

Fighting Fascism

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Last month, the New Delhi-based human rights group *Anhad*, along with some 90 other organizations, held a two-day national convention on the theme, 'Countering Fascism: Defending the Idea of India'. It was attended by scores of social activists from various parts of the country. Predictably, it received hardly any mention in the so-called 'mainstream' Indian media.

The first session of the convention was devoted to discussions about *Hindutva*. In his introductory remarks, the noted social activist Ram Punyani dwelt on the ideology and politics of *Hindutva*, which he, as did many other speakers after him, characterized as the Indian form of fascism. He argued for the need to examine the links between *Hindutva* terrorism and free-market terrorism represented by Western economic and cultural imperialism, and also to recognize the fact that *Hindutva* fascism poses a graver danger not just to Muslims and Christians, but in fact, to all marginalized groups and toilers in the country, particularly Dalits and Adivasis, since it represents the worldview, interests and agendas of entrenched 'upper' caste elites. He pointed out that in this regard there was little difference between the 'hard' *Hindutva* of the BJP and the 'soft' *Hindutva* of the Congress, and noted the deep inroads that *Hindutva* forces have made into every pillar of the state, including the bureaucracy and the judiciary, besides in the educational field and the media.

Elaborating further on the theoretical analysis of *Hindutva* as fascism, noted historian K N Panikkar spoke about how the *Hindutva* agenda is now being advanced not so much by communal riots, as in the past, but by what he termed as 'organized attacks on Muslims and Christians, amounting to genocide', often in complicity with agents of the state. Earlier, he said, communal riots were largely localized affairs, but now these organized attacks are happening simultaneously in different parts of the country, particularly in states ruled by the BJP or by coalitions in which the BJP is a major partner. In other words, he said, 'There is a convergence between the state and *Hindutva* fascist organizations since the state promotes or allows these attacks'.

These well-planned attacks on Muslims and Christians, Prof Panikkar pointed out, are characterized by far greater brutality than previously, and no effective action is taken against their perpetrators, whether by the Central or state governments. He indicated that although the present Government at the Centre had come to power on what it had touted as a 'secular' platform, it has taken no effective action against *Hindutva* terrorism. In this way, he argued, 'There is no fundamental difference between the present UPA Government and the previous BJP-dominated NDA Government vis-à-vis fascism. The only distinction is that while the latter was aggressively communal, the former appears passively communal. But both allow and create spaces for fascism to advance'. In the last four years of Congress-led rule, he noted, groups like the RSS, the Bajrang Dal and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and their allied social and cultural outfits have made rapid inroads across the country, 'so much so that today there is hardly a village in India where they do not operate'. He also argued that many of the terror attacks and bomb blasts that have occurred in India in recent years might have been orchestrated by *Hindutva* groups in order to justify attacks on Muslims and Christians, whip up Hindu sentiments and thereby consolidate their vote-bank.

Noted academic and legal luminary Prof Upendra Baxi spoke about what he called the 'Modi-fication' of India, a process of 'regression', exemplified in the form of the Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, which, in his words, 'represents a totalitarian order and a

politics of immunity and impunity', a situation where those in power 'can do as they want without any pull of accountability or tug of constitutionality and can practise genocidal governance, a form of governance that continuously destroys democracy'. The 'Modi-fication' of India, he added, also signifies a particular relationship between 'development' and 'destruction', characterized by a close alliance of Hindutva fascism with Western economic imperialism in the garb of 'globalization' that is wreaking havoc with the lives of the poor.

Prof Baxi demanded that the international convention against genocide should be incorporated into the Indian Constitution and law and that the state's 'anti-terrorism' policy be made 'ethical and constitutional'. Remarking about the lack of political will to punish perpetrators of violence against minorities, and lamenting that 'law reforms have become a joke in India', he insisted on the need for a 'legal framework through which obstruction of the administration of justice is made a serious and punishable offence'.

'Hindutva is identical with fascism', declared the noted social activist and Arya Samaj leader Swami Agnivesh. 'The RSS is the single major source of strife and danger to the unity and prosperity of India', he announced. He argued that Hindutva was a formidable threat to the Hindus themselves, and that it aimed not just at the suppression of Muslims and Christians but also of the so-called 'lower' castes, who together form the vast majority of the Indian population. Hindutva terrorists, he said, 'are a blot on the face of India and the Hindu religion'. He also castigated the Congress for providing covert support to Hindutva fascism, and argued the need for a new, united political struggle for social justice and communal harmony and against capitalist depredation and Hindutva fascism.

The same point was made by John Dayal, spokesperson for the Catholic Church. He noted how scores of middle-class Hindus send their children to study in Christian schools but yet passionately support, or else remain silent on, Hindutva fascism. He also pointed out the close alliance between Indian and foreign capitalists and the Hindutva lobby, remarking that it was by no means accidental that the favourite destinations for large investments are now BJP-ruled states, such as Gujarat, Orissa, and Karnataka, where labour and people's movements have been harshly repressed.

Since Hindutva fascism aims also at the suppression of the 'low' castes, and the poor in general, the struggle for social and economic justice must form a central plank of popular mobilization against Hindutva, opined noted social activist and former Vice-Chancellor of Lucknow University, Rooprekha Verma. She also dwelt at length on what she opined was the growing communalization of sections of the judiciary, which, she warned, posed ominous portents for prospects of genuine democracy and secularism in the country.

Magsaysay Award winner Sandeep Pandey pointed out that possible links between Hindutva radicals and certain terror attacks urgently needed to be probed. He critiqued the growing military and 'counter-terrorism' collaboration between India, Israel and the United States, as well as the manufacturing of the image of Muslims as 'terrorists' which global powers are propagating so assiduously in order, among other things, to boost their weapons industries.

