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The Other Face of Fanaticism

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On the evening of Jan. 30, 1948, five months after the independence and partition of India, Mohandas Gandhi was walking to a prayer meeting on the grounds of his temporary home in New Delhi when he was shot three times in the chest and abdomen. Gandhi was then 78 and a forlorn figure. He had been unable to prevent the bloody creation of Pakistan as a separate homeland for Indian Muslims. The violent uprooting of millions of Hindus and Muslims across the hastily drawn borders of India and Pakistan had tainted the freedom from colonial rule that he had so arduously worked toward. The fasts he had undertaken in order to stop Hindus and Muslims from killing one another had weakened him, and when the bullets from an automatic pistol hit his frail body at point-blank range, he collapsed and died instantly. His assassin made no attempt to escape and, as he himself would later admit, even shouted for the police.

Millions of shocked Indians waited for more news that night. They feared unspeakable violence if Gandhi's murderer turned out to be a Muslim. There was much relief, also some puzzlement, when the assassin was revealed as Nathuram Godse, a Hindu Brahmin from western India, a region relatively untouched by the brutal passions of the partition.

Godse had been an activist in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteers Association, or R.S.S.), which was founded in the central Indian city of Nagpur in 1925 and was devoted to the creation of a militant Hindu state. During his trial, Godse made a long and eloquent speech claiming that Gandhi's "constant and consistent pandering to the Muslims" had left him with no choice. He blamed Gandhi for the "vivisection of the country, our motherland" and said that he hoped with Gandhi dead "the nation would be saved from the inroads of Pakistan." Godse requested that no mercy be shown him at his trial and went cheerfully to the gallows in November 1949, singing paeans to the "living Motherland, the land of the Hindus."

Now, more than half a century later, many Indians feel that the R.S.S. has never been closer to fulfilling its dream. Its political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party, B.J.P.), the most important among the "Sangh Parivar" -- the "family" of various Hindu nationalist groups supervised by the R.S.S. -- has dominated the coalition government in New Delhi since 1998. Both Atal Bihari Vajpayee, India's prime minister, and his hard-line deputy and likely heir, L.K. Advani, belong to the R.S.S., and neither has ever repudiated its militant ideology.

In the last five years, the Hindu nationalists have conducted nuclear tests and challenged Pakistan to a fourth and final war with India. They have taken a much harsher line than previous governments with the decadelong insurgency in the Muslim majority state of

Kashmir, which is backed by radical Islamists in Pakistan. After a terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001, they mobilized hundreds of thousands of troops on India's border with Pakistan. The troops were partly withdrawn last October, but a war with Pakistan -- one involving nuclear weapons -- remains a terrifying possibility and is in fact supported by powerful, pro-Hindu nationalist sections of the Indian intelligentsia.

The Hindu nationalists' attempts to stoke Hindu fears about Muslims also appear to be succeeding among many of India's disaffected voters. In December, the B.J.P. won elections in the western state of Gujarat, despite being blamed by many journalists and human rights organizations for the vicious killings of more than 2,000 Muslims in Gujarat early last year.

According to a report by Human Rights Watch, the worst violence occurred in the commercial city of Ahmedabad: "Between Feb. 28 and March 2 the attackers descended with militia-like precision on Ahmedabad by the thousands, arriving in trucks and clad in saffron scarves and khaki shorts, the signature uniform of Hindu nationalist -- Hindutva -- groups. Chanting slogans of incitement to kill, they came armed with swords, trishuls (three-pronged spears associated with Hindu mythology), sophisticated explosives and gas cylinders. They were guided by computer printouts listing the addresses of Muslim families and their properties . . . and embarked on a murderous rampage confident that the police was with them. In many cases, the police led the charge, using gunfire to kill Muslims who got in the mobs' way."

