to be "taught a lesson."

Sikh militants pushed the movement for decentralisation of power in the direction of a demand for Khalistan with

**Communal differences or conflicts can be far more easily resolved by the communities concerned at the local level on the basis of their several shared interests as co-habitants... the moment one or the other community decides to purify itself and declares itself as a separate nationality, their interests appear almost irreconcilable and the conflict assumes the shape of warfare.**

the help of the Congress (I), which propped up Bhindranwale to destroy the influence of the Sant Longowal-led Akali Dal. The Congress party instigated and encouraged Bhindranwale to raise the slogan of Khalistan to discredit the movement for regional autonomy. Even though it was well known that Bhindranwale began as a Congress party agent, many Sikhs began to identify with his demands for Khalistan after the Sikhs got targeted as a community following Operation

Bluestar. They began to declare themselves to be a separate *quam* or nation, in the same way that some Muslim leaders came to do in the 1930s and the 1940s, leading to the disastrous Partition in 1947.

Communal differences or conflicts can be far more easily resolved by the communities concerned at the local level on the basis of their several shared interests as co-habitants. In the 1950s and the 1960s, the Jana Sangh, the party representing urban Hindu interests, had no difficulty in forming coalition governments with the Akali party, their political, religious, and other differences notwithstanding. However, the moment one or the other community decides to purify itself and declares itself as a separate nationality, their interests appear almost irreconcilable and the conflict assumes the shape of warfare. Thus, the moment a section of the Sikhs began purifying the Sikh religion of Hindu influences, and declared Sikhs to be a separate nationality, Hindus even of Punjab, not to speak of distantly situated ones, became willing to condone the worst atrocities against the Sikhs, even though culturally and ethnically the Sikhs are inseparable from the Punjabi Hindus. Similarly, militant Khalistanis felt no compunction about selectively killing Hindus in order to force them to move out of Punjab so that Punjab would become a Sikh state.

If the Sikhs, who have historically played the role of defenders of Hinduism, could be so alienated as to declare themselves as inherently different from, and antagonistic to, the Hindus once they felt that their Sikh identity was in danger, and the Hindus were willing to avidly seek the massacre of their own defenders and brothers once they felt their own survival threatened, we need to understand that any of the various cross cutting identities can easily become the basis of separatist sentiments if not allowed an appropriate realm for legitimate assertion.

## Monolithic Identity Dangerous

The reorganisation of States in India on the basis of language in the 1950s, viewed in retrospect, was a very favourable political development. It allowed space for assertion of one's linguistic identity. Bangladesh seceded from Pakistan mainly as a reaction against the imposition of Urdu on Bengali-speaking Muslims by the ruling elite of West Pakistan - their common Muslim identity notwithstanding. When Hindi was sought to be imposed in India in a similar manner, the southern States all revolted and the protest in Tamil Nadu assumed separatist overtones. Had a certain measure of linguistic autonomy not been granted, there would have been many more national separatist movements in India than there are today. And they could not possibly have been countered by demands for national unity.

There are similar issues involved in the assertion of other ethnic identities. In 1947, the Kashmiri Muslims did not oppose the merger of Kashmir with India when the local Maharaja opted for India against Pakistan because their Kashmiri identity prevailed over their Muslim identity. However, recurring spells of president's rule after repeated dismissals of democratically elected state governments, strengthened the demand for regional autonomy in Kashmir, as in Punjab, and finally led to the call for the secession of Kashmir from India. Kashmiri nationalism, seen as Muslim nationalism, in turn, made the Hindus of Jammu and Kashmir and the Buddhists of Ladakh oppose regional autonomy and demand greater devolution of powers to their respective regions.

Just as the Kashmiris do not wish to be sat upon by Delhi, neither do the Dogras and other Hindus of Jammu, nor do the Buddhists of Ladakh wish to have their region remote-controlled from Srinagar. Thus, a large portion of the state's population has come to oppose the demand for regional autonomy

because they know that the rulers in Srinagar will not extend the principle to include a measure of autonomy for those regions within the state where Muslims are a minority, as in Ladakh or Jammu. The Congress party could not have isolated and destroyed the national Conference party so easily by projecting the latter as anti-national (as with the Akalis) had the leaders evolved a meaningful programme of decentralisation of power within the state, so that varied cross cutting identities and political aspirations of the various regional, linguistic and religious minorities in Jammu, Ladakh and Kashmir could find their legitimate space for assertion.

