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Hindu Nationalism or Proto-Fascism: the Nature of Hindu Communal Politics in India*

This paper uses material which was presented in a lecture in 1993, in the aftermath of the destruction of the Babri mosque in December, 1992. Certain questions implicit in that lecture have acquired new importance with the acquisition of central power by the Hindu chauvinist party, Bharatiya Janta Party, or BJP for short. What follows is an attempt to make these questions explicit and also to find some answers.

On 6th December, 1992, a sixteenth-century mosque in the mediaeval town of Ayodhya was destroyed in broad daylight by a fanatical Hindu mob. This was the culmination of a campaign launched by the Sangh Parivar, i.e. "the family" of organisations built around the RSS [Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangha, i.e., National Volunteer Organisation], ostensibly a cultural organisation meant to propagate and nurture Hindu values. To understand the true nature of the Hindu chauvinist movement in India and of the party that is the major partner in the central government of the country today, one needs to understand the history and nature of the RSS. The Hindu chauvinist movement describes itself as the Sangh Parivar, the Sangh family, consisting of a number of organisations structured around the Sangh, i.e., the RSS, which embodies its ideology and provides its cadres. The key members of the BJP, including the present Prime Minister and the Home Minister, are also members of the RSS and have reiterated their loyalty to the organisation.

The RSS was banned for some time after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi because it was suspected of complicity in the crime. Its leader, Golwalkar, was imprisoned but eventually released and the ban on the RSS was withdrawn because Nehru's liberal conscience was uneasy about banning political parties and organisations. Besides, the evidence in the hands of the state prosecutor was not enough to prove the RSS's responsibility for the assassination. In short, the usual difficulties of a liberal democracy in dealing with conspiracies helped the RSS. Incidentally, the

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assassin, Godse, was long a member of the organisation and remains a respected cult figure to the Parivar, who never repudiated him.

Intertwined with the question of Hindu chauvinism's true nature is the related issue of its appeal. Some observers have interpreted the popularity of the movement and the mass hysteria provoked by the agitation over the Ramjanambhoomi issue as conclusive evidence for the centrality of religious concerns in the Indian psyche and hence the absurdity of the experiment to create a secular state in India, apparently successful for nearly fifty years. The narrative which follows provides answers to both questions – the true nature of the RSS and its objectives and the reasons for their sudden popularity.

The Parivar projects the belief that a Rama temple once stood on the sacred spot where the incarnate deity was born. Further, according to their canon, it was destroyed by Babar, the founder of the Mughal empire whose general, Mir Baqi, constructed a mosque in its place. Replacement of the mosque with a Rama temple, an enterprise to which it was hoped all good Hindus would contribute has been given top priority in the Sangh Parivar's agenda. There are other mosques standing on the site of ancient temples which have to be similarly replaced. The full list is said to cover some three thousand items.

The destruction of the Babri mosque has been interpreted in sections of the Western press as one more episode in the timeless conflict between two mutually antithetical monoliths, the Indian Muslims and their hereditary enemies, the Hindus. I submit that we have enough evidence proving beyond reasonable doubt that the mass hysteria over the Babri mosque-Ramjanmabhoomi controversy is not a symptom of religious revivalism or any spontaneous resurgence of Hindu concern for the honour of their ancient faith. It was in effect the successful end result of a sustained organisational and propaganda campaign launched by the Viswa Hindu Parishad, its parent body the RSS, the latter's political front, the BJP and many affiliates such as the activist youth organisation, Bajrang Dal, the association of sadhus known as the Sant Sabha, etc. A local dispute going back to the 19th century, that had aroused little interest in the rest of the country was adopted by the VHP as a national cause of the Hindus in 1985. The long campaign of mobilisation was structured around newly-invented rituals, such as the laying of a foundation stone, the call to every Hindu village for the contribution of a brick for the projected temple, motorised chariot journeys by the BJP leader Advani in an attempt to raise consciousness, a barrage of propaganda, including some of exceptional virulence in their anti-Muslim rhetoric and, of course, mobilisation and recruitment of RSS cadres, whose strength was estimated at 2 1/2 to 3 million in 1992. This sustained campaign has succeeded in converting an

issue of no relevance to the multiple problems of contemporary Indian life into the central concern of Indian politics.

Statements like the one I have just made have been ascribed by the supporters of the movement to the Westernised pseudo-secularist's total incomprehension of *Hindutva*, the essential content of the Hindu ethos, all that makes a good Hindu tick. If such ascription is correct, one would like to ask why Hindu passions on this issue lay dormant until the VHP adopted it as the central plank in their programme. Mosques built on the sites of destroyed temples are not very rare in India and the country also has an unfortunate record of communal frenzy, at times without provocation from outside. Yet we know of no incident in which Hindus, eager to restore the glory of their faith, have tried to destroy such mosques and replace them with temples. After all, even Ramlalla, baby Rama, allegedly manifested himself at the temple site as early as 1949. Yet until 1985, good Hindus showed no excessive anxiety to replace the Babri mosque with a Rama temple. And since the destruction of the mosque, we have seen no sign of Hindu enthusiasm for recovering other sites where mosques stand in place of ancient temples. Why?

