

**THE HINDU
COUNTERREVOLUTION:
THE VIOLENT
RECREATION OF AN
IMAGINED PAST**

BY WALDEN BELLO



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Author: Walden Bello

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This study of Hindu nationalism is part of the author’s larger study that includes investigations of counterrevolutionary movements in Indonesia, Chile, Thailand, Philippines, Fascist Italy, and Contemporary Europe and the United States, which are brought together in the volume titled *State and Counterrevolution: Explorations into the Global Rise of the Right.*

Among the cases of counterrevolution touched on in this study, the case of India is unique in that it provides a fascinating, if disturbing direct link between an ongoing counterrevolutionary movement and classical fascism in early 20th century Europe. The key Hindu right-wing nationalist organization in India is the RSS, or *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, often translated into English as the “National Volunteer Corps.” A tight, disciplined organization, the RSS was founded in 1925, just five years after the founding of the Nazi Party in Germany. Perhaps, not surprisingly, images of the Fascist Blackshirts and Nazi Brownshirts are evoked when RSS units come out on parade, with their trademark accouterment of knee-length khaki shorts (lately replaced by long brown trousers) and white shirts, their long fighting sticks or *lathi* displayed in a fashion that is meant to be menacing.

But more important than the matter of uniform is inspiration. Instrumental in making European fascism an ideological influence on the Hindu right was the prime ideologue of the RSS, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar who declared, “Surely Hitler knows...what suits Germany best. The very fact that Germany or Italy has so wonderfully recovered and grown so powerful as never before at the touch of the Nazi or Fascist magical wand is enough to prove that those political ‘isms’ were the most congenial tonics their health demanded.”¹

Savarkar’s glowing admiration was seconded by another figure in the RSS pantheon, Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, who asserted, “To keep up the purity of the race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic Races—the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan [India] to learn and profit by.”²

Perhaps the best known contemporary admirer of Savarkar and Golwalkar is India’s current Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who began his political career as an RSS organizer and is accused of supervising an anti-Muslim pogrom that took the lives of thousands of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002 when he was chief minister of that state.³ Modi has been effusive in his praise of Savarkar, saying “Savarkar means brilliance, Savarkar means sacrifice, Savarkar means penance, Savarkar means substance, Savarkar means logic, Savarkar means youth, Savarkar means an arrow, and Savarkar means a Sword!”⁴

Role Reversal

In his discussion of fascism in his classic work, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*,

Barrington Moore, Jr., was dismissive of Hindu nationalists, writing that “their programs lack economic content and appear mainly to be a form of militant, xenophobic Hinduism, seeking to combat the stereotype that Hindus are pacific, divided by caste, and weak. So far their electoral appeal has been very small.”⁵

Moore would not be the only social analyst whose judgment would be overturned by developments of the last few decades. Indeed, a great number of Indian academics and intellectuals and India specialists did not anticipate the blazing rise of the right, nor have they fully comprehended it intellectually, much less come to grips with how to deal with it politically.

Today, Hindu nationalists, for whom the RSS is the political center, are the hegemonic force in Indian politics, having captured many state governments and, during the 2014 national elections, an outright majority of seats in the Lok Sabha, the national parliament, as well. Modi, once banned from entry into the US for his role in the Gujarat massacre, is probably the most powerful Indian leader since Indira Gandhi and, under his watch, the peaceful democratic competition, pluralism, and secularism that post-war India was known for are in grave danger of becoming history.

A few decades back, the hegemony of the Hindu nationalist right would have not only been regarded as improbable but unthinkable.



Hedgewar, Golwalkar, and Savarkar—Key figures in the RSS pantheon

While not exactly on the fringe, groups associated with the ideology of “Hindutva” (best translated as “Hinduness”) were marginal players in post-independence politics. Deriving its prestige from the role it played in the struggle for independence against the British under the moral inspiration of Mahatma Gandhi and the political leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, the Congress Party dominated the politics of post-independence India for three decades. While there were instances when it resorted to communal politics for its own ends, for the most part, Congress espoused the vision of an India that was secular, democratic, and diverse. As Nehru put it in his speech on India’s achieving independence in 1948: “All of us, to whatever religion we may belong, are equally the children of India with equal rights, privileges and obligations. We cannot encourage communalism or narrow-mindedness, for no nation can be great whose people are narrow in thought or in action.”⁶ On the critical issue of the Hindu-Muslim religious divide, Gandhi and Nehru had pushed for a one-state solution in the period leading up to the British departure, but the chaos that accompanied the latter saw communal hatred and violence drive the process, leading to the establishment of India, where the Hindus were in the majority, and

Hindu nationalism, for its part, was regarded by many Indians as backward looking, its appeal largely confined to the central regions of the country, the Hindustani heartland

Pakistan, which emerged as a state which not only was a Muslim-majority state but was self-defined as an Islamic state. Notwithstanding the Partition, the Indian constitution, which was adopted by the Constituent Assembly on November 26, 1949, and came into effect on January 26, 1950, cemented “this inclusive and democratic objective of keeping government equidistant from all the religions of India’s religiously diverse population.”⁷

Hindu nationalism, for its part, was regarded by many Indians as backward looking, its appeal largely confined to the central regions of the country, the Hindustani heartland. Moreover, the RSS and other Hindu nationalist groupings were plunged into disrepute when a former RSS member, Nathuram Godse, was sent to the gallows for the assassination on January 30, 1948 of Mahatma Gandhi, an act for which their chief ideologue Savarkar was implicated, though acquitted.

The shocking role reversal, from a hegemonic Congress to a hegemonic Hindu right, was underlined by results of the 2014 parliamentary elections, which saw Congress reduced to a rump of 44 seats in the national parliament, while the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) gained an absolute majority of 282 seats. This was a veritable

revolution, or better yet, counterrevolution. That it was a process that unfolded over three decades does not detract from its massive significance. And the answer to why it happened must address two questions: What did Congress do wrong and what did the Hindu right “do right?” This is not meant to imply that no other political forces played a significant role in driving India’s post-independence politics. Certainly, the Indian left as well lower class or caste political formations had a major impact on the evolution of the political system. Nevertheless, the focus here on the Congress-Hindu nationalist struggle is justified since it is the central rivalry that has driven national politics since the mid-1970’s.

The Unhinging of Congress

What accounted for the erosion of Congress’ credibility? Several factors contributed to this, but foremost among them are four: the authoritarian turn of Indira Gandhi in the mid-seventies; the unhinging of the relationship between Congress’ central leadership and the local brokers that provided it votes in the grassroots; Gandhi’s introduction of populist politics into India, which ultimately benefited not Congress but the Hindu right; and the failure of Congress to deliver on its social contract with the Indian masses.

The turn to authoritarianism of Indira Gandhi in 1975-77, the so-called Emergency, shattered the party’s image as a bulwark of democracy. Not only was there a drastic curtailment of democratic processes, but there occurred widespread violations of human rights, like arbitrary imprisonment of Gandhi’s enemies and forced sterilization aggressively promoted by Gandhi’s son, Sanjay.