The scale of the violence was matched only by its brutality. Women were gang-raped before being killed. Children were burned alive. Gravediggers at mass burial sites told investigators "that most bodies that had arrived . . . were burned and butchered beyond recognition. Many were missing body parts -- arms, legs and even heads. The elderly and the handicapped were not spared. In some cases, pregnant women had their bellies cut open and their fetuses pulled out and hacked or burned before the women were killed."

Narendra Modi, the chief minister of Gujarat, who is also a member of the R.S.S., explained the killings as an "equal and opposite reaction" (a statement he later denied) to the murder in late February of almost 60 people, most of whom were Hindu activists, by a mob of Muslims. The Human Rights Watch report disputed this defense, charging that the Hindu nationalists had planned the Gujarat killings well in advance of the attack on the Hindu activists. It cited widespread reports in the Indian media that suggest that a senior Hindu nationalist minister sat in the police control room in Ahmedabad issuing orders not to rescue Muslims from murder, rape and arson.

Many secular Indians saw the ghost of Nathuram Godse presiding over the killings in Gujarat. In an article in the prestigious monthly Seminar, Ashis Nandy, India's leading social scientist, lamented that the "state's political soul has been won over by [Gandhi's] killers." This seems truer after Hindu nationalists implicated in India's worst pogrom won state elections held in Gujarat in December -- a fact that Praful Bidwai, a widely syndicated Indian columnist, described to me as "profoundly shameful and disturbing."

Not much is known about the R.S.S. in the West. After Sept. 11, the Hindu nationalists have presented themselves as reliable allies in the fight against Muslim fundamentalists. But in India their resemblance to the European Fascist movements of the 1930's has never been less than clear. In his manifesto "We, or Our Nationhood Defined" (1939), Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, supreme director of the R.S.S. from 1940 to 1973, said that Hindus could "profit" from the example of the Nazis, who had manifested "race pride at its highest" by purging Germany of the Jews. According to him, India was Hindustan, a land of Hindus where Jews and Parsis were "guests" and Muslims and Christians "invaders."

Golwalkar was clear about what he expected the guests and invaders to do: "The foreign races in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no ideas but those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture . . . or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges."

Fears about the rise of militant Hindu nationalism, present since the day Godse killed Gandhi, have been particularly intense since the late 1980's, when the Congress -- the party of Gandhi and Nehru that had ruled India for much of the previous four decades -- was damaged by a series of corruption scandals and allegations of misrule. The B.J.P., which began under another name in 1951, saw an opportunity in the decay of the Congress Party.

In 1989, it officially began a campaign to build a temple over the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama in the northern town of Ayodhya. (The Hindu activists whose train was attacked last February had been assisting in the construction of the temple.) Hindu nationalists have long claimed that the mosque that stood over the site was built in the 16th century by the first Mogul emperor, Babur, as an act of contempt toward Hinduism. The mosque was a symbol of slavery and shame, B.J.P. leaders declared, and removing it and building a grand temple in its place was a point of honor for all Hindus.

In December 1992, senior B.J.P. politicians watched as an uncontrollable crowd of Hindus, armed with shovels, pickaxes and crowbars and shouting "Death to Muslims," demolished the mosque. It is estimated that at least 1,700 people, most of them Muslim, died during the riots that followed. In March 1993, Muslim gangsters, reportedly aided by the Pakistani intelligence agency, retaliated with simultaneous bomb attacks that killed more than 300 civilians.

The struggle over the construction of a Rama temple on the site continued throughout the 90's, inflaming both sides. Muslims (who form 12 percent of India's population of more than one billion) and secular Indians protested the Hindu nationalist attempt to rewrite history. But the nationalists fed on a growing dissatisfaction among upper-caste and middle-class Hindus. In March 1998, facing a fragmented opposition, the B.J.P. emerged as the single strongest party in the Indian Parliament, and Vajpayee and Advani took the top two jobs in the federal government.

After the massacres in Gujarat last year, the Hindu nationalist response was shockingly blunt. "Let Muslims understand," an official R.S.S. resolution said in March, "that their safety lies in the goodwill of the majority." Speaking at a public rally in April, Prime Minister Vajpayee seemed to blame Muslims for the recent violence. "Wherever Muslims live," he said, "they don't want to live in peace." Replying to international criticism of the killings in Gujarat, he said, "No one should teach us about secularism."