The answer is provided by an anecdote recorded by the young Harvard scholar, Nico Blank, in his report of dialogues with the people of Ayodhya. A wrestler turned ascetic who had tended one of the many Rama temples in the town for a period of years told him that a holy place was not a suitable site for conflicts in any form. Mrs. Sahi, a local tea vendor, had a very different view of the matter. She confessed to a deep hatred of Muslims and gratefully acknowledged that the VHP's campaign had first made her aware of the misdeeds of that hated community.

One central object of the entire exercise was made explicit by Mr. Advani in a statement recorded by a young journalist, Smita Gupta: "We always refer to the disputed structure in Ayodhya as Ramjanmabhoomi (the birthplace of Rama). On the two occasions that the building was stormed, we said that saffron flags had been hoisted on the Babri Masjid. You see, there is no triumph in planting a saffron flag on a temple." After the destruction of the mosque, the RSS mouthpiece Organiser published an interview with the organisation's Secretary, Seshadri. He described the act as "a tremendous morale-booster for the Hindu psyche", "a symbolic self-assertion of the nation's Hindu identity". Such evidence leaves one in very little doubt about the real object of the entire campaign. An issue highlighting the alleged insults inflicted by Muslim rulers on the Hindu faith had been chosen to whip up anti-Muslim sentiments as the basis for forging a Hindu identity. Hence, the destruction of a mosque is not a cause for shame but instead a tremendous morale booster for the Hindu psyche, in effect an act of liberation.

The attitudes reflected in such statements and projections are not sudden aberrations. These have been the basis of an organisation and its ostensibly non-political cultural programme going back to the late twenties. That organisation, the RSS and its many affiliates, have spread their tentacles through six-and-a-half decades of sustained effort. Their quiet growth had gone unnoticed for the most part until it was reflected in the very recent electoral gains of the Hindu party, BJP, and the spectacular extra-parliamentary activities of the Sangh Parivar since 1985. These gains and activities have been rendered possible by a specific and dangerous historical conjunction, a theme to which I return later. They do not derive from devotional concerns deeply rooted in the Hindu psyche, otherwise such concerns would have been powerfully manifest at a much earlier date. Besides, the very real phenomenon of Hindu devotionism is traditionally expressed in a quietist, nonconfrontational idiom. And the alleged spontaneous revival paradoxically sought exclusive expression through the Parivar's carefully orchestrated campaign for the destruction of mosques and their replacement by temples. The central focus is on alleged historic wrongs and the fomenting of hatred against a religious minority.

A tract produced by a group of Indian scholars tracing the history of the RSS and its affiliates projects in brilliant detail a sinister record of ideology and organisation structured around xenophobia, the project for a nation state that would relegate non-Hindus to the status of a subject population. Savarkar first spelled out this new notion of Hindutva in 1923, when he declared that only those who thought of India as the Holy Land as well as the fatherland could be true patriots. Since this joy was inaccessible to Muslims, their patriotism should always be suspect. In 1925, in the wake of extensive communal riots on a scale without precedent, Dr Hedgewar established the RSS in direct response to the new quest for disciplined cadres of Hindu communalism. The founder's analysis of the political situation which necessitated the new organisation is illuminating: "The yavan-snakes reared on the milk of non-co-operation were provoking riots with their poisonous hissing". The riots were Muslim riots because in every single case "it is they who start them". Thus "it became evident that Hindutva was Rashtriyatva", i.e., Hinduness was the same as nationalism. It was hence necessary for dedicated Hindu youths to organise in self-defence. Golwalkar, who succeeded the good doctor to the leadership of RSS, developed the notion of cultural nationalism as distinct from territorial nationalism. The idea that those who lived within the geographical boundary of a country constituted the nation was rejected.

He defined his notion of cultural nationalism along following lines: "German national pride has now become the topic of the day. To keep up

the purity of the nation and its culture, Germany shocked the world by purging the country of the Semitic races – the Jews. National pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown 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 Hinduism to learn and profit by ... From this standpoint sanctioned by the experience of shrewd old nations, the non-Hindu people in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and revere Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but the glorification of the Hindu nation ... in one word they must cease to be foreigners or may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment, not even citizen's rights." He went on to castigate the minority treaties laid down by the League of Nations on the ground that these would confer unlimited rights on the minorities and Hindu national life would "run the risk of being shattered". Of the five criteria of nationhood he laid down, race was the most important. Hence the need to equate Hindus with Aryans and claim that Aryans did not come from outside the holy land of Bharatavarsha. The latter belief is central to the version of Indian history taught in schools which were controlled by the BJP state governments. Interestingly, Guruji Golwalkar rejected all Western ideologies as alien. Fascism was the one exception. And perhaps inspired by the ideal of greater Germany, the map of Hindu India on the jacket of his book included Afghanistan, Burma and Sri Lanka.

In recent RSS propaganda there have been attempts to explain away such ideas and suggest that Guruji actually revised his earlier opinions. In fact, the minor verbal changes in later editions of his book do not modify the pristine purity of Guruji's ideals and these have never been directly repudiated by the RSS or BJP leadership. As the BJP leader Malkani helpfully explained in a television interview, many Indians admire Hitler. He did not explain if he shared that popular Indian preference.