The Emergency was unpopular and triggered widespread resistance. It is perhaps not surprising that the reinvigoration of the Hindu nationalists can be dated to the period, for the Emergency translated into opportunity for the RSS and its allied organizations. Ironically, after being associated with extremism and authoritarianism, they were able to step into the role of defenders of democratic processes. As Chetan Bhatt notes, “The ‘emergency period’ is relevant not simply because of the participation by Hindu nationalists in mass campaigns against authoritarian rule (and their consequent rehabilitation within some democratic, Gandhian and socialist circles), but also because it enabled Hindu nationalists to present themselves for the first time ever as genuine democrats working for the ‘organic’ interests, liberties, and freedoms.”⁸

A second key factor behind Congress’ decline, according to political scientist Paul Kenny, has been the destabilization of the relationship between its national leadership and the local bosses who ran its electoral machinery. A few words of clarification are in order here: The Congress Party emerged as a mass movement during the struggle for independence that incorporated the Indian rural and urban lower classes into the political sphere as collective agents under the charismatic leadership of Mohandas Gandhi. That was the popular image of Congress. There was, however, another dimension, one that was brought about by the difficulty of sustaining direct ties between the national leadership and the mobilized masses. This was the forging of a cross-class and cross-sectional alliance between the national leadership and locally dominant elites made up of the rich and middle peasantry that “could exploit their role as brokers between the national leadership and the lower peasant clientele below them.”⁹

In the first decades after independence, this relationship evolved into a synergy between the Congress national leadership and regional and local power brokers. On the one hand, the “National Congress leadership...was guaranteed the delivery of vote banks by its brokers, which gave it substantial autonomy over high-level policy formation in the domestic and international arenas.”¹⁰ On the other hand, the local brokers from the “middle and rich peasantry could gain external patrons in their own struggle for access to the spoils for their faction at the local level.”¹¹ This was the configuration of power that lay behind the idealized picture of a secular, democratic, pluralistic, and socialist India.

The crumbling of Congress’ hegemony began with the death of Nehru. That fine balance between the national center and the subnational brokers that he had cultivated was increasingly eroded, with the local brokers gaining more and more autonomy from the center. At the local level, Congress became increasingly merely a patronage party, that is, a mechanism for winning power and distributing spoils to its voting base, while at the national level, the strong central leadership of Nehru gave way to a feuding, fragmented, and weak party elite. This combination threatened to erode the party’s dominance nationally and locally, prompting Nehru’s daughter, Indira Gandhi, who eventually became his successor, to try to decisively recentralize power. The post-Nehru crisis is well summed up by Kenny:

Although the Congress party had been able to retain power in the states for nearly two decades after independence, this situation of divided national government, or vertical fragmentation, was fatal in the context of patronage democracy. Both Indira Gandhi and

her opponents within the Congress knew that the national party’s survival rested on the party’s continued success at the subnational level. Without control over the reins of patronage at the lower level, the national party retained only its residual emotional appeal as the party of independence.¹²

Gandhi’s project culminated in her resorting to a populist style of political mobilization and governance, which meant establishing a direct link to voters to break the hold of party brokers and prevent the emergence of autonomous power centers in the states.¹³ In this intra-Congress fight over control of the state, Indira Gandhi remade herself as a populist, appealing directly to the people “in a way no Indian leader since M.K. Gandhi had done prior to independence.”¹⁴ Her populist makeover, with her appeal to “end poverty,” resulted in her getting a conclusive mandate after the 1971 elections. She then moved to translate this electoral support into an authoritarian system that would enable her to gain direct access to local voters and resources:

With a supermajority in the legislature, she quickly set about recentralizing the patronage mechanism and eliminating her rivals. Confronted by a rival populist movement under the leadership of Jayaprakash Narayan, Mrs. Gandhi imposed Emergency Rule, locked up her political rivals, and imposed her centralist vision of modernization by executive fiat.¹⁵

With widespread abuses of human and political rights, popular pressure forced Gandhi to lift the Emergency after two years and led to her ouster from office. Coming back to power in 1980, Gandhi resumed her push to centralize power,

but this effort was cut short by her assassination by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984. Gandhi may have disappeared from the scene but her populist authoritarianism had done irreparable damage to the relationship between the party center and the party's local bosses, resulting in the party's slow unravelling as an effective patronage mechanism. This organizational dislocation compounded the organization's crisis of credibility as the party of democracy that it was already suffering from owing to Gandhi's authoritarian turn.

The Hindu Right Learns from Indira

Congress' authoritarian interlude was disastrous for Congress, resulting not only in the erosion of its credibility as the party of Indian democracy but yielding four key developments that facilitated the rise of the Hindu nationalists.

First, it intensified factional disputes that further eroded Congress's grip on power.

Second, it promoted the rise of opposition coalitions of power that successfully challenged Congress's hegemony at the national level.

Third, it facilitated even greater autonomy of state-level power brokers, with many of them forming political parties along regional, ethnolinguistic, or caste lines, but with most of these having as their central aim winning elections on an exclusivist platform in order to gain access to the spoils of government.

This more pluralistic arena at both the national and state level, with the possibilities of coalition politics

that it offered, was a key factor that influenced the transformation of the Hindu nationalist political formations from marginal to key players. Though ideological in orientation, the BJP became skilled at making alliances with regional or ethnolinguistic parties to achieve its strategic goals.

As important as the more pluralistic political arena inherited from the Indira Gandhi era was a fourth factor, and this was her introducing populist politics to India. She showed that one could bypass patronage systems and appeal directly to the voters with a populist style of campaigning. There was one important difference, however, between Gandhi's populism and that of the BJP. While Gandhi's populism, however self-serving it might have been, sought to rouse the masses against entrenched economic and social privilege, Hindu populism sought to turn the majority against the imagined privilege of the country's minority religious communities. Coalition politics and populism proved to be powerful instruments that the Hindu nationalists would employ in their transformation from marginal players to hegemonic power in the space of two decades.

The Failure of the Nehruvian Ideal

The political and ideological crises of Congress were not the only developments that facilitated the rise of the extreme Hindu right. Another important reason was the failure of Congress to deliver on the so-called "Nehruvian developmental ideal," that is, on its economic and social commitments to the population. One analyst sums up the expectations gap in this manner:



Indira Gandhi's Emergency provided the opportunity for the Hindu nationalists to emerge as a major political actor.

From a generous reading of the Nehruvian vision, a fully-fledged and educated citizenship should have arisen automatically from processes of modernization. Instead there exists an infra-citizenship that functionally governs the relationship between a fractionally-enfranchised poor populace and the state. By any measure, this is a crisis of genuinely democratic citizenship of which enduring poverty and the entrenchment of anti-dalit anti-lower-caste discrimination are key examples.¹⁶

Nehruvian “socialism” also became synonymous with bureaucratic control of the economy and overregulation—the so-called License Raj—which led, according to its critics, to Eastern European-style economic stagnation. While it was under Congress’ rule that the full-scale liberalization of the economy was launched in 1991, it was the Hindu right that most enthusiastically embraced and became identified with the benefits it brought to the urban entrepreneurial and middle classes while Congress was stuck with a large part of the blame for the greater misery among the masses that liberalization brought about.