Vajpayee has worked hard to build close ties with the United States. Recent joint naval exercises in the Indian Ocean and frequent visits by Colin Powell seem to confirm Washington's view of India as a long-term ally against radical Islamism and China. But Vajpayee's efforts can also be seen as part of R.S.S.'s millenarian vision of India as a great superpower -- and not just in Asia. A clearer sense of his worldview can be had from a long discourse K.S. Sudarshan, the present supreme director of the R.S.S. and an adviser to Vajpayee and Advani, delivered to R.S.S. members in 1999.

In the address, he described how a new epic war was about to commence between the demonic and divine powers that forever contended for supremacy in the world. Sudarshan identified the United States as the biggest example of the "rise of inhumanity" in the contemporary world.

He claimed that India exercised the "greatest terror" over America, a theme he had touched on in his praise of India's nuclear tests in 1998 when he said that "our history has proved that we are a heroic, intelligent race capable of becoming world leaders, but the one deficiency that we had was of weapons, good weapons." He ended his speech by predicting the "final victory" of Hindu nationalism.

"The Hindu nationalists are especially cautious at present," an Indian journalist told me this fall. "Their fascistic nature has been obscured so far in the West by the fact that India is a democracy and a potentially large consumer market. They have managed to speak with two voices, one for foreign consumption and the other for local. But they know that religious extremists are under closer scrutiny worldwide after 9/11, and they know that they don't look too good after the killings of 2,000 Muslims in Gujarat."

When I arrived at the R.S.S.'s media office in Delhi, I was told by the brusque young man in charge, "The R.S.S. is not interested in publicity." Sudarshan declined my request for an interview. Deputy Prime Minister Advani also declined to be interviewed on his connection with the R.S.S. Other members bluntly refused to talk to what they described as an "anti-Hindu" foreign newspaper.

One person who would talk was Tarun Vijay, the young editor of an R.S.S. weekly who was described as the "modern face of Hindu nationalism." Vijay shows up frequently on STAR News, India's most prominent news channel, and speaks both Hindi and English fluently. He is known as one of Advani's closest confidants.

When I ask Vijay about the R.S.S.'s role in the killings in Gujarat, his normally suave manner falters. "Westerners don't understand," he says agitatedly, "that the R.S.S. is a patriotic organization working for the welfare of all Indians."

It must be said that his own career seems to prove this. He was so impressed by the "selflessness" and "patriotism" of the R.S.S. members he met as a young man, he says, that he left his home and went to work in western India protecting tribal peoples from discrimination. "Some of my best friends are Muslims," he says. "My wife wears jeans, and she wears her hair short. We eat at Muslim homes. There are reasonable people among Muslims, but they are afraid to speak out their minds. We are trying to have a dialogue with them. We are trying to talk with Christians also. After all, Jesus Christ is my greatest hero. But the left-wing and secular people are always portraying us as anti-Muslim and anti-Christian fanatics."

The superior organization of the R.S.S., which now reaches up to the highest levels of the Indian government, is its strength in a chaotic country like India. Christophe Jaffrelot, a French scholar and the leading authority on Hindu nationalism, says he believes that the mission of the R.S.S. is to "fashion society, to sustain it, improve it and finally merge with it when the point [is] reached where society and the organization [are] co-extensive." Bharat Bhushan, a prominent Indian journalist, agrees. The R.S.S., he says, is "the only organization which has consistently geared itself to micro-level politics." Its members run not just the biggest political party in India but also educational institutions, trade unions, literary societies and religious sects; they work to indoctrinate low-caste groups as well as affluent Indians living in the West.

The scale and diversity of this essentially evangelical effort is remarkable. Highly placed members of the R.S.S. conduct nuclear tests, strike a belligerent attitude toward Muslims and Pakistan and push India's claims to superpower status, while other members are involved in almost absurd small-time social engineering.

