

The Rise of Saffronshirts

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The cycle of killings in Kannur in Kerala can be viewed as a violent symptom of the deep-rooted irreconcilability of two political forces in India—the secular Left and the communal Hindu Right. Although the media seek to depoliticize the CPI(M)-RSS conflict there by projecting it as a simple gang warfare between two contending electoral foes, each seeking to retain and extend its territory, one cannot overlook the fundamental ideologies that sharply divide the two. The fact that soon after the Kannur killings towards the end of February, the saffron brigade in a planned manner organized attacks on party offices of the CPI(M) in Delhi and other cities, should underline the political nature of the conflict which moves beyond the turf war of Kannur. Most of the non-BJP parties in parliament quite rightly condemned the attacks on the CPI(M) offices. The gesture represents the present balance of forces in parliament that still remains slightly tilted in favour of those who are not willing to go the whole hog with the BJP, and its bullying attempts to saffronize the Indian polity.

But such parliamentary support in an unstable political situation provides a very fragile base for the Left in its long term fight against the Hindu communal forces. The latter are led by veteran BJP politicians who despite proofs of their complicity and even participation in communal riots, have not been debarred from fighting elections, and consequently still enjoy credibility among sections of the electorate and civil society. The voters are taken in by their patriotic and populist rhetoric, without realizing their insidious plans to carry out their parental (derived from their RSS origins) goal and long term political objective of setting up a fascist theocratic state—which subverts the basic tenets of Indian constitution.

How can Indian secular forces defeat this game plan of the Sangh Parivar that is being carried out by its well-organized bunch of pork barrel MPs and tub-thumping MLAs going under the name of BJP to woo voters at one level, and a well-armed gang of Saffronshirts led by its outfits like RSS, Bajrang Dal, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Shiv Sena to terrorize civil society at another level? The Parivar has successfully combined these two methods of constitutional and extra-constitutional politics. Should its secular opponents also then adopt this policy of dual methods—politically fighting the BJP on the floors of the legislature, and retaliating against the Parivar's violent offensive in the streets? In Kerala, the CPI(M) appears to have opted for this policy, and is paying back the Parivar in its own coin, which has raised the hackles of the BJP national leaders, who are crying hoarse in Parliament. But the CPI(M) actions in Kannur have created a dilemma for liberal-minded observers and human rights activists, who may be sharing the secular views of the CPI(M) but are revolted by the brutalities perpetrated by its workers on the RSS activists.

While sharing that dilemma, sensitive political observers and analysts should also try to understand the CPI(M)-RSS feud in Kannur in the wider context of the threat of divisive politics that is looming large over the society and polity—posed

not only by the Hindu communalism of the Sangh Parivar, but also by the fanaticism of various other religious sectarian groups, whether Islamic, Sikh or Christian. But the BJP-RSS-VHP-Shiv Sena constituents of the Hindu Parivar, because of their wider network and numerically superior strength of ideologically brainwashed musclemen (compared to their counterparts in the Islamic or Sikh terrorist camps), pose a bigger threat. Their cadres are to be found active in every violent divisive agitation— whether of xenophobic regionalism (like attacks on the reputed Bhandarkar Institute for allowing a scholar to do research on Shivaji, whose findings did not suit their tastes, or again recently, Raj Thackeray's offensive against north Indians in Mumbai), or of upper caste Rajput chauvinism (manifest in the acts of vandalism against the showing of the film Jodhaa Akbar in metropolitan cities).

The UPA government at the Centre, despite professing to be secular, has remained an impotent witness to the growing demonstration of muscle power by the Parivar's armed Saffronshirts, who are openly encouraged by their political patrons, the BJP leaders. The latter should have been ostracized and punished after the mayhem they created by destroying the Babri Masjid, and still later, their planned genocide in Gujarat. Emboldened by the inaction and passive attitude of the UPA government, they have extended their offensive—from their earlier targets among the Muslim minorities to Christians now, to historians who are engaged in independent research, filmmakers daring to criticize the regressive customs of Hindu society, artists painting mythological characters. Whether it is the Congress-controlled state of Maharashtra, or the BJP-ruled Gujarat, the Hindu communal marauders are confident that they can get away with murder. Thanks to a paralytic administration and a compliant judiciary, they have succeeded by their violent public agitations in hounding out an eminent artist like M F Husain from the country.