**Nationalism becomes increasingly poison ous as it divorces itself further and further from social justice.**

It is the same for individuals. When I am walking on the streets of Delhi, I do not think of myself as an Indian. I am more aware of my urban and gender identities because I have to constantly guard against sexual harassment. But with my family I am not aware of my gender identity because my parents did not discriminate against me as a daughter. Likewise, I have never needed to assert my gender identity when seeking a job because jobs came without a fight. But while travelling in crowded DTC buses, I do often feel tempted to claim the "ladies seat" to avoid being pawed by men. When I go looking for rented accommodation, I become more acutely aware of my Punjabi identity because of the prejudice in Delhi against renting to Punjabis. I become aware of being an Indian when I am travelling outside the country, especially in the West, because the colour of my skin, dress and language marks me out from the majority.

In addition, the prejudice I encounter on account of my being identified as an Indian makes me somewhat defensive and, therefore, enhances my awareness of being an Indian. Thus, one comes to aggressively assert whichever part of one's identity that feels more threatened - both in inter-personal as well as in inter-community relations.

## What Won't Work

Many people think that the resolution of the Hindu Muslim conflict in India is crucially dependent on an improvement in India-Pakistan and Indo-Bangladeshi relations, and that as long as Bangladeshis keep facilitating the pushing out of Hindus from Bangladesh, and Pakistan keeps supporting terrorist, secessionist politics in Kashmir and Punjab, the Hindus will continue to target their hostility at Indian Muslims. This is true, to some extent. However, given our misfortune in having neighbours whose politics are far less democratic than is India's, we cannot allow the incompetency and foolish phobias of the Pakistani and Bangladeshi regimes to drive us towards suicidal politics. The way out of this conflict lies in refusing to give legitimacy to those who want India to follow the deadly path chosen by Pakistan, to refuse to support those whose *dharm* is not Hinduism but tit for tatism - those who argue that the Muslims should be treated the same way as Hindus got treated in Pakistan or Bangladesh.

The Sangh Parivar's way of hating the politics of Pakistan is strange indeed - they want India to blindly emulate the theocratic politics of Pakistan. It is unfortunate that Advani aspires to be nothing better than another Jinnah. The essence of the Sangh Parivar's politics implicitly amounts to attempting to vindicate Jinnah, even though history proved him wrong. Attempts to "unify" the Hindus into being Indian *rashtravadis* are bound to produce similarly disastrous results, as we can see from the continuous ethnic strife in Pakistan.

The conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims, and between the Hindus and the Sikhs, cannot be resolved merely by chanting the mantra of national unity. Our traditional bonds acted as a better glue than has modern nationalism. Supranationalism is not an effective enough counter to various subnationalistic tendencies. It often fails to prevent the latter from assuming separatist undertones. The inherent logic of nationalism is to give rise to contending nationalisms; it is based on the supposed “unity” of one group, almost always against some other. It attempts to make diverse peoples “become one” by accepting an arbitrarily chosen, real or mythical culture and history as a common bond. The all-inclusive nationalism advocated by the Congress party in the twentieth century came to be challenged by various subnationalisms, especially the Muslim version, resulting in the Partition. Pakistani nationalism in turn came to be challenged by Bangladeshi nationalism (even though they both shared the same religion). Even after the breakaway of Bangladesh, Pakistan is facing an acute crisis on account of the Sindhis, Baluchis, Mohajirs, Punjabis and others asserting their right to separate national identities. Similarly, our “secular” appeals demanding that religion be kept out of politics do not make much sense, for the Sangh Parivar is actually fighting a secular battle using select religious symbols to give their movement an ethnic flavour as an aid for mass mobilisation for political purposes. That is why the leftist and secularist appeals for national unity are not able to counter the BJP’s plank of Hindu *rashtravad*. The Sangh Parivar is saying essentially the same thing — ‘put the nation before religion.’ In their view, all those who put religion above the nation are traitors.

The way out of this mess lies in ensuring that each individual, each group and community, feels a measure of safety and basic security. Today our government fails to protect people

even against brutal forms of violence and exploitation. National security cannot mean anything to people if their own lives are full of fear and insecurity about their own survival in the face of open and murderous attacks. Nor can people continue indefinitely to feel loyal to a nation if its government actively prevents them from retaining some shred of dignity. Only citizens confident of government protection from threats of harm and death can have a stake in supporting the stability of the state.