I was startled, for instance, when Vijay triumphantly showed me the headline in his magazine about the patenting of cow urine in the United States. Western science, he said, had validated an ancient Hindu belief in the holiness of the cow -- yet further proof of how the Hindu way of life anticipated and indeed was superior to the discoveries of modern science.

This was more than rhetoric. Forty miles out of Nagpur, at a clearing in a teak forest, I came across an R.S.S.-run laboratory devoted to showcasing the multifarious benefits of cow urine. Most of the cows were out grazing, but there were a few calves in a large shed that, according to the lab's supervisor, had been "rescued" recently from nearby Muslim butchers. In one room, its whitewashed walls spattered with saffron-hued posters of Lord Rama, devout young Hindus stood before test tubes and beakers full of cow urine, distilling the holy liquid to get rid of the foul-smelling ammonia and make it drinkable. In another room, tribal women in garishly colored saris sat on the floor before a small hill of white powder -- dental powder made from cow urine.

The nearest, and probably unwilling, consumers of the various products made from cow urine were the poor tribal students in the primary school next to the lab, one of 13,000 educational institutions run by Hindu nationalists. In gloomy rooms, where students studied and slept and where their frayed laundry hung from the iron bars of the windows, there were large gleaming portraits of militant Hindu freedom fighters.

I sat in the small office of the headmaster, a thin excitable young man. From the window, above which hung a large fantastical map of undivided India, I could see tribal women who had walked from their homes and now sat on the porch examining the sores and calluses on their bare feet, waiting to meet their children during recess. The principal explained to me how the R.S.S. member in charge of the federal government's education department was making sure that the new history textbooks carried the important message of Hindu pride and Muslim cruelty to every school and child in the country. His own work was to make the students aware of the glorious Hindu culture from which tribal living had sundered them. The message of the R.S.S., he said, was egalitarian and modern; it believed in raising low-caste people and tribals to a higher level of culture.

According to John Dayal, the vice president of the All India Catholic Union, the R.S.S. has spent millions of dollars trying to convert tribal people to Hindu nationalism. Dayal, who monitors the missionary activities of the R.S.S. very closely, claimed that in less than one year the R.S.S. distributed one million trishuls, or tridents, in three tribal districts in central India.

B.L. Bhole, a political scientist at Nagpur University, saw a Brahminical ploy in these attempts. "The R.S.S. can't attract young middle-class people anymore, so they hope for better luck among the poor," he said. "But the basic values the R.S.S. promotes are drawn from the high Sanskrit culture of Hinduism, which seeks to maintain a social hierarchy with Brahmins at the very top. The united Hindu nation they keep talking about is one where basically low-caste Hindus and Muslims and Christians don't complain much while accepting the dominance of a Brahmin minority.

"The R.S.S. has been most successful in Gujarat, where low-caste Hindus and tribals were indoctrinated at the kind of schools you went to. They were in the mobs led by upper-caste Hindu nationalists that attacked Muslims and Christians. But the R.S.S. still doesn't have much support outside Gujarat. This is a serious setback for them, and the only thing they can do to increase their mass base is keep stoking anti-Muslim and anti-Christian passions and hope they can get enough Hindus, both upper caste and low caste, behind them."

The consistent demonizing of Muslims and Christians by Hindu nationalists may seem gratuitous -- Christians in India are a tiny and scattered minority, and the Muslims are too poor, disorganized and fearful to pose any kind of threat to Hindus -- but it is indispensable to the project of a Hindu nation. The attempt to unite low- and upper-caste Hindus in a united front against Muslims and Christians has certainly worked in the state of Gujarat. Ashok Singhal, the president of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu

Council, V.H.P.), yet another R.S.S. affiliate, seemed to accept proudly the charge of inciting anti-Muslim hatred when he described last year's pogrom in Gujarat as a "victory for Hindu society." Whole villages, he said, had been "emptied of Islam." "We were successful," he said, "in our experiment of raising Hindu consciousness, which will be repeated all over the country now."

