

# Searching for a Progressive Hindu/ism: Battling Mussolini's Hindus, *Hindutva*, and Hubris

by Balmurli Natrajan



**A**ROUND THE TIME ANTI-JEWISH CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIANS WERE SEEKING A Christian legitimation for racism and Nazism (as described by Susannah Heschel in *Tikkun's* March/April 2009 issue), the long process of racializing Hinduism, militarizing Hindus, and Hinduizing India had already matured. On March 19, 1931, Mussolini met with Dr. B.S. Moonje at the Palazzo Venezia, the Fascist headquarters in Italy. Moonje was there to study the applicability of the fascist youth organizations, Balilla and Avanguardisti for Hindus. He was no ordinary visitor, being the mentor of Dr. K.B. Hedgewar, who was the first *sarsanghchalak* (supreme leader) of the Hindu supremacist organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, the National Volunteer Corps founded in 1925). Through the 1920s, the RSS had generated a public fascination with fascism in western India. In his diary Moonje wrote: "The idea of fascism vividly brings out the conception of unity amongst people.... India and particularly Hindu India need some such institution for the military regeneration of the Hindus.... Our institution of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh of Nagpur under Dr. Hedgewar is of this kind, though quite independently conceived."

Hedgewar's successor, M.S. Golwalkar (known popularly as "Guruji"), made the RSS vision even more explicit in 1939: "To keep up the purity of the Race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic races—the Jews. Race 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 Hindusthan [a term for India that literally means the "place of Hindus"] to learn and profit by." Less than ten years later, Nathuram Godse, a Hindu militant with close connections to the RSS, would assassinate Mahatma Gandhi. Godse also had close ties to the Hindu Mahasabha (Hindu Convention), an organization that inhabited the same ideological field as the RSS, and was a close confidant of V.D. Savarkar, the future leader of the Hindu Mahasabha and chief theoretical inspiration for the RSS credited with the notion of India as the exclusive land of Hindus.

The blood on the hands of the RSS, however, did not prevent its vision from taking firm root in independent India. By 1948, the RSS had already dealt a severe blow to the idea of a plural secular India espoused by Jawaharlal Nehru and the humanist Hinduism espoused by Gandhi by successfully ensuring that the Jewish Question became the Muslim Question for many Hindus in India. Over the next fifty years, the RSS enjoyed tremendous growth, with an estimated 700,000 to 900,000 men and boys attending its daily military drills in 2004. Simultaneously, it spawned an intricate network of political and cultural organizations collectively known as the *Sangh Parivar* (Collective Family) in India and abroad. The Sangh organizations advanced their major political vision and philosophy, *Hindutva*. The term, coined in 1923 by Savarkar, literally means "Hindu-ness," but in reality combines the prejudice of Hindu supremacy with the policy of fascism by fusing nationalism, racial purity, religious exclusivism, and militarism.

Members of all the minority religions in India, as well as secularists and progressives of all hues, are doubtless deeply troubled by the above history and valiantly oppose the Sangh. But these groups are severely limited in terms of the scale, ideological cohesion, and organizational capabilities needed to systematically oppose the Sangh or *Hindutva*. Nor can they rely much on the Indian state, whose secularism has suffered long-term attrition due to resolute attacks by the Sangh, and due to the fact that many state functionaries in India are members of the Sangh. Finally, the millions of Hindus who historically struggled against the hierarchies and oppressions of caste within Hinduism have also failed to systematically challenge the fascism of *Hindutva*. All the above forces' ability to resist *Hindutva* and the Sangh is severely limited by *Hindutva's* rapid consolidation over the terrains of "Hinduism" and "Hindu identity"—a consolidation that ironically owes much to official policies of multiculturalism.

Top: Hamid Roja, a Muslim boy who received burns over 75 percent of his body in Hindu-Muslim riots, recuperates at a civil hospital in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, March 4, 2002.

Bottom: Four-year-old Muslim Atul Azad, foreground, shocked by the riots that burned their small hut, is seen in a temporary shelter with his family in Ahmedabad on March 4, 2002.