In effect the RSS ideology implies a total rejection of the composite nationalism enshrined in the constitution of India. In 1949, Golwalkar criticised the Indian constitution as unBharat, anticipating the VHP's more explicit description, unHindu. Earlier, Guruji had interpreted swaraj, the stated goal of the movement for India's independence, as "our raj". But who were we? His answer, expectedly, was only the Hindus. The animosity to the national movement and its vision of unity transcending ethnic boundaries, so prominent in Hedgewar's statements, was intensified when the All India Congress Committee announced in 1931 that free India would be a secular democratic republic. The RSS was virtually absent from the mass movements of the 1920s and '30s. These move-

ments for the achievement of national independence under Gandhi's leadership were unacceptable, because they were unlikely to lead to the establishment of a Hindu *Rashtra*, their central objective. As already noted, Hedgewar unequivocally condemned the Non-co-operation-Khilafat movement because it had encouraged "the yavana-snake". The enemy of the nation, as perceived by the RSS, was not colonial rule, but the Muslims of India. Absent from the Quit India movement, the RSS cadres were very prominent in the riots of 1946–47.

The core doctrine of the movement today is stated succinctly in the slogan their cadres shout every morning at the branch or shakha meetings, "Hindustan Hinduka, nahi kisika baap ka". Hindustan belongs to the Hindus, not to anybody else's father. Hindus constitute the nation. Their faith, in its unique catholicism, is superior to all other religions. All other cultural traditions in India survived by Hinduising themselves. Oxbridge-trained pseudo-secular and deracine nationalists like Nehru had introduced a pseudo-secular constitution and the country was now ruled by pseudo-secularist traitors to the Hindu nation who appeased Muslims as vote banks. The truly secular Hindu *Rashtra* would offer true protection to the non-Hindus. RSS cadres often explain that as the followers of the world's most tolerant faith they of course love Muslims; in fact they love even insects. Bhandari, one of BJP's top ranking leaders, pointed out that there are some gentlemen even among Muslims. Unfortunately, Islam being a proselytising religion, all Muslims were necessarily intolerant. And India was in danger of becoming a Muslim majority state. They will soon outnumber Hindus by means of their highly fecund polygamy. Less legitimately, being lustful by nature, they would rape Hindu women, and thereby add to their own numbers, which will be further augmented by migrations from Pakistan and Bangladesh. Pakistan will eventually invade and conquer India aided by the majority Muslim population of the once-Hindu land. The pseudo-secularism of the Oxbridge-trained pseudo-Hindus is part of this treacherous grand design.

The joint authors of the tract "Khaki Shorts, Saffron Flags" were told by two leaders of the BJP that the ideal Hindu *Rashtra* had to be an absolutist state in which the individual must merge his/her identity. Back in 1981, when the Janta alliance broke up, Nanaji Deshmukh attacked parliamentary politics as opportunistic. Much earlier, in 1946, Mahatma Gandhi described the RSS as a "communal body with a totalitarian outlook". Its declared principle of allegiance to one leader, "ek chalak anuvartita" and the insistence on total obedience validates this assessment. When asked what they would do if asked by their *adhikari*, the officer in command, to jump into a well, the cadres are expected to answer, "We shall do so immediately."

This uncompromising ideology is dispensed through the shakhas or branches. The recruits are boys of 12 to 15. Indoctrination takes the form of handing down simple messages of Hindu glory and tales of resistance to Muslim tyranny. Discussion or complex ideas do not form any part of the bauddhic or intellectual sessions. An educational programme was initiated to complement the training of cadres as far back as the 1950s. There are provisions for primary and secondary schools, as well as informal schooling for slum children. The total number of these institutions was about 4000 in 1993. Students listen to frequent lectures on the duty to die for one's own religion. Indian culture, as dispensed in these schools, again emphasises Hindu resistance to Muslim tyranny. Non-Hindu heroes are no part of that culture or the iconography of Indian heroism displayed on school walls. This particular version of Indian culture has now penetrated schools and colleges run by older Hindu reform movements like the Arya Samaj. The emphasis throughout is on a thousand-year-old struggle for Hindu independence. That heroic tale virtually excludes the resistance to British rule led by pseudo-secularists. A new emphasis surfaces in the prescription for the Hindu's ritual duty of pilgrimage. Sites desecrated by Muslim rulers feature almost exclusively in the RSS list of holy places.

The RSS long remained quietly in the background as a purely cultural organisation. Its gradually unfolding programme has been one of penetrating organisations who share their basic outlook and then create a number of affiliates encompassing many areas of Hindu social life and political action. In 1931, the youth wing of the Hindu Mahasabha merged with the RSS, giving the latter, till then largely confined to upper-caste Marhatas, a chance to penetrate the Hindi belt. In 1941, when Shyamaprasad Mukherii set up his new Hindu Party Jan Sangh, Guruji Golwalkar sent four trained cadres of the RSS to assist him. This committed band included the mild-mannered Advani and the liberal Bajpeyee. Bhandari, who has met gentlemen even among Muslims, was a third member of the group. It is worth remembering that none of these gentlemen has repudiated their guru's high ideals or his professed admiration for Hitler. Jan Sangh, reborn as BJP, a formidable mass party, borrows its cadres and ideology from the RSS. As Bhandari helpfully explained, RSS is the organisational, BJP the political and VHP the social wing of the same Hindu nation. Like Brahma, Vishnu and Siva the three are parts of one indivisible reality. It would be a serious mistake ever to forget this fact. The VHP, which spearheaded the campaign to reclaim Ramjanmabhoomi, was born in 1964 when Golwalkar met a group of Hindu ascetics and heads of religious organisations in the quest for Hindu unity and a new legitimacy for the RSS. The Hindu Sadhu is now a political animal and their deliberations on the question of reclaiming the three holy sites at Ayodhya,