Here, the erosion of living conditions in the countryside under Congress's rule deserves special mention if we are to understand fully why a coalition dominated by the BJP came to power by the late 1990's. In the early nineties, under the leadership of Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, the Congress government removed state subsidies for fertilizer and handed fertilizer distribution to the private sector, resulting in considerable price increases alongside increases in pesticide prices. This blow was followed by financial liberalization, which resulted in reduced institutional credit for small farmers, while funding for public sector investment in power production and irrigation declined. The results of this one-two punch on the rural sector are cogently summed up by Kathy Le Mons Walker:

Thus in the span of a few short years the combination of, first, the state's withdrawal and, then, its increasingly predatory stance vis-à-vis the rural poor drove small peasant producers into the arms of moneylenders and traders, both of whom supply loans at usurious rates (amounting in some instances to as much as 100 per cent) and are much more inflexible in rolling debts than institutional lenders. According to an NSSO report of 2003, fully 76 per cent of rural households held loans from moneylenders. Increasing indebtedness in turn resulted in

further land loss and landlessness among peasants. By 1999-2000, the proportion of landless rural dwellers had reached 63 per cent. In this context increases in rural suicides began to occur, especially in the Green Revolution/ capital intensive areas where prior to the 1990s many smaller farmers had only been able to adopt the new techniques through borrowing.¹⁷

Owing to its comprehensive ideological, political, and organizational deterioration, Congress lost control of the Indian Parliament to a BJP-led coalition in 1998. A Congress-led coalition returned to power in 2004, but the party's loss of cohesion deepened till it became a party that was viewed as ridden with corruption and one that seemed to be held together only by dynastic allegiance to Rajiv Gandhi's widow, Sonia Gandhi, and her children Rahul and Priyanka.

The political and ideological crises of Congress were not the only developments that facilitated the rise of the extreme Hindu right

Hindutva and the Hindu Nationalist Ideological-Political Complex

Congress' descent, however, provided only the conditions for the Hindu right's ascent to power. Most of its momentum derived from its skilled employment of coalition politics at the national and state leadership levels, and its coordination of national or state leadership with its actions at the level of the mass movements. While

the necessities of electoral coalition politics obliged it to calibrate its pushing its ideological agenda at the national parliamentary level with the promotion of more popular measures, like promising growth via neoliberal measures, at the mass, street level, it cultivated ideological politics, using it not only to gain recruits but to denounce and often physically attack those considered enemies of the Hindu nation.

Here we must pause briefly to discuss the Hindu nationalist network and key elements of the Hindutva ideology, some of which inevitably led to extremist actions like the shocking slaughter of Muslims in Gujarat state in 2002.

Hindutva, according to the most influential Hindu fundamentalist ideologue Savarkar, was the fundamental essence of being Hindu. As pointed out by Sathianathan Clarke, this “essence” consists first, of an intimate sense of belonging to a sacred geography, to a motherland, Hindustan. Second, Hindutva binds all those of the motherland together by a common blood, seeing the diverse peoples of India as parts of a race that shares the inheritance of the Vedic ancestor. Third, Hindutva asserts that as the biological community devoted to this sacred land, all Hindus share a common culture, one that is the cradle of all civilizations.¹⁸ As Savarkar put it,

We Hindus are bound together not only by the ties of love we bear to a common fatherland and by the common blood that courses through our veins and keeps our hearts throbbing and our affections warm, but also by the ties of common homage we pay to our great civilization—our Hindu culture...We are one because we are a nation, a race, and own a common Sanskriti (civilization).¹⁹

As noted by scholars like K. Satchidanandan, Hindutva is an attempt to deny the many cultural streams that made Indian civilization so dynamic and create an artificial monolithic unity of Hinduness, one that is actually “a colonial construct borrowing elements from Western Orientalism, the Judaic idea of religion and the fascist ideals of cultural nationalism.”²⁰

Like all fundamentalist ideologies, Hindutva makes exorbitant claims, saying that the Vedic teachings, which go back 1500 years, already contained the advances of modern science, and asserting that ancient Hindus developed plastic surgery and flew airplanes.²¹

If it were just a question of exaggerated claims for the achievements of the Hindu ancients, Hindu fundamentalism would not be so controversial. But Hindutva was articulated by Savarkar and his followers within a narrative of victimhood, whereby invaders, first the Muslim Mughals, then the Christian British subjugated, repressed, and divided the Hindu nation. Thus Hindutva was a project of reclaiming the Hindus’ collective identity, creating a Hindu government, and restoring the glory of a culture from the depredations of alien forces, namely Muslims and Christians. Savarkar and his followers fashioned Hindutva into an exclusionary ideology and movement that justified violence against the representatives of alien forces residing in the homeland, namely the Muslim and Christian communities. As one analyst put it, “India’s fundamentalists were radicalized by anger over the past and fear for the future.”²²

This movement has been driven forward by a psychology that is remarkably similar to that

which propelled the classical fascist movements in Europe, again a reminder that the latter did have a direct influence on the development of the Hindu extreme right. It is not difficult to see, in the Hindu right, says Satchidanandan, “almost all the symptoms of European fascism dissected by Umberto Eco and Wilhelm Reich, though “at times in transformed, veiled, or diluted forms:”

[T]he cult of tradition that considers truth as already revealed or known—that goes against the grain of scientific thinking, rejection of modernism, action for action’s sake done without reflection, suspicion of culture and intellectuals, seeing any dissent as betrayal, fear of difference and the consequent rejection of pluralist ethos, appeal to the frustrated middle classes who feel the pressure from below, the negative and exclusivist way of defining the nation that leads to xenophobia, the creation of an “other” blamed for what is wrong with the society and an obsession with conspiracies, seeing pacifism as collusion with the enemy that comes from a vision of life as permanent battle that will finally lead to the lost “gold age” that never existed in history, a form of popular elitism that results in scorn for the weak, machismo that condemns all non-conformist sexual habits and a contempt for women and sexual deviants, the cult of death (“Viva la muerte” was the slogan of the Falangists in Spain) that prefers death to life—this readiness to die also justifying the readiness to kill....²³

Not only did the Hindu nationalists have a militant ideology and a shared psychology; they developed the organizational capacity to put it into action. Unlike Congress which had a secular

ideology that rested unsteadily on patronage mechanisms at the regional and local level, Hindutva had a highly ideological organization on the ground that eventually spawned a network of closely related groups: the RSS, which is essentially a paramilitary organization. The complex of organizations developed by the RSS came to be known as the Sangh Pariver, or Syndicate, and the two key organizations in this universe, which had complementary functions in the task of “filling” the Indian nation space and civil space, were the BJP and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP). In forging this relationship between a “vanguard” organization and subordinate mass organizations, the Hindu right probably copied the organizational methods of the Marxist left.

