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India

Compromises on the road to hell

- IV Online magazine - 2002 - IV339 - April 2002 -

Publication date: Monday 15 April 2002

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FOR one and a half decades, the Ram temple at Ayodhya has been at the centre of the fascist drive for power. Between 1987 and 1992, a massive campaign was waged, to "prove" the claim that Ram, the hero of the myth Ramayana, had been born in Ayodhya, on the spot where Mir Baqi, a general of Babar, had built a mosque.

Allegedly Babar had ordered the destruction of a temple on the site in order to build the mosque. In 1992 massive communal mobilisations and the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque resulted from this campaign by the right. Both the Congress government and then the United Front government dithered while the Far Right pressed ahead with its agenda. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the electoral arm of the combine, campaigned, and increased its seats in parliament. Important sections of the Indian big bourgeoisie began to conclude that it was desirable to climb on to the BJP bandwagon. They understood that full scale implementation of neo-liberal policies required the prior atomisation of the working class and therefore the empowerment of the BJP.

At the same time, the BJP's sister organisations, the Viswa Hindu Parishad, the Bajrang Dal, and so on, claimed to stand for all Hindus, to speak in their names regardless of parliamentary ups and downs. The VHP and its "holy men" continued to focus on the question of the temple. Contrary to what some on the left believed, this was not just a ploy to garner votes.

Mistake

To think that the BJP is the real force while the rest are adjuncts is a big mistake. The continuous harping on the Ram temple was a signal to supporters that here was a political force which did not allow political exigencies to harm "core" political issues, and a signal to the ruling class that accepting a long term BJP government would entail accepting their political terms. The VHP aimed to shift politics to the extreme right by force. The announcement of specific programmes, like the beginning of temple construction from March 15 2002, were intended to keep their extremist activists at a temperature near boiling point.

This rhythm was not totally unconnected with parliamentary political developments with elections in four provinces in early 2002. Despite the Prevention of Terrorism Act targeting Muslims, despite the blatant communalisation of the state apparatus, the BJP was an also-ran in all four states.

The increasing aggressiveness of the Hindutva brigade should also be seen in this context. They know that coming to power by basing themselves on a Hindu identity is impossible if the thrust is purely, or mainly, parliamentary. As with classical fascism, they try to blend legal and extra-parliamentary, violent mobilisations together.

Godhra is a powder-keg in the centre of Gujarat, India's most communally polarised state, and a Hindutva "laboratory". During the 1970s and 1980s, Godhra recorded violence or curfew on as many as 150 days in some years. The town had a Muslim majority population; there was endemic rivalry between Muslims and the surrounding Adivasi (tribal) groups, and caste Hindus; sharp Hindu-Muslim competition over trading interests; and the spread of Hindutva influence among the upper castes. All this gave Godhra a special, incendiary, character. Only a thorough, impartial and credible inquiry can establish what led to the gory Godhra incident in which 58 people were charred to death by a mob.

But no inquiry can ignore the relevant background: increasing harassment of Indian Muslims since September 11 and especially since December 13, and their maligning as the principal perpetrators of terrorism; growing communalisation of Gujarat society; the desperate tactics of the BJP in launching the temple-building campaign as they faced electoral defeat; the mobilisation of thousands of kar sevaks from Gujarat, and their abuse of Muslims, shouting militant Hindu slogans, taunting or cheating Muslim vendors, and verbally abusing Muslim women.

None of this constitutes a valid provocation for horrible and gratuitous acts like burning people alive. But they warrant a serious investigation into this incident. The provocations by the VHP and their friends were seized upon by some Muslim extremists to perpetrate a totally barbaric act. A mob several hundred strong was mobilised by 7 a.m. suggesting serious planning by Muslim communalists. Their far more dangerous counterparts among the Hindu communalists were all too happy to use this as an excuse.

Partisan

State collusion alone can explain the partisan conduct of the Gujarat police. They not only failed to deter or stop the violence; but on several occasions actively encouraged it. The Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, virtually called on VHP - Bajrang Dal forces to commit murder and pogroms.