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## Misusing Multiculturalism to Marginalize Dissent

OVER TIME—IN INDIA, THE UNITED STATES, AND THE UNITED KINGDOM—HINDUTVA HAS successfully arrogated Hinduism to itself, making the Sangh appear as the chief votary of Hindus and “protector” of Hindu institutions, practices, and “heritage.” It is now commonplace for Sangh organizations to lead any public and legal discourse around “negative representations” of the Hindu community in textbooks, print media, films, and popular culture. This has happened at least in part due to the Sangh’s strategic and cynical uses of the policy of “multiculturalism.” Since the 1970s, various societies have instituted official and semi-official policies of multiculturalism, aimed primarily as bulwarks against racism, bigotry, and ethnocentrism. Multiculturalism today structures public debates of justice, civility, and management of “difference” and “identity.” However, the dominant form of multiculturalism paradoxically gives rise to stereotyped notions of discrete, exclusive, and different “heritages” for every “ethnic,” “racial,” or “national” group. When combined with the notion of “cultural rights,” this ensures the axiomatic status of the fuzzy notions of “insider” and “outsider” (with respect to religions and cultures) such that “outsiders” are deemed as less valid commentators and critics than “insiders.” While some of this bias has existed throughout human history, multiculturalism has made these boundaries sharper and less easy to traverse. Hindutva’s hold over Hinduism is difficult to loosen since multiculturalism becomes Hindutva’s unintentional handmaiden by politically recognizing the latter’s claims of being Hinduism’s “authentic insider” and official representational voice. This is why the real power to resist Hindutva must come primarily from *within* the “Hindu community.”

Multiculturalism is, of course, not to blame for this state of affairs. Hindutva has risen largely due to the fact that progressive and secular Hindus have, for all practical purposes, exited intellectually, physically, and in part sociologically from the space of a “Hindu community.” In a different era but a markedly similar context of rising chauvinism, Hannah Arendt noted in *Jewish Writings* how “Jews who wanted ‘culture’ left Judaism at once, and completely” in the face of a racist European Enlightenment that devalued all things Jewish, including Judaism. This effectively allowed Judaism to be defined in particularly conservative ways. In a similar fashion, it may be said that progressive intellectuals who are at least enumerated in the census as Hindus (and who may even nominally consider themselves spiritually and philosophically as Hindu) have allowed Hindutva to define what Hinduism and Hindu mean.

## The Hindu Fascist Threat Is Real

WHILE A MAJORITY OF HINDUS MAY INDEED FIND THE RISE OF HINDUTVA FASCISM DEEPLY troubling, a dismissive attitude toward the threat of Mussolini’s Hindus has become popular enough to aid the long-term legitimation of the Hindutva vision.

Many Hindus prefer to either think of the Sangh and Hindutva as being the work of fringe fanatics (hence without power), or the above history as being safely in the past (having no power to shape the present), or the Sangh as restricted spatially to particular areas within India (having no power to become a national force), or the Sangh as not fascist. The facts, however, are quite contrary to such a benign presentation of the Sangh. The “political wing” of the Sangh, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People’s Party set up in 1961 as the Bharatiya Jan Sangh), is currently the second-largest party in parliament, next only to the Indian National Congress. It captured state power in India (1998–2004) and continues to hold power in various states all over India. Other organizational arms of the Sangh—the “cultural/religious wing” (Vishwa Hindu Parishad or VHP, the World Hindu Council, set up in 1964), the “paramilitary wing” (Bajrang Dal or BD, the youth wing of the VHP, formed in 1984), and the “student wing” (Akhil Bharatiya Vidhyarthi Parishad or ABVP, All India Student Council, set up in 1948)—have brought together a vast and diverse set of people linked ideologically and militarily to the cause of “protecting Hindus and Hinduism” from enemies (usually Muslims; Christians; secularists; intellectuals including artists, filmmakers, writers, and scholars; Westerners who are critical of Hinduism; Westernization except for its technology; and a vague but selective form of modernity).

Together, their resume includes fomenting and participating in almost every documented religious “riot” in independent India including the 2002 pogrom against Muslims in the western state of Gujarat in which at least 2,000 people were killed and innumerable women were publicly raped, the continuing murders and rape of Christians in the eastern state of Orissa, campaigns of hate (couched as Hindu



*Top: Narendra Modi, the chief minister of the Indian state of Gujarat, is the brightest star in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the “political wing” of the Hindu supremacist Sangh movement. The record of the BJP and the Sangh’s other wings, the author writes, “includes fomenting and participating in almost every documented religious ‘riot’ in independent India.”*  
*Bottom: Residents run following riots in Vadodra, in the western Indian state of Gujarat, on May 2, 2006.*

### ASK THE AUTHOR! September 14: Balmurli Natrajan

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One of Hinduism's most progressive leaders, Swami Agnivesh (about whom the author will write in a future issue of Tikkun), takes part in a rally of the well-known Indian Organization for Learning and Science. The banner states, "Work for All, Wages for All."

pride) such as the one which resulted in the demolition by Hindu fanatics of the sixteenth-century mosque in Ayodhya (north India) in 1992, regular terrorizing of intellectuals who write against Hindutva and Sangh versions of history and society, and the cultural policing of youth who display any sign of "Western" influence (such as women wearing "Western" clothes or couples celebrating Valentine's Day).