Loyal citizens are found more often in societies where nationalism is tempered by higher values such as

respect for human life and freedom, where governments are made to act lawfully and with responsibility, where equality among different ethnic groups is accepted as a fundamental principle of social and political organisation. Wherever these principles do not prevail, and nationalism is the sole substitute, there are tensions and strife, and governments face active disaffection endangering the health of the society and of the peoples that compose it. The frightfully high crime rate in the US is linked to discrimination against and the consequent ghettoisation of the Blacks and other despised minorities. In neighbouring



**From a calender brought out by the RSS proclaiming to BharatMata: “May your grandeur be immortal, no matter how short our lives” It depicts Bharat Mata spreading luminously across and beyond the South Asian sub-continent erasing national boundaries from Afghanistan to China and Russia. She herself is allowed to look benevolent but has been provided with a ferocious lion traditionally associated with Durga as her *vahan*.**

Canada, there is much less social strife and crime because the disgruntled groups are not comparably discriminated against. Nationalism becomes increasingly poisonous as it divorces itself further and further from social justice.

### **Cross Cutting Identities Need to Thrive**

The only effective way to counter the belief in the permanent and irreconcilable enmity between one community and the other, being advocated by the Sangh Parivar, is to preempt the emergence of monolithic identities involving deadly “purifying and cleansing” tendencies among various communities. For instance, it is only when political leaders try to insist that all Hindus, or all Muslims have identical sets of interests — no matter whether they are from Kerala or Maharashtra, whether peasants or artisans, Urdu speaking or Tamil speaking, rich or poor, Sunni or Shia, lower caste or higher caste - that they can be pitched against each other as permanently hostile monoliths. But the moment Muslim and Hindu peasants can come together to safeguard their interests as farmers, come together as Gujaratis or Kashmiris to assert their linguistic, or their regional identity or acknowledge bonds of commonality on account of being from the same village or neighbourhood, they cannot easily be pitched against each other as hostile warring groups on an all-India basis by letting religious identity overwhelm all other identities.

### **Minority Rights Policy**

The problem is not one of Hindus having any inherent conflict with the Muslims. The problem is due to not working out decent norms for majority-minority relations. All over the world we find that in the absence of decent procedures for working out majority-minority relationships, majoritarian community politics can easily become tyrannical. All groups begin to fear for their very physical survival, until finally the only way out seems to be to exterminate or drive out the other group. Thus the Hindus in Pakistan

and Bangladesh are even more marginal than Muslims are in India. Hence, very few of them survive there. Given India’s heterogeneity, every community is a minority in some place or status and a majority elsewhere. For example, the Hindus are a minority in Kashmir, Ladakh, Punjab and Nagaland. The Muslims are a minority everywhere else except in Kashmir. The Sikhs are a minority everywhere except in Punjab; the Christians are a minority elsewhere

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guarantee against a but not in Nagaland; the Tamils are a minority except in Tamil Nadu; the Brahmins are a minority everywhere except in certain government jobs and elite professions.

We need to define decent, workable norms for power sharing, be it with the Hindu minority in Kashmir or Punjab, or with the Muslims in Madhya Pradesh, or with the Christians in Tamil Nadu. As of today, our country does not have a well worked out policy framework for minority rights which will have safeguards for the Hindus as well as the Muslims, the Sikhs, the Christians and all others, wherever they are situated as a minority. Our government is only capable of making gimmicky gestures such as declaring Prophet Mohammad’s birthday as a national holiday or succumbing to fundamentalist pressure on issues of Muslim personal law or banning *Satanic Verses*.

### **An Accountable Government**

A policy that actually provides a fair deal for minorities will work only if

it is accompanied by a thorough overhaul of the government machinery to ensure that principles of accountability are introduced in such a way that the government machinery becomes answerable to those it is supposed to serve within a restricted area of functioning. Unless we succeed in making the law and order machinery behave lawfully so, that individuals do not have to gang up as groups and groups do not have to seek the protection of mafias, we will continue to have more and more violence, on one pretext or another.

This can only happen if we rehaul the political system to ensure effective and meaningful decentralisation of power — not just between the Centre and the States, but also between different regions within a State, so that each village and each city is allowed a degree of autonomy, so that a village panchayat or a city corporation need not have to depend on the political bosses in state capitals or in Delhi for managing their day to day affairs.

Excessive centralisation of power inevitably breeds corruption and tyranny and tends to foster greater conflicts among various ethnic groups, as the collapse of the Soviet Union demonstrates.

Excessive homogenisation of meaningful group identities in favour of an all powerful national state requiring sacrifices from all and benefits only to a small elite will inevitably promote more civil strife, as has happened in the erstwhile communist bloc.

If India has escaped going the way of Hitler’s Germany or becoming another Yugoslavia, even though politicians of Sangh Parivar are trying hard to take that route, it is because India’s heterogeneity makes it far more difficult for Hitlerian attempts to unify all the people at the same time for a murderous purpose. Our rich diversity is our best guarantee against a tyrannical dictatorship. If we allow politicians to destroy it, it would amount to destroying the very soul of India. □