Mathura and Kashi are projected in the VHP video cassettes as “urgent devotional necessity”. Thanks to the VHP initiative, taped speeches of the firebrand female ascetics, Ritambhara and Uma Bharati, who delight in referring to Muslims with an unmentionable epithet, were broadcast in Hindu temples to gatherings of often innocent faithful. The saints are not very easy to control. After their Ayodhya victory, an enterprise in which they were prominently visible, they demanded the immediate abrogation of India’s pseudo-secular constitution. An embarrassed BJP repudiated that demand. Evidently, they are willing to wait.

The VHP’s Foreign Co-ordination Committee has projected the brilliant idea that Hindus all over the world constitute a single country, divided for its purposes into thirty odd branches. The British Committee funded by very wealthy expatriates has established an association innocuously named Friends of India. At one of its seminars, to which some Hindu academics were invited, the VHP version of the Ayodhya temple’s history was presented as proven truth. Attempts to question it were shouted down. At home, its department looking after the Ramjanmabhoomi campaign has freely recruited sections of the urban poor at the margin of subsistences who are known to have a very low flashpoint, into their youth wing, the Bajranga Dal. Admittedly, these sections of the urban population have had a role in all mass agitations, but they have also provided the firepower in the subcontinent’s communal riots over the years. It was a clever idea to organise them for an aggressive campaign of communal hatred, but their ardour has been difficult to contain.

However, the chief concern of RSS/VHP is with the educated middle classes. The student wing of BJP, Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, has wielded considerable power in Delhi and other North Indian universities ever since the early 70s. And there are organisations working among women, tribals and importantly, factory workers. The last-named organisation is dedicated specifically to the task of fighting the pernicious doctrine of class war. Maharashtra’s Shiv Sena, originally set up to protect Marathi interests against outsiders like the Tamil clerks in Bombay, has now jumped onto the Hindutva band wagon. Some of its leaders have claimed credit for the destruction of the mosque and smilingly acknowledged that their boys were very active in the anti-Muslim riots in Bombay which followed.

The many-pronged struggle for the eventual establishment of a Hindu Rashtra has produced the largest single organised movement in the country. The efforts spread over many decades are beginning to pay rich dividends. The number of sakhās went up from 8,500 in 1975 to 11,000 in 1977 and reached 20,000 by 1982. In 1981, RSS cadres had reached an estimated one million. The current estimates put the figure at several

times that figure. By 1981, financial contributions amounted to 10 million rupees annually. The current figure is certainly much higher, with nonresident Indians contributing generously to the cause of Hindutva. All contributions, incidentally, are anonymous. The BJP had two seats in parliament in 1984. In 1993, it led the opposition with 119 seats. Now, as the largest single party in Parliament, it leads a coalition government. Its extra-parliamentary power was manifest in the assaults on the Babri mosque.

The movement and the organisations I have discussed have been described by their radical critics, expectedly, as fascist. As Trevor Roper pointed out in an essay, the term fascism has been applied to too wide a range of phenomena to have any clearly identifiable meaning any longer. Except where used simply as political abuse, in his view the term is really relevant only in the context of an industrialised society in the grip of a political and economic crisis, especially after defeat in war. In Europe, to his understanding, it was closely linked to the fear of socialist revolution. Others have pointed out that fascism has mushroomed in industrially backward countries as well, and that the *Führerprinzip* has emerged even in the absence of an outstanding leader.

It is generally agreed that, historically, fascism has been marked by some common characteristics. It is a movement of aggressive nationalism with strong anti-intellectual or non-intellectual overtones. In industrial societies it was the movement of a frightened lower middle class anxious to defend their interests without disturbing the existing social hierarchy. It emphasised the organic character of society and preached a gospel of racial superiority as well as the spoliation of social outgroups. It has sought a break with the existing structure of power and to forge a wholly disciplined state to achieve a new preeminence based on past glory. Everywhere it has been marked by a deep nostalgia for return to a mythical past. In some instances it began in a disorderly way and retained that disorderly and nebulous character throughout its career. Weakness of parliamentary governments has contributed to its emergence. Structurally, it has been based on a coalition of classes, with industrialists generally willing to help, especially after the movement has acquired state power.