Although the various arms of the Sangh regularly attempt to display their "independence" of the RSS ideology, their top leadership are dyed-in-the-wool members of the Sangh. Mr. A.B. Vajpayee (who was the prime minister of India during the BJP regime) even authored an essay titled "The Sangh is my Soul" in the RSS official mouthpiece in 1995. Most recently, a network of terror cells run by various offshoots of the Sangh was unearthed in Malegaon to the northeast of Mumbai. Thus, the Sangh is by no means a fringe element, nor is it a spatially confined force or only a historical reality. Nor has it ever bothered to disavow its continuing commitment to fascism. A dismissive view of the Sangh sadly underestimates the scope, vibrancy, and power of Hindutva today and hence becomes an apology for the Sangh.

## The Vulnerability of Hinduism to Takeover

ANOTHER POPULAR VIEW THAT HAS SERVED TO LEGITIMIZE THE HINDUTVA VISION IS THE IDEA that Hindutva is different from Hinduism. This claim supports the Hindutva project by providing ideological cover for it.

Proponents of this intellectually lazy idea often put it forth without explaining the reasons behind it, thereby becoming complicit with the agenda of Hindutva. For it has been the historical policy of the Sangh to take charge of Hinduism, to shape it according to its vision, and to become its official representative. To this end, the Sangh has worked tirelessly to successfully establish sway over the content and representations of what constitutes Hinduism. This is done chiefly through prolific and persistent interventions in public discourses and "Hindu" practices. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the structural features and history of the term "Hinduism," which originated far more recently than is popularly imagined. Scholarly consensus places this term, in its religious sense, anywhere from the fifteenth to mid-nineteenth century, or no more than five centuries ago. Suffice it to say that the Sangh has made deft use of the lack of a single ecclesiastical structure or centralizing force that characterized Hinduism over its short history, and transformed it over the twentieth century to give rise to a "standardized" and "syndicated" Hinduism over which it now dominates intellectually, organizationally, congregationally, and financially.

The case of Hindutva in the United States offers the clearest examples of how the Sangh and Hindutva have additionally become global phenomena by dominating the terrain of Hinduism. In a recent legal battle over the representation of Hinduism in California school textbooks, the Hindu Educational Foundation (the educational project of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, which is the arm of the RSS in the United States) represented the "Hindu community" whose "sentiments" it claimed to protect from bigotry in existing representations of Hinduism in California textbooks.

Notably, in keeping with Hindutva claims of an eternally pure and perfect Hinduism, the revisions sought by the Hindu Educational Foundation focused on erasing or misrepresenting histories that challenged such hubris. Thus, the foundation assumed all ancient India to be Hindu and proceeded to seek to portray *caste* relations as mere social difference (rather than as a form of birth-based social inequality and stigmatization), to portray *gender* relations in ancient India as egalitarian (rather than patriarchal), and to blur distinctions between the Indus civilization and the later Vedic society in ancient India. Thus, whereas the Sangh's attempt to rewrite history has met with strong opposition from secular intellectuals in India, it is far more successful in the multicultural context of the United States.

Significantly, any opposition to the Hindu Educational Foundation's position gets painted as "Hindu-hating," as happened to the renowned Sanskritist at Harvard, professor Michael Witzel. The result is that most (not all) sites within which Hindus learn, preserve, and transmit their version of Hinduism have a very high chance of being shaped by Hindutva ideology, and many times they are controlled by Sangh organizations. For example, the Campaign to Stop Funding Hate recently offered evidence that the most prominent organization of Hindu students on American campuses, the Hindu Student Council, is linked to Sangh organizations in India and the United States. Mercifully, many Hindu students reacted positively in as much as they sought to distance themselves immediately from the Hindu Student Council.

The claim then that there are clear distinctions between Hindutva and Hinduism, even when the two are systematically blurred by the Sangh, appears hopelessly anachronistic and obfuscates the

work of Hindutva. If the claim is to have meaning on the ground, in teaching Hinduism to young Hindus and its representation to others, let alone in Indian politics, a great deal of hard work has to be done by progressive Hindus.