Just as in Bombay in 1992-93, the Gujarat police refused to intervene in time, knowing this would result in mass murder. It participated in arson, abduction, armed intimidation and homicide. Ten times more Muslims have already been killed in Gujarat than the Hindus murdered in Godhra. For millions of citizens, Gujarat has turned into a veritable purgatory. Vishwa Hindu Parishad goons took over more than 30 cities and towns, and rampaged, burned and killed at will. The police were nowhere to be seen. Once again, hardcore communalists suborned agencies of the state.

Unlike the unknowns in Godhra, little about its far bloodier aftermath is in doubt. But despite the well-known connections between the VHP, the RSS and the BJP, the media focus on distinctions between them. The fountainhead of these organisations is the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) founded in 1925. This organisation has much in common with European fascist organisation, though there are differences. From an early stage, the RSS adopted what could be described as a far right version of a Gramscian policy of establishing hegemony. The first attempt to switch to a war of manoeuvres came in 1946-48, around the time of partition and independence.

The RSS had trained and drilled an immense number of members in 1925-46 but kept them aloof from the anti-colonial struggles. But in 1946-48 it sought to fan the flames of communalism and to set up what in retrospect looks like a premature fascist type bid for power. The murder of Gandhi, even though the murderer, Nathuram Godse, was no longer formally an RSS member, dealt a blow to this. At this point RSS leader Golwalkar wrote to the rightwing nationalist Home Minister Sardar Patel, offering a "united front" in an anti-communist crusade. If the RSS were re-legalised, he promised, it would keep out of politics.

After this deal the RSS did not withdraw from politics. It evolved a whole series of organisations including a women's organisation and a labour organisation. Its first electoral outfit on an all-India level was the Jan Sangh which in 1977 merged with a number of other bourgeois and petty bourgeois opposition parties to form the Janata Party and then formed a government of the centre.

Agenda

Immediately, the RSS started pushing its agenda. This led to a conflict and the break up of the Janata Party, and the subsequent formation of the BJP. After initial lip service to Gandhian socialism, the BJP switched to a line of controlled, but steadily ascending Hindutva.

Meanwhile, from the 1970s, other outfits had been created, the most important of which was the Viswa Hindu Parishad, initially formed in reaction to lower caste rejection of oppressive Hinduism and conversions to other religions. This was obviously unacceptable to Hindu fundamentalists, and the VHP resisted these conversions. The VHP also took over the task of consolidating fundamentalist values amongst Indians living outside the country. Minorities in alien milieus, many of these tend to clutch at an odd mix of archaic and modern values, which is exploited by the VHP.

In the last few years a separation of functions has been effected. The BJP has been increasingly accepted as a responsible party - not because Vajpayee and Advani have turned over a new leaf but because the bourgeoisie, facing the unceasing decline of its traditional party, Congress, has been compelled to look to the BJP. The RSS has been repainted by the media as a nice, kind of "cultural" organisation despite the fact that countless Commissions of inquiry have established that Hindu communalists including the RSS have organised communal riots. It is only the VHP, and its purely thug like allies of the Bajrang Dal which are ostensibly "extremist".

Rewriting history is a necessary component of the RSS story. Central to Hindutva as a mass phenomenon is the development of a powerful image of Muslims as a perpetual "Other". This ideology appropriates stray elements from past prejudices, combines them with new ones skilfully dressed up as old truths, and spreads the resultant compound through the most up-to-date media techniques.

The Muslim becomes almost exactly what the Jew was in Nazi propaganda. The Muslim in India is supposedly unduly privileged - a charge even more absurd here than it was in Germany, where the Jews had been fairly prominent in intellectual, professional and business circles. In post-Independence India, Muslims are grossly underrepresented at elite level.

Regardless of reality, their alleged privileges are supposedly the product of 'appeasement' of Muslims by 'pseudo-secularists'. In the pages of the RSS's Organiser, one reads regularly about the Red-Green alliance, a combination of Muslims and communists, recalling Hitler's denunciation of communism as a Jewish conspiracy.

