

Profile of the Religious Right

In two earlier essays I had argued one, that all religio-political movements are products of the shift from the agrarian/pastoral to the capitalist/industrial mode of production and the many forms of dislocations that it entails and two, that the religious tradition they invoke is more imagined than real, outcome of political opportunism and contemporary compulsions rather than of a return to sources and fundamentals.

Given their shared roots, the so-called 'fundamentalist' movements bear remarkable similarities which are outlined in the following paragraphs:

The Jew as well as the Christian, the Hindu no less than the Muslim 'fundamentalist' plies an ideology of superior difference. Each confronts an inferior and threatening Other. Each engages in the politics of exclusion. Hence each poses a menace to the minority communities within its boundary. The Jewish ones regard the Arab, especially the Palestinian Arab whose land they covet and colonize, as the Other violent, dirty, uncivilized, over-sexed, and dangerous.

For long, the Hindu militants' sole Other was the Muslim; Christians have now been added to their enemy list. The Christian bigot had long regarded the Jew as the conspiratorial, grasping Other. In the decades after World War II, antisemitism became a widely decried prejudice and receded into the interstices of Christian societies. Gradually, Muslims and coloured immigrants are taking the place of Jews in the western world. For the Muslim militants the Other are the Jews, occasionally Christians and, in South Asia, the Hindus, Christians, and Ahmedis. I know of no religio-political formation today which does not have a demonized, therefore threatened, Other.

The Other is always an active negation. All such movements mobilize hatred, and often harness unusual organizational effort to do so. The Ram Janam Bhoomi campaign lasted nearly two years during which the BJP leaders and their partners reached out to thousands of villages and towns throughout India, with their mobilizing rituals of preparing bricks to build a temple where then stood the 16th century Babri mosque. The campaign ended in December 1992 in a national march to Ayodhya where the mosque was violently demolished by a frenzied mob. Riots and massacres inevitably followed.

Hate pays, however temporarily. The mobilization contributed to the dramatic transformation of the BJP from a marginal political grouping to one of two largest parliamentary parties in India. In Israel, the right wing Likud and its extremist allies began their rise to national power as they mobilized a campaign of hate and colonization of Palestinians under occupation. In Bosnia, the Serbs' campaign of ethnic cleansing preceded and accompanied a mobilization of Christian hatred of Muslims.

In Kashmir, where despite the Maharaja's harsh and discriminatory rule Hindus and Muslims had coexisted peacefully, the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS played an important role in alienating the Muslim population. In recent times 'Islamic' militants have assaulted Hindu homes, villages and committed atrocities that are strictly forbidden in Islamic laws of war.

The cult of violence and proliferation of enemies are inherent in ideologies of difference. All express their hate for the Other by organized violence. All legitimize their violence with references to religion and history. In nearly all instances the enemy multiplies. At first, the Indian Parivar had the Muslim Other for target. It has now turned on Christians. The Dalit, Sikhs, and tribal communities will most likely be its future targets. The Jewish militants are increasingly turning on the liberal and secular Jews of Israel. They have already assassinated one prime minister and caused growing internal strife.

In Pakistan, Christians have been hit, and Ahmedis. At the same time intra-militant violence has proliferated, and wanton killings occur even inside mosques and imambargahs. In Algeria, brutalities have become so complex that it is nearly impossible to identify the perpetrators and, occasionally, even the victims.

Since all religio-political formations bear but little relationship to lived religious traditions and histories, they tend to invent and, in the process, distort their own history and tradition. "I see but only shadows of Judaism and Jewish history in their writings and statements", Moshe Menuhin, a great Jewish scholar said of Zionist ideologues during a meeting I had with him in 1972. In recent decades, a historical eminent group of Israeli historians have been documenting their historical character of Zionist historiography.

When I pointed out to M.R. Malkani, a well-known theoretician of the RSS and currently a member of the Lok Sabha, that India's most respected historians had questioned the validity of their historical claims, he responded with an exclusionary declaration: "Aisay ittihaasiyon ke liye Hindustan mein koi asthan naheen hai. (For such historians there is no place in India.)" In Pakistan, as Dr. K.K. Aziz has amply documented, in the hey day of the "Islamization" process, even the school and college history texts were contaminated with historical inaccuracies and sectarian claims. They still await a clean up which is an essential requirement of the educational enterprise.

All such movements share a patriarchal outlook, and to varying degrees discriminate against women. Amrita Basu, a political scientist at Amherst College, has shown that hostile attitude toward minorities parallels in the 'parivar's' literature a patriarchal outlook and discriminatory practices toward women. In this regard, the Islamists outdo their Hindu, Jewish and Christian counterparts for they alone tend to segregate women, and insist on laws which perpetuate gender inequalities in nearly all walks of life.

All religio-political movements are made up, of comparable cadres and constituents. They appeal to urban more than rural people, to the lumpen proletariat and lower middle class more than the working or upper classes, technical more than the liberal professionals, to the expatriate bourgeoisie more than the national one. The pattern suggests that they attract especially those persons and classes which are caught in the 'middle of the ford' between tradition and modernity and who, in differing ways, feel marginal and socially uprooted.

Given their transitional social environment, leaders and cadres of the contemporary religio-political parties evince ambivalence toward products and symbols of modernity. They love the products of technology and put it to political and personal uses while they evince a negative attitude toward science with its emphasis on rationality and causation. Nearly all have a proclivity to find, post hoc, the evidence of scientific discovery in religious texts, and proclaim the existence of an Islamic, Hindu, Jewish and Christian science that predates the modern discovery of it.

All tend to be grim and humourless. All, to varying degrees, frown on joy and pleasurable pastimes. They have few positive links to culture and knowledge, and regard these as dangerous sources of corruption. Hence the control of educational institutions and regulation of society's cultural life becomes the primary objective of these movements. This tendency has climaxed with the Taliban who have prohibited chess, football, the homing pigeon, kite flying, singing, and dancing as un-Islamic.

All religio-political parties are inherently undemocratic even when they operate in a democratic framework. In theory and practice, they reject basic democratic values - acceptance of pluralism, emphasis on reason as the organizing principle of social and political life, commitment to the resolution of differences by dialogue, and secular legislation. Nearly all favour a centralist and absolutist structure of governance.

What then is the future of these 'Fundamentalist' movements and parties? I think it is limited and quite dim. The reasons for it are multiple: Their links to the past are twisted. Their vision of the future is unworkable. And their connections to contemporary forces and ideals are largely negative. Yet, in their limit lies the reason for us to fear. Between their beginnings and end, right wing movements are known to have inflicted great damage upon countries and peoples. So help us God!

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