This inadequate summary of the shared characteristics of fascism in very different societies is not meant to provide an abstract model of the phenomenon or to explore its affinities with the Indian situation. My object is simply to indicate that in certain historical situations, aggressive nationalism, invoking myths of past glory and racial superiority with strong overtones of xenophobia, has been projected by social classes, who feel threatened. Such emotionally charged movements are usually illiberal, anti-intellectual and totalitarian in inspiration. Based on an alliance

of a broad spectrum of social classes, they profit from the weakness of constitutional regimes and seek to construct a repressive political system and do so, *inter alia*, by exploiting any available seam of hatred against one or another ethnic minority identified as a threat to the nation's well-being. In the rest of this lecture, I shall try to show that the striving for a Hindu Rashtra and the efforts at mobilisation to that end are acquiring the features of such a movement. For a multi-ethnic, poor and at the moment weak parliamentary democracy like India, such a movement, whether it acquires total power or not, has disastrous implications.

To appreciate the nature of the threat, one needs to analyse the nature and origins of Indian nationalism, its political and ideological basis. The colonial discourse on India repeated *ad nauseum* the evident fact of India's ethnic diversity to assert the impossibility of nationhood for India. The ideological construction of Indian nationhood in the nineteenth century by the emerging politicised intelligentsia sought to challenge this colonial perception by emphasising elements of cultural unity in the sub-continent and imagining a past of imperial unity based on a high and superior civilisation. The early versions of this imagined unity focussed almost exclusively on the Hindu elements of past glory. They also projected the conflicts between the mediaeval dynasties of Turkish or Afghan origin and the local Rajput or Maratha chieftains as a struggle for independence by their Hindu ancestors. At a more self-conscious stage in the development of nationalist ideology, the composite character of Indian society, the traditions of tolerance and co-existence, the claims to a unique pattern of unity in diversity, were projected as the basis of Indian nationhood. The Indo-Islamic past was proudly claimed as an integral part of the Indian inheritance. Throughout the years of nationalist agitation for independence in the present century, this ideal of a composite nationhood was a central theme in nationalist mobilisation. The efforts at mobilisation also sought to create and sustain an alliance between all classes in Indian society as a basis for the future independent state. These efforts had achieved a measure of success by the time of independence.

As to the class basis of the newborn Indian state, radical critics may be right in emphasising its exploitative character, but the social revolution which accompanied the end to colonial rule also needs to be underlined. Within a few years, the centuries-old princely India disappeared for good, as did the world of great landlords. A very substantial class of upwardly mobile and increasingly wealthy farmers became a part of the social and political landscape. The intelligentsia benefitted from a remarkably quick expansion of the tertiary sector and higher levels of education. There were 17 universities in India in 1947. There are 140 now and more than 4000 colleges in place of the 200 in the year of independence. The absolute

growth in the industrial sector was quite phenomenal. While some 300 million people are still below the poverty line, in percentage terms, people in that unfortunate position have fallen from some 53% to about 30%. The condition of the marginal peasant has not improved except in one or two states, but the tenant of yesteryear now owns his land. And universal adult suffrage has meant a political revolution whose full impact remains to be analyzed. Since 1979, the poor and illiterate repeatedly exercised their power to throw out regimes unacceptable to them. The untouchable still remains where he was socially, but at least the statute book contains a law that renders the practice of untouchability punishable by rigorous imprisonment. And in recent years, untouchables have been laying claims to a share in political power. Nehru, the misguided socialist, laid the foundations of an infrastructure for agriculture and industry which made India self-sufficient in food probably for the first time in 200 years and which has helped create a relatively affluent class estimated at somewhere between 150 to 200 million.

The end result of the positive and negative developments, and the latter includes a phenomenal increase in population that eats up most of the benefits of economic growth, is the emergence of what Kalecki described as the intermediate state. Such states, according to his analysis, are marked by an unlikely alliance of wealthy farmers, the petty bourgeois, and the capitalists (to which one should add the intelligentsia) as the ruling class. At best, this is an uneasy alliance, for it is difficult to reconcile the interests of these social classes. Besides, they also need to handle the tensions arising from the existence of a vast and ever-growing class of the underprivileged, whose sense of deprivation is now continually exacerbated by their exposure to visual media such as television. One source of the present crisis has to be sought in this particular conjunction of circumstances.

The urban petty bourgeois – shopkeepers, small businessmen, clerks, lower level professionals and the like – are highly politicised by now and share the multiple aspirations of their more fortunate fellow citizens. They also feel excluded from the higher echelons of political and administrative power and social privilege by virtue of their relative disadvantage in matters of education and resources. Their children do not go to the English medium schools and can hardly even dream of education abroad. In the vast Hindi-speaking belt, where the standard of literacy and education is lower than elsewhere, this significant section of the electorate feel that they are excluded from the privileged world of the modern intelligentsia whose language of discourse is in effect English. The world of vernacular, especially Hindi media press and publications, on the other hand, is of little interest to the English-speaking intelligentsia.