Founded in 1980, the BJP is the principal mechanism by which the Hindu nationalists compete for political power in India’s democratic parliamentary system. The VHP, translated as the World Council of Hindus, was created in 1964 to bring all Hindu sects under the common agenda of creating an Indian nation state. The VHP is described as having “gone beyond the tight vanguardist structure of the originary RSS, and thereby made communalism (and communal conflict centered around politically constructed identities) into a mass force.”²⁴ While the BJP focuses on winning the competition within the current political system, the VHP and RSS are working hand in hand to bring about a more strategic aim, which is to “transform not only the content of the entire Indian political culture, but also the legitimate form of that culture.”²⁵ As one academic observer puts it:

This includes changing the nature of the public sphere and its forms of political discourse, the

quality of the relation between nationalism, the state, and democratic citizenship, the boundaries between legal and extralegal spheres, the deepest layers of personal and civil society, and the nature of civic association, solidarity, and mass participation. A key aim of the RSS and VHP is to conflate political and civic citizenship, while transforming the understanding of both through a long-term aim to patiently but wholly transform the “body, mind, and intellect” of each Hindu adult and child. This dislocates traditional understandings of family, community, civil society and nation in order to replace them with a vitalist, organismic (and arguably quasi-eugenicist) conception of society and nation.²⁶

The concept of democracy, the relationship of the state to religion, and justice—the traditional mainstays of liberal democracy—have been reformulated to fit the Hindutva paradigm. Thus since democracy is the rule of the majority, this means it must serve as an instrument for promoting the interests of the 80 per cent of India’s population that are Hindu. The liberal state’s doctrine of separation of Church and state is hypocritical since

it protects the rights of religious minorities; thus it must be abandoned and the state must serve the ends of the religious majority. Achieving justice is reformulated to mean rectifying the historical injustice done to the Hindu majority by Muslim

and Christian alien invaders, who continue to enjoy the privilege of being protected by the state. “Hindutva ‘justice’ can only be figured, notes one analyst, “through a reversal of time (the destruction of the medieval monument), the assimilation or erasure of minority identity, or the (seemingly brahminical) requirement that the state and minorities be compelled to recognize, distinguish, and honor Hindus.”²⁷

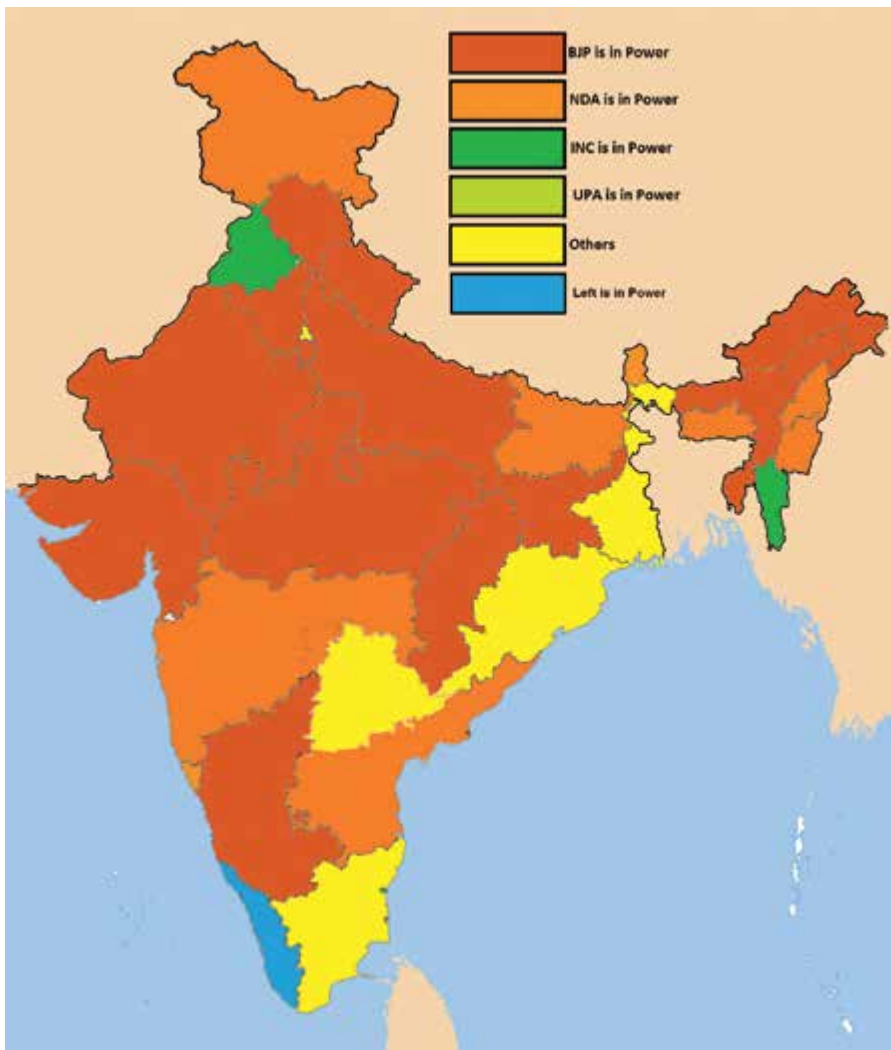
While the BJP is given room to maneuver owing to the necessities of alliance politics and political timing, the Sangh Parivar expects the BJP to deliver on its immediate demands, which are legislating that Muslims and Christians must be incorporated into the common civil code instead of allowing them to live their family lives according to their own traditions; ending the

special status of Kashmir, India’s only state with a Muslim majority; and completing the construction of a Hindu temple on the site of the old mosque of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, which was destroyed by its militants in 1992.²⁸

Founded in 1980, the BJP is the principal mechanism by which the Hindu nationalists compete for political power in India’s democratic parliamentary system

The last demand reveals the uncompromising ideological character of Hindu nationalism, which is essentially a politics of vendetta whereby “the political and social trajectories of the Sultanate and British rule, are not only constructed as a fall from an original state of purity, but the citizens who today belong to the Muslim and Christian faiths are reduced to standing in for the Invader, the Plunderer, the Desecrator, and are positioned as treasonable subjects to be disciplined and suborned within the nation-state.”²⁹ Along with Muslims and Christians, liberal and progressive intellectuals

are denounced as “sikular libtards” on Facebook and Twitter and by the chief of the RSS in 1999 as that “class of bastards which tries to implant an alien culture in our land.”³⁰ Intellectuals, artists, and journalists who dare to criticize Hindutva and its practitioners are intimidated, if not murdered outright. It was only a matter of time before the Congress Party, which long represented the Nehruvian ideals of secularism, tolerance, and pluralism would be denounced as the “party of Muslims,” an allegation that seems to be supported by Prime Minister Modi himself.³¹



The “Saffron Tide:” Indian states by ruling party in 2018

With Muslims, Christians, and westernized intellectuals seen as a fifth column, violence against them is constrained only by public opinion, which can eventually be changed, or by legal criminal sanctions, the imposition or severity of which is sensitive to who is in power. For the Hindu right, it is also important to devise arrangements to keep violence at an arms-length from the main organizations of the Sangh Parivar. Thus the VHP has spawned a number of organizations that are tied to it yet enjoy a measure of autonomy, like the Bajrang Dal and Hindu Jagran Manch, which have been implicated in “spectacular forms of violence against religious minorities.”³² Ideological affinity coupled with arm’s length organizational relationship allows what one

otherwise restrained analyst calls the “genocidal” VHP at one and the same time “to distance itself from these newly named organizations while providing the gestatory womb for them.”³³

One of the most spectacular cases of Hindu nationalist violence against religious minorities was the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque by Hindu militants in Ayodhya in 1992 based on the claim that it had been built on a temple of Lord Ram in the 16th century, one for which there is limited historical evidence. But overshadowing the Babri Masjid incident were the Gujarat riots of 2002, an orgy of killing, mainly of Muslims, triggered by the deaths of 59 Hindu pilgrims returning to Gujarat from Ayodhya. In response, there was a systematic two-month-long deadly massacre of Muslims that struck many as methodical, well thought out, and carried out with the support of the state whose chief minister then was Narendra Modi.³⁴ Modi’s role has been much debated, but it cannot be denied that “the Sangh Parivar (the umbrella organization of all militant Hindu organizations) was well prepared and well-rehearsed to carry out the murderous, brutal, and sadistic attacks on Muslim men, women, and children.”³⁵

By March 2002, at the end of this riot, the estimate of casualties ranged “between a thousand dead (official) and two thousand (unofficial), spread over thirty cities and towns in Gujarat. Apart from the deaths, which occurred at a ratio of 15 Muslims to every 1 Hindu, nearly 150,000 Muslims were driven from their homes while 500 mosques and Muslim shrines were destroyed. These violent attacks against Muslims put fear and anxiety in the hearts and minds of Muslims in a state that was aggressively working to extend Hindu-ness.”³⁶ As

for Christians, they were put on notice that they were fair game by attacks, including murder, rape of nuns, and pulling down of churches, that began in 1998, with the burning of an Australian missionary and his sons.