The success of the fascist Hindu communal forces in gaining a foothold in the Indian political system is due, to a large extent, to the 'soft' policy followed by successive governments at the Centre and the states. In fact, the RSS could have been marginalized and eliminated long ago, but for the namby-pamby policy of the Congress and the various coalitions that ruled the Centre. Every time it lost credibility among the people, the RSS was given a new lease of life by them. After the assassination of Gandhi, when the Hindu communal groups stood totally isolated, the government banned the RSS (on February 4, 1948), but the then Union Home Minister Sardar Patel lifted the ban within six months (on July 11, 1949), accepting the RSS plea that it would function as an organization devoted to social work only. Patel even invited its members to join the Congress! A shrewd, dyed-in-the-wool Right-wing leader, Patel surely did not believe the RSS pretension to social work; but he cynically wooed its members at that time to seek their help in his vicious fight against the Communist Party of India which had been banned in several states in 1948 (the same year as the RSS). Its members continued to be killed and hounded by his police till 1951, when the ban was finally lifted—a long record of state persecution which stands out in sharp contrast with the kid-glove treatment meted out by Patel to the conspirators of the killing of his political guide and preceptor Gandhi! It is no wonder that the

Sangh Parivar leaders today all praise for Patel, and describe Advani as his true successor.

It is there all to see now how the RSS had kept its promise to function as a 'social' organization since then. It has been proved beyond doubt by several government-appointed judicial commissions that most of the Hindu-Muslim communal riots that had occurred in post-Independence India, were caused by the vicious propa-ganda and murderous activities of the RSS. Coming to recent years, people found a Congress government at the Centre behaving like a mute spectator to the long drawn out BJP-led violent run-up to the demolition of the Babri Masjid and its aftermath, that left thousands dead. The United Front governments that succeeded the Congress at the Centre, refused to punish the BJP-RSS leaders like Advani who led the murderous ratha-yatra, or Murli Monahar Joshi and Uma Bharti who were caught by the media inciting their followers, and then embracing each other to applaud the demolition of the Babri mosque. Even a CPI leader, the late Indrajit Gupta who was the Home Minister in one United Front government at the Centre, failed to book these guilty VIPs who are still moving around blatantly flaunting their communal politics.

What is even more dangerous—by their acts, these Hindu communal groups are setting a model for their counterparts among the Islamic fanatics. Discovering the effectivity of violent agitations by the Hindu communal groups to pressurize the state to concede to their religious demands (however undemocratic they may be), the orthodox Islamic groups feel encouraged to resort to the same means to suppress expressions of democratic dissent within their own community. By staging violent demonstrations in Kolkata, they succeeded in forcing even the self-proclaimed secular CPM-led Left Front government to oust Taslima Nasreen from the city. Interestingly enough, despite their religious differences, both the Hindu and the Islamic fanatic groups harp on one common slogan—'hurting of religious feelings'—as an excuse for launching violent offensive against any challenge that they may be facing from secular and liberal minded sections of their respective communities.

How long can the democratic forces allow this increasingly aggressive torrent of religious communalism to rush unabated and devour the secular and pluralistic ethos of the society and political system? When the administration, which is required to firmly stem the rising tide of such violence, refuses to do so on the plea of 'respecting religious sentiments', it behoves the secular political parties and civil society groups to build up resistance against the goons of the Sangh Parivar and similar gangs. It is necessary for such parties and groups to organize defence squads to protect not only the minorities, but also exhibitions, cultural functions, film shows from the vandalism of the saffron brigade and their ilk. In other words, they have to come out on the streets to take on the Saffronshirts. Does Kannur represent that resistance?