One interesting consequence of the expansion of university education has gone unnoticed. It would probably be true to say that, in the great majority of university and university-level institutions in India today, the education dispensed to the bulk of the students is indifferent in quality. English, which remains the main avenue of access to the world of knowledge, is not understood by the bulk of the university-educated in India today. This deficiency has created a new hierarchy among the relatively privileged, a clear division between those whose educational advantage gives them access to careers with high income and status and the others who are excluded from these benefits. Much of the history of political conflicts in modern India is a story of rivalry between the more privileged and the less privileged among the elite groups at given periods in time. This pattern of conflict has acquired a new context and dimension through the educational and socio-economic developments of the last five decades. Political India now has two mutually unrelated worlds of intellectual discourse. When the Indian intellectual contemptuously refers to the Hindi-speaking region as the cow belt and its denizens as ignorant obscurantists, he aggravates the resentment of a politically conscious and powerful social group. He also sharpens the edge of their need for psychological self-assertion. Inflation, scarcity of urban housing and unemployment threaten their fragile hold on a genteel life-style. And the upper-caste component of the urban petty bourgeoisie feel both socially and economically threatened by efforts at positive discrimination in favour of the lower castes, a magnanimity which the more secure elements in the intelligentsia can afford. We have here a fertile ground for ideologies of anti-intellectual nationalism, anger against the Oxbridge-trained pseudo-secularists of RSS propaganda and their alleged protégés, the hated descendants of tyrannical conquerors one reads of in the Hindi textbooks.

The constitution of independent India projected a federal state. In fact, however, the political contingencies of post-independence India produced a highly centralised government. The Nehruvian state has been described, up to a point correctly, as a mandatory dictatorship. Power was vested by popular will in the hands of a charismatic leader. The inheritance of the partition riots, the war with Pakistan and the task of integrating the princely states rendered a concentration of authority at the centre virtually unavoidable. These were not tasks which state governments could have handled on their own. Because the National Congress had virtual monopoly of power in the states down to the early sixties, this centralisation did not create insoluble tensions. Challenges to centralisation were quantitatively speaking a marginal phenomenon.

The mandate for the centre was gradually eroded by the debacle of the China war, increasing corruption in politics, and the rising aspirations of

the political leadership at the state level. In parts of the country, especially the North-east where people had genuine grievances in terms of unfair distribution of resources and power, politically ambitious leaders could mobilise mass support for their aspirations in the name of ethnicity. Much of the tensions which have been identified as centrifugal tendencies were no more than bargaining for a larger share of the national cake, at least to begin with. A classic example is the Sikh demand that a third of the Indian army should be recruited from their community. This does not exactly sound like a desire to break away from the Indian union. To take another example, the protagonists of the Tamil autonomy movement who rejoiced in burning the Indian constitution swore undying faith to the same constitution the day their party was elected to power in the state. Quantitatively speaking, the political consensus in favour of national unity has far outstripped the challenges to that unity in independent India. One reason for this has been the structure of representation within the dominant party, which allowed conflicting aspirations to be accommodated. As non-Congress governments were formed in the states since the mid-sixties, the resolution of centre-state tensions and the conflicting claims of the states have been far more difficult to resolve. The system has yet to develop the necessary resilience to tackle these problems. But it is worth noting that, except in Kashmir and the Punjab, and there for very special reasons, the tensions nowhere reached a point of no return.

The true erosion of consensus really happened in the last phase of Mrs Gandhi's government. In her anxiety to retain personal power and establish a dynasty, she played short-sighted political games dangerously undermining the national consensus. This is how the Sikh demand for a greater measure of autonomy and a larger share of the national cake was transformed into an angry desire for total independence. She also closed the channels of political communication with the Muslims of the Kashmir valley by rigging elections and throwing out the National Conference Government. Furthermore, to consolidate her personal power, she dismantled the structure of elections within her own party. How one single individual succeeded in doing so much damage is a mystery which still remains unresolved. The basic weaknesses in the political system which provided the opportunities for her cynical action have yet to be scrutinised. However, the negative end results of a disastrous regime were accentuated by the final loss of credibility when, after the Bofors scandal, people came to believe that the very centre of authority was corrupt. The charges of corruption against members of the last Congress government were the very last straw.

The erosion of confidence in the central government accentuated another negative development in Indian political life. Nationalist ideology

and the politics of mobilisation in the twenties and thirties had deliberately set about creating a nation based on a sense of unity which would encompass all ethnic elements among the people living within the geographical boundaries of India. That the effort had achieved a measure of success was evident in the electoral successes of the INC since 1937, as well as in the popular enthusiasm for the nationalist leadership. Indian nationalism, always a somewhat nebulous phenomenon, was powerfully expressed in that very evident enthusiasm. In the latter years of Mrs Gandhi's regime, a disillusionment with the political system became an integral part of popular consciousness in India. Sab Chor Hai, "they are all thieves", is an expression heard at every level of society as a description of the country's politicians. The extensive criminalisation of politics, which has a longer history stretching far beyond the latter years of Mrs. Gandhi's rule suggests that the popular perception has a large element of truth.

Nationalism, the emotion based on a sense of belonging to a political community which one is willing to defend with one's own life if necessary, has to be the ultimate foundation of a modern nation state. Anyone who has lived in India under colonial rule and in the early decades of independence knows that this sense of belonging was very much a reality among extensive sections of the population. It was created, as already noted, by the words and deeds of the nationalist movement and sustained as well as developed further through the experiences of representative democracy. The fact that the unlettered masses were not indifferent to the fate of political democracy was proved by the massive turnout to vote Mrs Gandhi out of power and again, two years later, to bring her back after the dismal failure of the Janta coalition. These events were surely the end product of complex processes and the interplay of interests, and not merely triumphs of a popular nationalist concern. But to overlook the anxiety of the Indian masses for the maintenance of acceptable norms at the centre of authority, an anxiety manifest in these events, would be a misreading of the record. And that anxiety can only be explained in terms of some sense of belonging to a nation state.