The Class/Caste Dimension

Hindu nationalism is a complex social phenomenon. While it is important not to be class reductionist, it must be acknowledged that it has a class dimension and not simply a cultural counterrevolutionary dimension. As Bhatt puts it, the emergence of Hindu nationalism can be seen as an authoritarian response on the part of both the traditional upper caste as well as the emerging rural and urban middle class to “widening democratization, especially related to the political rise of non-elites castes and dalits, but also because of the sub-national and regional importance of a range of new socio-political movements and parties.”³⁷

But reaction to the rise of the lower castes and tribal communities was only part of the class story. Although the Congress government had initiated liberalization in 1991, it was the succeeding BJP-led government led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee that embraced neoliberalism most thoroughly and championed the interests of big business and the urban middle classes that drew the political payoff from it. In power at the national level between 1996 and 2004, the BJP opted for a strategy of postponing pushing its most controversial political and cultural measures in favor of promoting a strong neoliberal agenda. This may have upset hardliners in the RSS, but it brought big business and the urban middle classes into the BJP fold.

As Walker describes it, neoliberal political economy discriminated against agriculture and the poorer classes and involved a “privileging of urban India associated with the ‘rise’ of information technology and business services sector as the most dynamic of the economy, the related growth of an affluent middle class, and the expansion of a productive structure catering to the ‘class and comfort’ of both the expanding middle class and India’s tiny but by world standards, extremely wealthy, ‘billionaire’ bourgeoisie.”³⁸ Satisfying their material interests had an added but critical effect: it opened the ethically sterile rich and the middle classes to the ideology of Hindu nationalism.

The “Gujarat Model”

A good window into the class dimension of the BJP’s appeal is provided by the French India specialist Christophe Jaffrelot in his deconstruction of the so-called “Gujarat Model.” The state of Gujarat has been dominated by the BJP since 1990, and while Modi was chief minister, its pattern of economic development was extolled as a model for the whole of India. The state had a high rate of growth and was friendly to investors, providing them with tax breaks and the elimination or loosening of restrictions governing labor, pollution, and the acquisition of land. Yet investment was capital-intensive, resulting in jobless growth, with formal employment (+0.3) between 1999-2000 and 2009-2010 in the boom years. With few new jobs in the formal sector, people went into the low-paid informal sector. In 2011, Gujarat had the third lowest level of wages for casual labor, this being the reason why many industries flocked to the state.³⁹

What many Indians failed to note, however, was that there was an underside to the Gujarat miracle, which is aptly summed by Jaffrelot:

While the Gujarat government gave several fiscal exemptions to industrialists, many companies did not pay taxes. As a result, the state’s fiscal liabilities have increased, making Gujarat one of India’s most indebted states. The lack of resources partly explains the low level of social expenditure in Gujarat. Between 2001-2002 and 2012-2013, Gujarat spent 13.22 per cent of its budget on education—the national average was slightly above 15 per cent. It did little better in so far as public health was concerned.

With 4.2 per cent of its budget devoted to health-related expenditure, Gujarat ranked seventh out of 17 large states in 2010-11. But Gujarat lags behind states like Tamil Nadu with respect to vaccination, infant mortality rate, child undernourishment and literacy. These are symptoms of rising inequalities between caste groups as well within them.

The “Gujarat model” has, therefore, been characterized by attempts at attracting big investors who generate growth but few jobs (and even fewer good jobs), at the expense of the exchequer. It is also characterized by disappointing social indicators reflecting comparatively low social expenditures.⁴⁰

With such a poor record in terms of raising the standards of living of the poor, why does the electorate keep returning the BJP to power with 40 to 50 per cent of the vote? The answer Jaffrelot provides is an intriguing one: the negative synergy

between political economy, cultural politics, and class identification.

Even though the ‘Gujarat model’ cultivates social polarization, Narendra Modi was able to win elections three times in the state for two major reasons. First, the main casualties of this political economy have been Muslims, Dalits [“Untouchables”] and Adivasis [tribal communities] who do not represent more than 30 percent of society. Second, the beneficiaries of this ‘model’ were not only the middle class, but also a ‘neo-middle class’ made up of those who have begun to be part of the urban economy or who hope to benefit from it—the ‘neo-middle class’ is primarily aspirational. These groups were numerous enough to allow Modi’s BJP to win successive elections in Gujarat.⁴¹

“While the BJP is known for its expertise in religious polarization,” Jaffrelot concludes, “this is clearly a case of social polarization in which the ethno-religious identity quest of the middle and neo-middle classes continues to play a role.”⁴² In less academic terms, this core BJP support base is described by one journalist as “a rising middle class that is hungry for religious assertion and fed up with the socialist, rationalist legacy of Jawaharlal Nehru.”⁴³

The Populist Dimension

Hindu nationalism is an ideological movement. But doctrine is just part of the reason for its success. Electoral victory is not guaranteed just because the country is 80 per cent Hindu. A key ingredient is a populist style associated with some of its leaders,

notably Narendra Modi. Paul Kenny expresses a common observation of many of those who have followed the career of the man: “Narendra Modi rode to power by...appealing directly to independent voters who were no longer deeply embedded in national party-patronage networks. Modi’s charismatic appeal won the day.”⁴⁴ A study of the 2014 elections concludes that the BJP “victory was secured by a well-planned presidential style campaign around Modi himself.”⁴⁵ Yet another showed that one in every four respondents who voted for the BJP-led alliance said that they would not have voted for the coalition if Modi had not been the prime ministerial candidate.⁴⁶

Modi’s populist campaign in the national elections of 2014 allowed the BJP to break social and regional barriers by attracting voters from the so-called scheduled or historically disadvantaged classes—the Dalits and Adivasis—and regions where the BJP had not previously been dominant to add to its core Hindu, upper caste, and Hindi-speaking support base to secure an outright majority in the Lok Sabha or national parliament. And not to be discounted in his rise to power is the BJP’s skillful deployment of social media, which was also utilized to intimidate critics to silence after the elections.⁴⁷

Four years into his five-year term in 2018, Modi retained the image of a pro-market reformer who was injecting a new dynamism to India’s economy. This was despite the damage to the economy, particularly the rural economy, of his sudden move in 2016 to demonetize the currency, that is, making 500 and 1,000 rupee notes non-legal tender, allegedly to eliminate counterfeiting, curb terrorism, and force the destruction of cash that people hid to stop paying taxes.⁴⁸

The Real Gujarat Model

To many foreign observers, the image of an economic-growth focused government is hard to reconcile with communal violence, the incidence of which now outstrips that recorded during the BJP regime under Atal Bihari Vajpayee from 1998-2004. To others, however, this is the real “Gujarat model,” one that promotes neoliberal economic growth along with ideological hegemony and communal violence.