This sounds like an empty threat, but the B.J.P.'s gains in the recent elections in Gujarat, where it did best in riot-affected areas, may have encouraged hard-liners to think that they can win Hindu votes by whipping up anti-Muslim hysteria elsewhere in India. Narendra Modi is to be the star campaigner for the B.J.P. in the local elections later this month in the north Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, an area with almost no Hindu-Muslim tensions to date. Virbhadr Singh, a senior opposition leader from the Congress, wonders if the Hindu nationalists have hatched an "ill-conceived plan to stage-manage some terrorist incident in the state."

John Dayal fears that Hindu nationalists may also target Christians. "They have never been more afraid," he told me. "I have been expecting the very worst since the B.J.P. came to power, and the worst, I think, may still be in the future."

The worst possibility at present is of a militant backlash by Muslims. In the villages and towns near Ayodhya, I found Muslims full of anxiety. They spoke of the insidious and frequent threats and beatings they received from local Hindu politicians and policemen. At one mosque in the countryside, a young man loudly asserted that Muslims were not going to suffer injustice anymore, that they were going to retaliate. His elders shouted him down, and then a mullah gently led me out of the madrasa with one arm around my shoulders, assuring me that the Muslims were loyal to India, their homeland, where they had long lived in peace with their Hindu brothers.

Saghir Ahmad Ansari, a Muslim social activist in Nagpur, told me that the Muslims he knew felt "that the Hindu nationalists, who were implacably opposed to their existence in India, now controlled everything, the government, our rights, our future." He said he worried about the Muslim response to Gujarat. "When the government itself supervises the killing of 2,000 Muslims, when Hindu mobs rape Muslim girls with impunity and force 100,000 Muslims into refugee camps, you can't hope that the victims won't dream of revenge," he said. "I fear, although I don't like saying or thinking about this, that the ideology of jihad and terrorist violence will find new takers among the 130 million Muslims of India. This will greatly please the Islamic fundamentalists of Pakistan and Afghanistan."

His fears about vengeful Muslims were proved right in September, when terrorists reportedly from Pakistan murdered more than 30 Hindus at the famous Akshardham temple in Gujarat in ostensible retaliation for the massacres last winter. It was the biggest attack in recent years by Muslim terrorists outside of Kashmir, and the Hindu rage it provoked further ensured the victory of Hindu nationalist hard-liners in December's elections.

The growth of religious militancy in South Asia is likely to excite many Hindus. As they see it, Gujarat proved to be a successful "laboratory" of Hindu nationalism in which carefully stoked anti-Muslim sentiments eventually brought about a pogrom, and a Muslim backlash seemed to lead to even greater Hindu unity. A few months ago, I met Nathuram Godse's younger brother, Gopal Godse, who spent 16 years in prison for conspiring with his brother and a few other Brahmins to murder Gandhi. He lives in Pune, a western city known now for its computer software engineers. In his tiny two-room apartment, where the dust from the busy street thickly powders a mess of files and books and the framed garlanded photographs of Gandhi's murderer, Godse, a frail man of 83, at first seems like someone abandoned by history.

But recent events seem to Godse to have vindicated his Hindu nationalist cause. Gujarat proved that the Hindus were growing more militant and patriotic and that the Muslims were on the run not just in India but everywhere in the world. India had nuclear bombs; it was growing richer and stronger while Pakistan was slowly imploding. Only recently, Godse reminds me, Advani advocated the dismemberment of Pakistan.

India has turned its back on Gandhi, Godse claims, and has come close to embracing his brother's vision. Nathuram did not die in vain. He asked for his ashes to be immersed in the Indus, the holy river of India that flows through Pakistan, only when the Mother India was whole again. For over half a century, Godse has waited for the day when he could travel to the Indus with the urn containing his brother's ashes. Now, he says, he won't have to wait much longer.

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