There is a felt psychological need for the emotions of nationalism as a necessary underpinning of a nation state. That underpinning has been seriously damaged in India since the late nineteen-seventies. The space vacated by the ideology of composite nationalism is being claimed by the doctrine of Hindutva and the Hindu state.

It is well to remember that the construction of nationhood in terms of an all-India Hindu identity has been one of the alternative agendas in modern Indian politics. This was very directly fought with programmes based on the ideology of a composite nationhood, especially from the

mid-nineteen-twenties onwards. The electoral records suggest that the popular mandate was in favour of the ideology of consensus and unity. Even in the wake of the disastrous partition riots, political organisations claiming to speak exclusively for Hindu interests secured only an insignificant proportion of electoral support. This may be due to a variety of reasons and it is certainly true that the victory over Hindu communalism was secured by some concessions to its aspirations. It is also known that the Hindu communalist has been prominently present, both in the leadership and among the cadres of the Congress party. Still, when they threatened to take over the organisation, Nehru could carry out a purge in 1952, and it would be correct to say that the central agenda of the state has successfully emphasised anti-communal policies. It is the erosion of nationalism and the loss of credibility of the political party which projected that ideology as the basis of state policy that has opened the gate for an alternative nationalism based on the Hindu identity.

For historical reasons, that identity in the colonial period and after has been built around xenophobia, more specifically, the hatred of the Muslims. The history of communal hatred, as distinct from the aspirations of the sub-continent's Muslim elite which led to the formation of Pakistan, has yet to be written. There is little reason to doubt that it arose from the conditions of colonial rule, even though any exclusive emphasis on the consequences of imperial policy alone would be misleading. In pre-colonial days, any struggle against "Muslim tyranny", as projected in RSS propaganda, was probably no part of Hindu consciousness. The Marathi historical literature tracing the emergence of the Maratha empire does not talk about Muslim tyranny. In the late eighteenth century, Sindhia, the leader of the confederacy, was eager to convince the Hindu Rajput princes that he had no intention of overthrowing the Muslim Mogul emperor; he was in Delhi only to protect the emperor. The great rebellion of 1857, which involved Hindu soldiers, princes, and peasants, aimed at replacing the English East India Company's rule with that of a Muslim emperor. The spoliation of temples by Turkish and Afghan rulers is supposed to have generated a permanent hatred against Muslims in Hindu hearts. It is worth emphasising in this context that India, unlike Europe, has no record of wars of religion involving the civil population. Further, if memories of such wars do not sustain political conflict in modern Europe there is no reason to imagine that ancient wounds constitute a spontaneous basis for political hatred in modern India. Furthermore, it is not at all clear why the ardent Hindu has no special feelings of hatred towards the Turks or Afghans, whose ancestors no doubt destroyed their temples from time to time. The fact that his rancour is focussed instead on often hapless Muslim slum-dwellers, who are almost certainly descendants of Hindu

converts, tells us much about the nature and origins of communal sentiments. Hindu as well as Muslim communalism as we know it today is the end product of historical contingencies of the colonial era. But there is little consolation today in that thought, because the poison in question has by now a history of more than one hundred years.

With the erosion of nationalist ideology, communal hatred, which has long been a part of Indian social consciousness, began to move to the centre of the political stage. The process was accelerated by Mrs Gandhi's now notorious policy of playing the Hindu card. At the same time, the Sikh rising and the massacre of innocent Hindus introduced a new component into Hindu xenophobia further sharpened by allegations of Pakistan's involvement in the Sikh movement for autonomy. The developments in Kashmir leading to the mass exodus of Hindus from the valley have provided more fuel for the fire. The protagonists of Hindu Rashtra have fully exploited these developments.

The Muslims in India are in a sense a decapitated community. The bulk of their elite migrated to Pakistan after partition. Consequently, this large community has very little representation in the higher echelons of Indian political and economic life. Already by the thirties, the national movement had lost the support of politicised Muslims, though there were some very important exceptions. The task of securing that support on an active basis in the aftermath of partition as an essential foundation of composite nationhood remained neglected. Opportunist leaders have taken advantage of the community's withdrawal syndrome to try and fossilise a community-based politics. Political parties have willingly played their game, justifying the allegation of treating the Muslims as a vote bank. The record of continual rioting after 1947 has stoked the fire of Muslim communalism. The two hatreds feed each other. But the threat of absolutist politics based on hatred can be posed by the protagonists of Hindutva alone, and hence they are the enemies the nation has to watch.

The doctrine of Hindutva and its subtext of communal hatred now enjoys widespread support across a wide spectrum of Hindu society. While its main base is the urban lower middle class, it also has the support of a substantial section of more affluent elements in urban society. A section of students and the upper strata of the professional classes including, very crucially, some journalists and academics, are active supporters of the RSS/VHP programmes. Industrialists encouraged by the Shiv Sena record of fighting class war and strikes in Maharashtra are also happy to support Hindutva. The affluent non-resident Indian who often leads an alienated and marginalised ghetto existence abroad is happy to be acknowledged as part of a world-wide Hindu nation. Most dangerously, the unemployed upper-caste Hindu youth scared by the policy of positive

discrimination feels attracted by the saffron flag. The social trend towards consumerism and extensive corruption in administration and politics have generated an ambience of anomic in Indian society. A simple, direct and ethically correct political slogan which denounces the pervasive corruption and calls for dramatic actions of protest has obvious appeal to the educated young. Totally marginalised elements among the urban poor have always been in the forefront of agitational activity. They were conspicuously present when the mosque was destroyed.