The three thrusts of this strategy, which was honed in Gujarat by Modi, complement rather than contradict one another. The first prong, cultivating a pro-growth image, is meant to win investors, disarm the skeptical, and win over the middle class.

The second prong aims to normalize Hindu nationalist discourse, with the “public discursive space...being carefully occupied by imagery and propaganda on issues of Hindutva.”⁴⁹

The third prong is informal encouragement of violent actions against minorities while formally decrying them, what many have characterized as the Modi government’s “wink and nod attitude” towards acts of violence by Hindu nationalist mobs. Not surprisingly, as one critical observer notes, “Cow protection vigilante groups have become ubiquitous, and have lynched Muslims for allegedly selling or eating beef. Attacks on

Christians, rare in the past, are more frequent and widespread. Most disturbing, the BJP chose a notoriously anti-Muslim cleric as chief minister after winning elections in India’s largest state.”⁵⁰

While nothing of the scale of the 2002 pogrom in Gujarat has occurred since Modi took office, violence against Muslims has become routinized and normalized.⁵¹ According to human rights crusader Harsh Mander, Muslims are “today’s castaways, political orphans with no home...

[against whom] open expressions of hatred and bigotry have become the new normal, from schools to universities, work places to living rooms, internet to political rallies.”⁵² Most of the more than 40 people reported in newspapers to have been victims or lynching over the last four years on suspicion of slaughtering, skinning, or transporting cattle, the Hindu nationalists’ sacred beast, have been Muslims.⁵³ Hatred against Muslims has been deliberately cultivated by false claims like Muslims engaging

Hindu nationalism is an ideological movement. But doctrine is just part of the reason for its success.

in “love jihad,” that is seducing and Islamizing Hindu girls, so that they can give birth to more Muslims in order to eventually tip the demographic balance in their favor.⁵⁴

Despite efforts to tweak or rhetorically “soften” Hinduism’s doctrinal bias against lower caste groups and enlist them in the struggle against Muslims and Christians, which will be discussed below, Hindu nationalist violence against Dalits

and Adivasis continues, one of them a much publicized killing in Modi's home state of Gujarat of a Dalit for riding a horse.⁵⁵ Moreover, sectarianism aside,

[the] Modi era is witnessing concerted assaults on dissent not seen since the 1975–77 Emergency. Laws against sedition have been used to arrest student union leaders for protesting the execution of a convicted terrorist. The same laws facilitated the arrest of Muslims accused of cheering for Pakistan in a cricket match. Journalists have been killed, subjected to legal harassment and attacked by police. Civil society leaders associated with secular values have been assassinated. Statues of leaders associated with secularism have been torn down.⁵⁶

Three prominent members of the secular intelligentsia have been assassinated in the last few years: Marxist intellectual Govind Padharinath Pansare, the playwright Malleshappa Kalburgi, and the crusading woman journalist Gauri Lankesh.⁵⁷ Many have been intimidated into silence, while those who continue to speak out are subjected to cyber vitriol, like author Arundhati Roy, whom one BJP MP said should be used as a human shield by the Indian Army in Kashmir.⁵⁸

Another critic writes, “The Modi regime wields far greater legal and extra-legal coercive power than enjoyed by any ruling party in post-independence India. It uses every possible constitutional-legal power *sans* the constraints imposed by democratic conventions: dismissal of unfriendly state governments, use of CBI [Central Bureau of Investigation] and other investigative agencies and, of course, the use of armed forces. This is

supplemented by the use of state apparatus for extra-legal coercive measures: harassment and persecution of political and ideological adversaries, protection to vigilante groups and the misuse of anti-terror laws. The most pernicious aspect of the BJP's use of coercive state apparatus is the silent, everyday form of surveillance, intimidation and infiltration.”⁵⁹

While the use of the state's security forces has been an important element in the Hindu right's repertoire of repression and violence, a special role is played by mob violence. Lynchings have usually been carried out by Hindu mobs inflamed by rumors about the identity or actions of the victims, usually in relation to the slaughter or transport of cows, which are invested with a sacred identity by hardline Hindus. These lynchings have been gruesome affairs, with the attackers usually filming the incidents and circulating them on the internet. In what Harsh Mander describes as a particularly horrifying incident in Jharkand, the mob stops the car of a Muslim and accuses him of transporting a cow. He is filmed being beaten to death, the laughing faces of his attackers appearing in the video that is uploaded even as they lynch and burn his car. His young son, notes Mander, “receives the video of his father being lynched on his mobile even as the lynching is underway.”⁶⁰ In this connection, the use of information technology to spread and promote lynchings and riots is a practice that the Hindu right has become particularly adept at, with devastating consequences, as when the uploading of a fake video by a BJP legislator in Uttar Pradesh purportedly showing a Muslim mob murdering a Hindu youth provoked riots in the city of Muzaffarnagar that took 47 lives and displaced 40,000 people.⁶¹

Lynchings are not aberrations or deviations from their political project, as senior BJP and regime officials are wont to claim. In fact, claims Ashik Swain, lynching serves the function of enforcing “inter-group control and to keep the idea and practice of upper-caste Hindu domination.” In this context, it does not matter whether the victim is guilty of wrongdoing or not—the lynching serves a larger political objective.⁶²

Christophe Jaffrelot lays out three additional reasons why vigilantism has become so widespread under the BJP regime, rooting it in the evolving synthesis of Hindutva ideology and populism:

First, the RSS, since its inception, intended to transform society from the inside by infusing in it its own sense of discipline, which it thought was necessary to defend the Hindus more effectively...Secondly, Hindu nationalists claim to represent society at large and do not want the state to prevail over society. The latter has to regulate itself, as the emphasis on social order and “harmony”—or hierarchy—in the Hindutva doxa suggests. This approach gives the job of policing a greater legitimacy. After all, the people’s will is beyond the law; it is the law...This facet of Hindu nationalism has clear affinities with the populist repertoire.



In 2016, two cattle traders were lynched by a mob in Jharkhand (Image Credit: NewsClick)

For the populist leader, the people prevail over the rule of law and public institutions at large. In fact, the vigilantes and their leader supremo (a key component in every populist dispensation) are on the same wavelength for this very reason: They overwhelm public institutions and neutralise them...Last but not least, the fact that the vigilantes “do the job” is very convenient for the rulers. The state is not guilty of violence since this violence is allegedly spontaneous and if the followers of Hinduism are taking the law into their hands, it is for a good reason—for defending their religion. The moral and political economies of this arrangement are even more sophisticated: The state cannot harass the minorities openly, but by letting vigilantes do so, it keeps majoritarian feelings satisfied.⁶³

Jaffrelot’s observations underline not simply a collusion between right wing movements and the state, but the increasing subordination of the administrative and repressive apparatuses of the state to “Hindu civil society.” This trend is supported by the fact in a great many cases of lynching the police turns a blind eye, in some cases even prodding the attackers or lodging a case against the dead victims for “provoking the people.”⁶⁴ The parallel to the rise to power of fascism in Italy, where state

security forces turned a blind or sympathetic eye to the murders or beatings of socialists taking place before them, is striking. In India, one sees a synergy between the elected regime, acting from above, and its “civil society” allies pushing from below to neutralize and eventually take over and transform the administrative and security machineries of the state. In this connection, it

must be noted that Prime Minister Modi’s first recorded disapproval of lynchings was registered only in August 2018.⁶⁵