It has to be admitted however that the secular political party which is fighting the RSS in Kerala—the CPI(M)—is itself no paragon of virtue. In West Bengal which it rules, it employed its 'harmads' (the local Bengali term to describe hired killers—derived from the Portuguese pirates who invaded Bengal in the 18th century), to kill poor farmers in Nandigram who refused to give up their land for the benefit of the corporate sector which the CPI(M) preferred as an agent of

industrialization in the state. Similarly in Kerala, the Left Front government that it heads, is grabbing lands from poor farmers for so-called development projects—which often make way for real estate mafia and unscrupulous industrial interests (provoking popular protests in places like Erayamkudy in south Kerala, Moolampally and Valanthakkadu in the Kochi area, Mooriyad in Thrissur—and even in Aralam in Kannur itself where landless tribals are demanding equitable distribution of land). The only point that may be cited in favour of the CPI(M) in Kerala is that, in Kannur by directing its hit men against the RSS flunkies, it has sent a message to the most dreaded enemy of the Indian people. If it can nip in the bud the Sangh Parivar's nefarious game plan to gain a foothold in a state which had always been known for peaceful harmonious coexistence among different religious communities, the CPI(M) would be able to call the bluff of a dangerous gang of Right-wing politicians and hoodlums, which had been holding Indian civil society to ransom by creating the impression that they are invincible.

Kerala is the only state where the saffron brigade is facing armed resistance from a Leftist force. In other parts of India, none of the RSS members or leaders had so far been harmed by their clones in the opposite camp—the various Islamic terrorist groups which use the rhetoric of jihad against 'Hindu infidels'. In the name of jihad, they have resorted to the senseless tactics of indiscriminate bombings that take a heavy toll of innocent lives—including members of their own community—as during the Mumbai blasts, which were a reprisal for the Babri Masjid demolition, or their later operations in other cities as a show of their revenge for the post-Godhra genocide of Muslims in Gujarat). Despite their braggadocio, they have not yet been able to touch a single notorious leader of the saffron brotherhood. Curiously enough, in Kannur too, although the CPI(M) had gone for selective attacks on individual members of the Sangh Parivar (unlike the mindless massacre of civilians that is indulged in by the Islamic terrorist groups), the top guns who are the kingpins of the saffronite operations have managed to escape punishment. The majority of the RSS ranks who had been killed or maimed so far are petty activists, supporters, or cannon fodder. The choice of such soft targets could be dictated either by the CPI(M)'s lack of courage to take on the head honchos of the RSS, or its calculation that the elimination of its cadres would deprive the Sangh Parivar leadership of its main buttress and frighten off potential recruits. It may be guided by Trotsky's famous dictum defending Red Terror : "It kills individuals, and intimidates thousands."

Though the CPI(M) retaliation had been cruel and barbaric, the RSS-BJP in reality had been asking for it for a long time. The bravado displayed by them following their unopposed march of devastation and killings, beginning from the Ramjanambhoomi movement, and reaching its climax in the cold-blooded genocide of Muslims in Gujarat, had become an affront to all civilized norms. Their leaders and ranks needed to be put in their place. Since the only language they understand is that of violence, the CPI(M) hit men have addressed them in that language in Kannur. The RSS has finally met its match in the CPI(M), whose hit men can be as barbaric in suppression of any opposition, as the RSS thugs.

If the BJP takes heed of the warning, and wants to operate as a civilized Right-wing party (for which there is enough space in the present political system), it should conform to the basic secular tenets of the Indian Constitution. It has to

give up its inherent ambition (derived from its RSS parentage) of setting up a future Hindu theocratic state through extra-constitutional means like violent offensive against religious minorities and suppression of cultural freedom of secular people. If it persists in this strategy, it will be resisted—if necessary by force. It may then invite more Kannurs in other parts of India. It is about time that the BJP leaders learn from history to find out what happened to their ideological gurus in the past. Benito Mussolini (who founded the fascist Brownshirts in Italy, and from whom the ideologues of Hindutva derived the inspiration to organize the Indian Saffronshirts who are buttressing the BJP today) met his end at the hands of Communist partisans in 1945. If the BJP leaders prefer to take lessons from the indigenous mythology that they worship, they must be surely knowing the story of Krishna who grew up in obscurity in Gokul and was destined to kill the villain Kangsha. Forces are ripening in present Indian society to bring about the doom of the modern reincarnation of Kangsha—the Sangh Parivar. □