This formidable coalition of mainly urban and upper-caste Hindu social groups may or may not produce an unchallengeable supremacy for the cause of Hindutva within the parliamentary system. But its penetration into the social and institutional life of India has already acquired threatening proportions. The paralysed helplessness of the central government during the destruction of the mosque is an evidence of this danger. More significantly, the behaviour of the police, after the event both in Delhi and Bombay, was quite incredible. In both places, they went on a rampage in Muslim colonies and in Delhi actively harassed academics preaching communal peace. Then there are the judicial decisions which allowed Hindus to worship idols they had sneaked into the old mosque while denying Muslims the right to pray at the same site. The less tangible spread of communalist ideology among extensive sections of the Hindu middle classes, including teachers and administrators, is perhaps the most frightening feature of all. Over the years, Indian civil society has developed to a remarkable degree a tolerance of violent repression by the state. If such official policies are now supplemented by an unofficial connivance at persecution of Muslims, the political portents for India may well be disastrous. The subjective consciousness of the Indian Muslim today is one of total insecurity.

Guruji Golwakar expressed his envious admiration for one experienced European nation about to solve its problem of a Semitic presence. But Hitler and his cronies had one advantage. They had a mere six million people to deal with. India has one hundred and thirty million Muslims. The ultimate solution is hence likely to present a few logistic problems. Efforts in that direction may meanwhile tear apart the fabric of the nation state.

One has only to consider the fate of the island to India's south to appreciate the potentialities of xenophobic politics in a multi-ethnic society.

Post Script

Since the Babri mosque episode, nearly six years have passed. India has seen the emergence of the BJP as the main opposition in Parliament, then as the largest single party and finally as the successful contender for central power, albeit in coalition with a large number of small parties.

What does this portend for the future?

It would be paranoid to prophesy the immediate emergence of fascist rule in India. But certain signs are worth watching.

The BJP, dependent for their survival in power on local parties and splinter groups with no interest in Hindutva, does not have a free hand. So the prophets of Hindutva are making secular noises. The savants who read into their rise the inevitable end of secularism should now explain why BJP has to court that discredited doctrine. Has the famous Hindu revival suddenly ended or the BJP decided on a change of heart out of magnanimity?

But alas, there is no change of heart. First, the leaders of the party have repeatedly asserted their loyalty to their alter ego, the RSS. The latter has never repudiated its xenophobic doctrines. Singhal, the VHP chief, has threatened Muslims with further humiliation if they do not hand over the other mosques where Hindu temples originally stood. Quietly, in Rajasthan, stone masons are busy hewing out different parts of the projected Rama temple. The Home Minister, Advani, who led the campaign resulting in the destruction of the mosque, has declared that whatever he has learnt is from the RSS, an organisation of which he as well as the Prime Minister remain members. Advani, Joshi, Uma Bharati, all facing criminal charges in the mosque affair at the behest of the Supreme Court, are ministers of the central government. Uma is the Minister of State and Joshi the cabinet minister in charge of education. It might help to remember that one of the main weapons in BJP propaganda was a distorted version of Indian history introduced in school textbooks. The new government's education policy is worth watching.

Also worth watching is what they do at the executive level. All State Governors have been sacked. Some are to be replaced by RSS leaders who have no mandate. A constitutional head in normal times, the Governor exercises great power in uncertain political situations.

One of the main planks of the RSS-BJP agenda was intervention in the centuries-old Muslim personal law. Have they given it up? The BJP, with their options limited, is showing signs of sweet reasonableness, except that they have placed far from reasonable men and women in positions of great power, assured the RSS that it has nothing to worry, and laid the basis for executive action, the nature of which is still not clear. There are

no indications that they have abandoned policies at the heart of their political propaganda.

Their declared objective is total central power. Whether they will make it without depending on a host of allies, is uncertain. One gimmick, the explosion of nuclear devices, has not produced quite the results it was expected to do. The sanctions and the protest of most sensible men have cooled the enthusiasm of the celebrants. The by-elections have been generally disappointing. Yet it is too early to celebrate the demise of Hindu communalism. The disunity of centrist and radical forces may still open the door to BJP-RSS victory. If they do seize central power, without depending on sundry allies, there is nothing to suggest that these leopards will change their spots. And if they fail, we can expect to see a return to the politics of the street in the name of Hindu honour, repetitions of the bitter episodes we have witnessed in the past.

Since names matter, let us be clear on one point. It does not help to refer to them as Hindu nationalists. It gives them an unwarranted legitimacy. They are no more Hindu nationalists than Le Pen's men are French nationalists or Neo-Nazis are German nationalists. Describing Hindu Fascists by their true names would help clarify the situation in India.