The second session of the convention dealt with 'Fascist Terror Networks in India'. In her introductory remarks, Shabnam Hashmi, coordinator of *Anhad*, spoke about the widespread and deep-rooted communalization of not just the political sphere but also of popular consciousness on what she called a 'massive and unprecedented scale'. The Congress is equally responsible, she said, for the rise of Hindutva fascism as the BJP, and she minced no words in claiming that certain actions and statements of the [former] Union Home Minister are no different from what one would expect from an RSS-leader. She came down heavily on the present government for its lack of political will to sternly

counter Hindutva terrorism despite there being ample evidence of this, for its targeting innocent Muslims by arresting or shooting them dead in fake encounters in the name of countering terrorism, and for its dismal failure to prevent attacks on Christians.

Well-known journalist Subhash Gatade spoke about the involvement of Hindutva terror groups in various bomb blasts that have taken place in different parts of the country. He lamented the fact that in several such cases no action at all has been taken against the perpetrators, and pointed that intelligence agencies and the police have sought to cover up many of these incidents. He spoke about the 'media's conspiracy of silence on Hindutva terrorism', adding that large sections of the media had failed to highlight the issue at the same time as they are engaged in a concerted campaign to declare scores of innocent Muslims arrested by the police as terrorists. The same view was expressed by the Nagpur-based writer and human rights activist Suresh Khairnar, who claimed that many terror attacks for which the media, the police and the intelligence agencies had blamed Muslims might actually have been the handiwork of fiercely anti-Muslim Hindutva groups, who, by seeking to attribute these attacks to Muslims, have sought to whip up anti-Muslim hatred, consolidate the Hindu vote-bank and, thereby, create a climate whereby oppression and demonisation of Muslims can be easily justified.

Noted senior Supreme Court advocate and head of the Delhi-based Human Rights Law Network Colin Gonsalves argued that it was crucial to examine the direction in which the courts were moving in India on the issue of communalism and secularism as reflected in their judgments. This would indicate both the ideology of the judges as well as what future judgments might be expected. Providing details of various Supreme Court decisions, he expressed his pessimism in this regard, suggesting that several of its recent judgments appeared to be clearly supportive of the Hindutva agenda and ideology. This, he opined, represented a decline of the judiciary's secular foundations. 'As a lawyer,' he remarked, 'I don't think the judiciary will help much in our struggle to counter communal violence, and to protect the rights of minorities, Dalits and the working classes. It hasn't helped much in the past, and it is increasingly moving in the direction of the rich. I don't say that all, or most, of the judges are pro-Hindutva, only that the doors of the law to uphold the rights of the oppressed are gradually closing'.

This, he suggested, should be seen in tandem with the mounting communalization of the police and of government-appointed commissions. He also noted the total unwillingness of the government to take any action against Hindutva terror groups as suggested by some commissions that it itself had appointed to look into cases of massacres of minorities.

Another legal luminary and fellow advocate in the Supreme Court, Prashant Bhushan, referred to the menacing rise of Hindutva fascist forces that have started resorting to terror bomb blasts and are threatening to export what they consider as the 'Gujarat model' of genocidal attacks on minorities to the rest of the country. In this regard, he pointed out how scores of innocent Muslims have been arrested and languish in jail for bomb attacks for which they have no responsibility at all, and in this the police, the intelligence agencies and influential sections of the media are in league with Hindutva forces and the state.

Bhushan referred to communal bias in sections of the judiciary, in addition to other arms of the state.

The third session of the convention was devoted to the theme 'Fascism and Neo-Liberal Economic Policies'. To consider Hindutva fascism simply as a religious or cultural or political phenomenon is misleading, suggested medical doctor and social activist Abhay Shukla. Rather, fascism, including in its Hindutva garb, also has to be understood as reflecting a certain economic agenda of entrenched and oppressive local

and global elites. It is intricately related to the new 'global' face of rapacious 'neo-liberal' capitalist exploitation, and, as the case of Gujarat shows, is perfectly compatible with communal violence, which serves it by diverting the attention and wrath of oppressed classes/castes from their real caste/class oppressors onto imaginary and manufactured 'enemies', such as Muslims and Christians. The 'neo-liberal' development policies adopted by the Indian elite are generating widespread and mounting unemployment and pauperization of the poor, and Hindutva fascism thus serves as a tool to stamp out dissent and resistance of the subaltern classes, he said.

Elaborating on this thesis further, noted development economist and documentary film-maker Jaya Mehta remarked how increasing economic insecurity caused by the 'neo-liberal' economic policies leads to social psychological crises, which makes it easy for Hindutva outfits, representing the interests of entrenched elites, to play on these insecurities of the poor and the middle classes and whip up anti-Muslim, and now, increasingly, anti-Christian hatred and violence. In such a climate of economic insecurity, added independent journalist and social activist Satya Shivaraman, obscurantist religious cults flourish, holding out the illusory promise of hope amidst despair, while at the same time further exacerbating the commercialization and politicization of religion.

Anil Choudhry, co-ordinator of INSAF, a Delhi-based activist group, further elaborated on this argument, stating that fascism, capitalism and war go hand-in-hand and that fascism must be seen as an 'economic project'. Hindutva fascism, he suggested, must be seen in the context of the current stage of the crisis of global capitalism, where, because global capital has taken over and the Indian state has given up many of its commitments to the poor, the state is now faced with what he termed as a 'moral crisis about its rationale'. Increasingly, the only rationale that it finds is 'security'-maintenance in the face of the civil-war-like conditions that the neo-liberal economic policies have themselves generated.

The lively and immensely productive convention concluded with the announcement of a long list of plans for practical action to be taken to galvanize the struggle against communal fascism. But as to how and when and by whom these well-meaning and certainly very urgent suggestions will be taken up remains to be seen. □□□ [15-11-2008]