Challenging the Idea of India

In one of the most insightful analyses of the way Hindu nationalism has transformed the Indian political, social, and cultural landscape, Yogendra Yadav says that what India faces at this point may “not be ‘fascism’ in a textbook sense, but likely something different if not worse.”⁶⁶ What the country faces is a deep and comprehensive challenge to the idea of India itself. It is

worth quoting in full his sober exposition of the different dimensions of this challenge:

It is hard to outline the features of this evolving deformity, but some of the elements can be anticipated. The political system could be ‘competitive authoritarianism’ where representative democracy and party

Lynching serves the function of enforcing “inter-group control and to keep the idea and practice of upper-caste Hindu domination”

competition would be limited to episodes of elections, with the playing field severely skewed in favor of one party. In between elections, it would resemble an authoritarian system with a presidential form of governance, severe curtailment of civil liberties, and a higher threshold of tolerance for deviations from constitutionally mandated procedures.

Concentration of power would take many forms: state power into the Union government, governmental power into the ruling party, and the power of the party into the hands of one person. Development would mean a no-nonsense rule of...capital, with occasional populist discount but minimum 'hindrance' from ecological considerations. On the diversity front, it would be a non-theocratic majoritarian rule with minor tweaking of some of the secular laws but effective delineation of the hierarchy of religious communities. The existing system of affirmative action may be diluted in a series of small steps. For its survival and popular endorsement, this regime would depend on occasional electoral endorsement, informal regimentation of the media, crushing of dissent, ongoing crusades against 'internal enemies' and a possible military adventure. To sum up, we may be looking at the mutilation of the idea of India.⁶⁷

Modi, says Yadav, is the crystallization of the many-sided hegemony of Hindu nationalism, one who occupies "a unique point of intersection of multiple lines and embodies the opposition to the idea of India." He represents a "constellation of forces, not all of which draw energy from the RSS-Jan Sangh-BJP lineage."⁶⁸

While there was nothing inevitable about his ascent to power in 2014, Modi is not an accident or aberration. We are not just dealing with someone who happens to have won an election and captured state power. His popularity has faced its first crisis in the fourth year of his government. The BJP's victory and Modi's rise to power has been accompanied by a realignment in the social basis of politics and a shift in the spectrum of public opinion. Thus, the challenge to the idea of India comes from a force that is at once widespread, well entrenched and popular. The Modi regime should be characterized as a hegemonic power since it combines state power with street power, electoral dominance with ideological legitimacy...

This coercion draws its legitimacy from the BJP's growing electoral dominance. The BJP may not match the Congress in its heyday of one-party dominance, but it does resemble the Congress during its one-party salience period in the 1980s. Despite reversals in Delhi and Bihar, the story of the BJP since its spectacular performance in the Lok Sabha election of 2014 is one of expansion and growth. It has spread to virtually every nook and cranny of India, including the hill states of the North East, and is a force to reckon with even in the coastal belt from Kerala to Bengal, though it is as yet in no position to win elections. The organizational machine, the election machine and the propaganda machine put together make the BJP the most formidable political force to emerge in recent times.⁶⁹

Yadav argues that it would be a mistake to attribute Modi and the BJP's hegemonic power just to its

political dominance and coercive capabilities. Central to it is its having “secured moral, cultural and ideological legitimacy.”⁷⁰

The BJP’s and Modi’s continuing popularity in opinion polls draws upon something deeper than an approval of its governmental performance. The packaging and positioning of the PM’s image as ‘hardworking’, ‘tough’, ‘selfless’ and ‘driven by larger national goals’ has more takers than many would care to admit.

The BJP has successfully shifted the entire spectrum of public opinion towards its ideology. It has more or less captured key symbols of nationalism, Hinduism and our cultural heritage. The demons invented by the BJP troll brigade—‘anti-national’, ‘westernized’, ‘secular’, ‘enemies within’—have come to acquire a life of their own. To be sure, Modi’s legitimacy is categorically different from the deeper ethical appeal of a Gandhi or a Nehru, or even the legitimacy of the Congress in the post-independence era. In a sense, a typical BJP supporter is saying, ‘We may not be ethical as per the highest standards; but what the hell, why do we need to be saints?’ A latent societal meanness has found a legitimate political outlet.

However, the BJP’s hegemony is far from total.

Its coercive power is frustrated by the endemic inefficiencies and the notoriously modest capacity of the Indian state. Its electoral dominance peters out at the geographical and the social peripheries. The BJP is not a serious contender in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, West Bengal and smaller

states like Tripura, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland and, of course, the Kashmir Valley.

This hegemony is predicated on the exclusion of the Muslims and mostly Christians as well. The inclusion of Dalits is still tentative, the peasantry’s association is still tenuous as is its hold over the youth. For all its seeming ideological dominance, it is yet to find acceptance among the intellectual elite, both in English and Indian languages. None of this takes away from the fact of BJP’s hegemony. But it does point to spaces available for counter-hegemonic action.⁷¹

Obstacles to Hegemony

In this regard, not to be underestimated is the opposition to Hindu nationalism that could come from the Dalits and Adivasis, the so-called “untouchables” and “tribals” who constitute some 20 per cent of the population. Sikhs are also a potential source of opposition owing to their growing resentment at attempts to expropriate their venerated figures into the Hindutva pantheon and the push on them to “return to the Hindu fold.” In the assessment he made over sixty years ago of the prospects of fascism in India, Barrington Moore, Jr., wrote that:

One possible reason for the weakness of the Hindu variant of fascism to date may be the fragmentation of the Hindu world along caste, class, and ethnic lines. Thus a characteristically fascist appeal addressed to one segment would antagonize others, while a more general appeal, by taking on some color of universal pan-humanism, begins to lose its fascist qualities.⁷²

Recent developments appear to confirm this observation. These sectors, who were systematically discriminated against in traditional Hindu culture, have increasingly discovered that the BJP and the Hindu nationalists are deadly serious about reversing the gains they made in terms of improving their political, economic, and cultural status in the secular, pluralistic Indian order that is now threatened. Not only are affirmative action policies to rectify historical injustice being aggressively challenged by the BJP, but the strict implementation of cow protection laws by the Modi government has exposed Dalits and Adivasis engaged in the cattle industry throughout India to violence from Hindu upper caste mobs. Moreover, even a key law meant to protect Dalits from violence, the 1989 SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act, under which anyone accused of committing an atrocity against the members of the scheduled castes and tribes is denied bail, has now been gutted, with the Supreme Court of India's recent ruling barring immediate arrest of those accused of violence against SCs and STs. The significance of this act was underlined by one observer:

Over the years, this act became a big problem for casteist forces in India who want to maintain the oppression of Dalits and other underprivileged communities. The RSS has been training its cadre for decades to oppose any form of social change and suppress any attempts to create a caste-free India, often through violence and intimidation. To continue with their agenda, they needed a mechanism to weaken the Atrocities Act and ensure the Hindu "vigilantes" who attack Dalits would not face imprisonment.⁷³