The shift to a war of movement was substantially aided by the waning fortunes of the Congress. In the early and middle 1980s, both Indira and then Rajiv Gandhi attempted to play the "Hindu card", communalising the state apparatus on an unprecedented scale. This directly prepared the ground for the Ram blitzkrieg now spearheaded by the VHP.

Prior to 1989, Congress itself had sought to utilise the Ram issue. They updated the Ramayana epic into a pseudo-nationalist TV serial. The idols installed inside the Babri Masjid in December 1949 had been placed there in collusion with a previous Congress regime. And it was Rajiv who made a series of catastrophic political moves.

After the Shah Bano verdict, when a case of gender justice was substantially distorted into a case of communal verdict, the Rajiv Gandhi government brought in a bill that sought to appease Muslim communalists. To do a balancing act, he also tried appeasing Hindu communalists by allowing the ceremony for laying the foundation stone of the temple at Ayodhya. All this allowed the RSS and its fronts to go on the offensive.

Today the government is dependent on allies from other parties for whom Hindutva is no option. This is why there is a two faced approach. In parliament, the Prime Minister will give assurances. Outside, some kind of ritual blessing of the Ram temple of Ayodhya will be permitted to keep the pot boiling.

Compromise

In this context we have to assess the "compromise" proposal made by Jayendra Saraswati, Shankaracharya of Kanchi - a very holy office in the Hindu faith. While the VHP demands that Muslims meekly accept that the Ram temple be built on the site where the mosque was destroyed 10 years ago, the Shankaracharya suggests there should be a dialogue between the Hindu community and the Muslim community. He says they should be represented on the one hand by the VHP and on the other by the All India Muslim personal Law Board. He also proposed that there should be some guarantees to the Muslim community. This appeared to many as a voice of sanity by contrast with the rampaging mobs of the Viswa Hindu Parishad. But it would be a dangerous mistake to go down this path - one which would further legitimise and give succour to the forces responsible for the carnage we have seen in recent weeks.

The proposal for a "settlement" means accepting the claim of the VHP that it has the right to represent the Hindus of India. If this happens done, one might as well put up a sign-post, saying, constitutional democracy ends here.

And yet many are working overtime to prove the reasonableness of the compromise, claiming that it will isolate the VHP extremists and favour the so-called moderates. This is dangerous nonsense.

To portray Vajpayee as a "good" nationalist statesman who has risen above the "petty views" of the RSS by inviting this mediation is to court disaster. But an increasing section of the bourgeoisie is willing to put up with occasional violations of rights of Muslims and Christians (to say nothing of communists, trade unionists, atheists and other oddballs who stand in the way of the great and glorious globalisation) and therefore to project him as an upholder of secular traditions. To accept the mediation of religious heads with other religious heads is to ensure that there will be no space left for secular politics.

The very idea that Hindus constitute a homogeneous community is dangerous. It is tantamount to accepting the forcible inclusion of Dalits into the Hindu fold, ignoring the massive and varied ways in which Dalits have fought against their oppression since the late 19 Century. After all the RSS was set up as much to counter Dalit assertion as to fight the Muslims.

What is the dispute about? Even if it were true (as in any case serious scholarship says it is not) that a general of Babar had destroyed a Ram temple under his orders, what should our response be? Kings committed many crimes. Kings of all religions exploited their subjects. Kings of all religions and no definite religions all used religion politically, destroyed as well as supported the building of religious buildings.

A modern, secular state has to take a different stance. One can no more hold Muslims of present day India responsible for the alleged destruction of a Ram temple by Babar, than one can hold modern Hindus responsible for other alleged crimes against Muslim holy places.

What is the problem? Not what may or may not have happened centuries ago, but whether the VHP has the right to use force to destroy an existing mosque, and murder Muslims in a drive towards making them into second class citizens. Since they palpably do not have that right, banning them and arresting all their leaders is the first step in the

direction of restoration of secularism and normalcy.