## Toward a Progressive Hinduism

THE EMERGENCE OF HINDUTVA HAS FAST ERODED ANY space for what may be called “progressive Hinduism.” Such a Hinduism would mean at the very least a clearly anti-racist, anti-casteist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, and anti-exploitative theology, cosmology, and social vision for living and loving that would enable a democratic Hindu, committed to the separation of religion and state, to emerge in the twenty-first century. Progressive Hinduism does not as yet exist, definitely not in any systematic manner. Yet, the rich traditions of humanism in Indian history—as articulated by its peace prophets and seekers of truth, love, and justice—offer some guide for those who wish to rethink and construct a new Hinduism.

Such an enterprise must begin with the unequivocal rejection of Hindutva’s hubris, which has prevented the emergence of progressive Hinduism in two fundamental ways: by channeling all energies for renewing Hinduism into the recovery of an imagined “golden past,” and by imposing a discursive tyranny that insists upon defining “Hinduism” as a doctrinally homogenous tradition, rather than as a linguistic technology that refers to an incredibly diverse and many times contradictory set of beliefs, practices, and traditions. Breaking free from such hubris clears the ground to give content to a progressive Hinduism that need not be beholden to *all* teachings, dicta, or practices claimed as “essential” to Hinduism.

Progressive Hindus can then engage in principled selection from Hinduism’s traditions and its very large corpus of teachings. We can construct our own “Hindu heritage,” a Hindu liberation theology that makes economic justice, freedom from oppressions, and critical humanism central to Hinduism and constitutive of our spirituality (not an occasional sentimental add-on).

Gandhi began this task a long time ago by reworking the key Hindu concept of *moksha* or Hindu liberation as *not* meaning an other-worldly existence (the Hindu orthodox view), but rather as an ongoing quest for ethical living in the here and now. His notion of a *Daridra Narayana* or a God who was with, for, and by the poor and oppressed articulates a Hindu theology of liberation that makes the *karmayogi* (spiritual activist) the exemplar for Hindus. But it falls short on many accounts, primarily due to Gandhi’s inability to break free from the caste concept (perhaps his greatest flaw) and his underdeveloped theory of the roots of poverty. For, although Gandhi famously developed his theory of economic freedom as the solution to poverty, his reliance on the notion of “trusteeship” (the expectation that propertied classes had to be trusted to be responsible to the community at large) did not allow him to explore the notion of classes in society and the exploitation or extraction of surplus as the root of poverty.

Consequently, Gandhi’s radical insight that “poverty is the worst form of violence”—which directly implicates the *social* and *moral/spiritual* universe and relations as the context for suffering—could not become the foundation for a transformative Hinduism in which personal liberation depended upon the liberation of all from poverty and oppression.

Will progressive Hindus be able to move forward the liberatory potential within Hinduism, build a renewed sense of being a Hindu, and become part of the global processes of renewal underway in many other traditions? I believe that this is not only possible, it is a calling that is impossible to neglect. But it requires the unegotistic critique of much of Hindu scriptures, orientation to this world, and practices, and the simultaneous construction of a new Hinduism that will allow progressives to avail themselves of the sagacity that did indeed exist in the crevices of the past; identify with the struggles and spirit of those subalterns who hoped for Hinduism’s fundamental renewal, even when facing the brunt of its oppressions; creatively rework Hinduism’s large corpus of symbols (including key concepts of *maya*, *karma*, *dharma*, and *moksha*) so that they become insightful teaching tools for living as a progressive; and establish new institutions (and reform or at least challenge existing ones) that will ensure the durability of the above energies and pave the way for a new understanding of heritage as never exclusive, but a selection from one’s particular pasts that belongs to all of humanity’s seekers of truth, equity, and justice. ■



*Seventy people were counted dead or missing in Gulbarg Society—a small Muslim housing development in Amedabad, Gujarat—after a 10,000-strong Hindu mob entered the houses, attacking residents with swords and choppers and burning them alive, with apparent police complicity. Above, the survivors pay homage at the sixth anniversary of the massacre.*

### Know Your Sangh Parivar/ Hindutva Organizational Structure

#### IDEOLOGICAL/INTELLECTUAL NODE:

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, India)  
Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS, USA)

#### POLITICAL WING:

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, India)  
Overseas Friends of the BJP (OFBJP, India)

#### SERVICE WING:

Sewa Bharathi (India)  
India Development Relief Fund (IDRF, USA)  
Hindu Educational Foundation (HEF, USA)

#### PARAMILITARY WING:

Bajrang Dal (BD, India)  
HinduUnity.org (USA)

#### CULTURAL/RELIGIONS WING:

Vishwa Hindy Parishad (VHP, India)  
Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHPA, USA)

#### STUDENT WING:

Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP)  
Hindu Student Council (HSC, USA)