But the ability of the Modi government to coopt at least some parts of the Dalit and Adivasi communities must not be underestimated. As noted earlier, Modi was able to win a section of the Dalit vote in the 2014 elections. This stemmed from a dual strategy. One prong was to convince the emerging Dalit middle class that Modi's election would redound to their economic fortunes. The other was a tactical underplaying of the caste issue. As one account put it, "Caste assertion has not been the strategy of the BJP, as it once was. As a matter of fact, on the one hand, they have aggressively negotiated with caste groups, and, on the other, presented the image of a single, powerful leader. Dissociating the image of the leader from the history of the RSS has allowed them strategic maneuverability."⁷⁴ A related tactic was to ideologically downplay caste conflicts and rhetorically appeal to all Hindus irrespective of caste to unite against the so-called common enemy: Muslims.⁷⁵

Opportunism has also marked the Hindu nationalists' approach toward women. The Modi government has cast itself in the role of being the defenders of the rights of Muslim women, launching a campaign against the practice of "triple talaq," that is, the practice among some Muslim men of simply uttering the word "talaq" ("I divorce you") to their wives three times for a divorce to take place. At the same time, the RSS and other Hindu nationalists subscribed to the highly patriarchal Sanskrit text, the Manusmriti, which opposes inter-class marriage and emphasized women's subordination to men. The Hindu nationalist view on women was expressed by Adithyanath, the hardline chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state,

who justified his opposition to the idea of reserving 33 percent of parliamentary and assembly seats for women, with the following argument:

Assess and then decide whether women who are active in politics and public life like men, whether in this process they may not lose their importance and role as mothers, daughter, and sisters...If men acquire women-like qualities, they become gods but when women acquire men-like qualities, they become [rakshasa] demon-like.⁷⁶

In short, what opposition forces in India face is a highly ideological nationalist force whose agenda

is being pushed by a highly skilled pragmatic leadership that can make tactical adjustments within what is nevertheless a determined strategic pursuit of the objective of recreating an imagined Hindu civilization purged of the “historical shame,” “aberrations,” and “injustices” imposed by the Muslim, Christian, and western secular enemies. Denunciations of violence, violations of human and democratic rights, and corruption on the part of its fanatical adherents will not stop the right-wing wave, many liberal and progressive partisans now realize. What is needed, they say, is nothing less than a comprehensive progressive vision for India that is not seen merely as an apology for liberal democracy’s failures.



Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India: Is his tenure the beginning of the BJP’s 50-year reign, as predicted by his comrade Amit Shah?

Conclusion

In conclusion, a number of characteristics of the rise of the Hindu nationalist right might be made in a comparative context.

First, what is transpiring in India is a counterrevolution. It may not be principally a class-based counterrevolution, and it may be protracted compared to the other cases studied in this volume, but it is a comprehensive and fundamentalist enterprise that seeks to overturn a liberal democratic, secular, and pluralistic order. It is a “total” counterrevolution that has transformative goals at the levels of the ideological, cultural, political, social, and economic.

Second, like all counterrevolutions, but perhaps more than the others discussed in this study, it looks back to an idealized past in order to justify and legitimize old and new mechanisms and processes of domination.

Third, while there is certainly a reactionary class dimension to Hindu nationalism, that is, that it is partly an attempt by the threatened privileged castes to reassert their social dominance in the face of the gains made by the lower castes and classes in India’s liberal democratic order, that is not the whole story. In opportunistically championing neoliberal reform, the Hindu right was able to tap into the dissatisfaction of the Indian bourgeoisie,

formerly a pillar of the Congress regime, with the state restrictions to their activities and with what they saw as economic stagnation under Nehruvian “socialism.” Equally significant in this regard has been the Hindu nationalists’ ability to capture the imagination and support of the urban middle classes or, to use Jaffrelot’s terms, “neo-middle classes,” that are, in economic terms, among the beneficiaries of neoliberal reform or who expect to benefit from

it, and, in cultural-ideological terms, are alienated from the secular and “rationalistic” ideological scaffolding of the Nehruvian liberal democrat cum “socialist” order. Also noteworthy is the fact that In its approach to the lower classes and castes, including Dalits and Adivasis, Hindu nationalism falls in line with Barrington Moore’s observation that fascism is an effort by the upper classes to “make reaction popular.”⁷⁷

Fourth, as in Indonesia, Chile, and the Philippines, there is an eliminationist dimension

to the Hindu counterrevolution. Not just political subordination of the Communist-led left but its total physical extermination was the aim of the counterrevolutions in Indonesia and Chile, while in the Philippines, drug users fill the role of Jews or vermin to be stamped out in the political project of Rodrigo Duterte, which will be discussed in the next section. In India, tactical considerations currently dictate that Muslims and Christians are conceded temporarily the informal status of being second class citizens in the emergent Hindu political universe. However, Hindutva ideology considers especially

A number of characteristics of the rise of the Hindu nationalist right might be made in a comparative context

the Muslim community—numbering 172 million or 14.2 per cent of the population--as an alien element grafted into the current political order, as a force that cannot be absorbed into a Hindu social and political order. Thus the strategic thrust of Hindu nationalist ideology is the Muslims' physical elimination, and, as the Gujarat riots in 2002 revealed, this is a solution that is pursued when the opportunity presents itself.

Fifth, the counterrevolution has a heated mass base, not just an electoral base, one that is diverse, with some parts it organized into paramilitary formations and others in loose vigilante groupings. While some, like the RSS, mainly provide ideological and political leadership, others engage in actions in which they take the law into their own hands, often at the slightest or false pretext, to “teach” the targeted community a lesson, as well as to build solidarity in their own ranks. In a very real sense, this is a solidarity steeped in bloodshed. It should be added that the social media, in particular Facebook and Whatsapp, have become important tools used by the Hindu right to inflame its base.

Sixth, and related to the previous point, as with all the counterrevolutionary forces discussed here, violence is a central instrument in the Hindu nationalist project and its employment is an ever present threat, one that is constrained only by tactical political and legal considerations. When the facts on the ground change and there is a good chance of exercising or supporting violence without much political cost or serious prosecution, then violence is a method that is not disdained. For the Hindu right, one of the key lessons they have derived from their period of ascendancy over the last few years is that the changing correlation of forces can allow even a criminal promoter or enabler of genocide as Narendra Modi to become prime minister.

Finally, in the relationship between the right wing mass movement and the state, the latter becomes gradually subordinate to the former, with the representatives of the state, as in Italy, turning a blind eye to the actions of the mob or even participating in them, as in many cases of lynching. But what is especially noteworthy in the dynamics of the state-civil society relationship in India is the synergy between the elected regime, acting from above, and its “civil society” allies pushing from below, to neutralize and eventually take over and transform the administrative and security machineries of the state to serve the political and ideological ends of the Hindu nationalist movement. The parallels to Fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany are striking.

NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Walden Bello is co-chair of the board and co-founder of Focus on the Global South. He is also currently the International Adjunct Professor of Sociology at the Department of Sociology of the State University of New York at Binghamton. He served as a member of the House of Representatives of the Philippines from 2009 to 2016 and made the only recorded resignation on principle in the history of the Philippine Congress. He is the author of 23 books, including the forthcoming volume in which this study appears titled *State and Counterrevolution: Explorations into the Rise of the Right in the South and North* (Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing 2018).

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