

Is Hinduism in danger? BJP's siege mentality*

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In the shrill din of the mob that extols the virtues of Hindutva in India today, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's prescription for a Hindu way of life finds no takers. Remind the demagogues that syncretism is a natural, ancient impulse in Hinduism and they will scoff at you. They'll also possibly ask you to look up a 'defining' 77-page pamphlet called *We - or Our Nationhood Defined*, written in 1939 by Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, who once headed the RSS, the 77-year-old ideological fountainhead of the *Hindutva* upsurge. "The non-Hindu people in Hindustan," wrote Golwalkar, "must cease to be foreigners, or may stay in the country, wholly *subordinated* to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment - not even citizen's rights."

Over half a century later, in the RSS-VHP-BJP's rhetoric of schism, Hinduism and *Hindutva* have become synonymous. "I accept the Hindutva of Swami Vivekananda," said Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee after the two-month-long, state-supported communal riots in Gujarat left almost a thousand dead. "But the type of *Hindutva* being propagated now is wrong and one should be wary of it." *Hindutva* of Swami Vivekananda? The youthful monk, as we all know, rejected *exclusiveness* in matters of belief and believed strongly in syncretism through conscious acceptance of all faiths. When did *Hindutva* - a modern, ultra-nationalist ideology built around a phoney, reimagined glory-become synonymous with Hinduism? It's important to be unambiguous in these surcharged times. Scholars of religion will tell you *Hindutva* has nothing to do with the historical tradition of spiritual practices that we call Hinduism. (Hindu Mahasabha leader, V.D. Savarkar, a key progenitor of the new stream, says *Hindutva* is an articulation of the political and material interests of Hindus, and Hinduism just one of its elements).

Hijacked? But when it goes beyond the level of mere platitude, becomes praxis, and hundreds are slaughtered in its name, its effect has to be examined more closely: effect not on the victim but on the community from which it emerges and in whose name it speaks and acts. The *Hindutva* war cry that seems to exert its sway across classes has to be seen as a surface symptom, a self-assertion that betrays a cultural anxiety and neurosis, a deep mutation in society. The subtext of Hinduism's appropriation by the Hindutva horde has a grimmer implication for the believing, politically liberal Hindu: it has been well and truly hijacked by the mob. And the majority, as is always the case in such overt politicisation of religious symbols, is watching in ambivalent silence.

"A group of fundamentalists has hijacked the Hindu agenda successfully," says Swami Agnivesh. "Mainstream Hindus have been left out. *Hindutva* is a total distortion and perversion. The subtle, profound, enduring qualities of Hinduism are no longer in the debate. Hindu society is suffering." That is the crisis facing Hinduism today. The believing, liberal community feels it's being demonised for the sins of its few members. Religious extremism feeds on what Arvind

Sharma, Birks Professor of Comparative Religion at McGill University, Montreal, calls "secular extremism" where even talking about Hinduism becomes sinful.

Metaphysics: The signs are unmistakable. Sociologist T.N. Madan, emeritus professor at the Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi, says he feels the "burden of Hindu identity". How? "I feel burdened by the calls to glory of the Hindu right and equally oppressed when secularists become suspicious of you if you are interested in Hindu culture," he says. On the other hand, with the ascendancy of the right wing, some Hindus seemingly need to be reminded that the religion they practice is essentially a worldview: a set of beliefs about the divine order, the metaphysics of *dharma* that explains the human condition and gives the community an ethic, and a variety of quotidian practices dealing with purity, pollution, death and marriage. That Hinduism is necessarily amorphous and complex and it has never had a "church" or, as sociologist M.N. Srinivas says, "a clearly defined body of dogma". Says writer-philosopher Ramachandra Gandhi, "We sometimes forget that the word Hindu derives from *Sindhu* or Indus, the river whose *dharma* is to seek the ocean and nourish the land it traverses along...to seek the infinite and serve the finite."

So has one of the world's oldest religions fallen into wrong hands? Yes and no. To be sure, the religio-cultural tradition is not what is in crisis, despite the woolly warnings of the RSS-VHP-BJP combine. Says political scientist Ashutosh Varshney, director of the Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Michigan, "The Hindu right wing thinks Hinduism is in crisis. But this fringe isn't interested in Hinduism and society, where the Hindu faith is flourishing, as reflected in the number of temples being built and the rising religiosity all over India. We actually have a crisis of Hindu nationalism, not of Hinduism." Agrees Sharma, "It's an identity crisis, but not in the usual sense of the word. It is a crisis regarding the representation of a Hindu identity in the political sphere in India in an unimpeded way."

Historian Antony Copley, who teaches at the Rutherford College, University of Canterbury, Kent, echoes the sentiment: "Hinduism is a hugely strong tradition, embedded in a popular support which is almost impregnable. But there are those claiming to speak for Hinduism putting across a distorted version of its beliefs, turning a tolerant belief system into a highly intolerant one, dangerously misrepresenting it. This noisy and strident voice seemingly speaks of Hindus as a whole and consequently the whole is tarnished through the views of a minority."

Power Politics: Hindu scholar Karan Singh puts it most pithily: "A small group of *jehadis* have brought Islam into disrepute. The same thing is happening with Hinduism." This new, *jehadi* Hinduism has as its mission not social reform, like the Hindu revivalist movement of the 19th and early 20th century, but political hegemony. Sunil Khilnani, a professor of politics and author of *The Idea of India*, explains: "Today, it is simply about the acquisition of power. It's not about transforming the nature of Hindu society. That agenda is gone. They see opportunities in using fear and aggression to try and herd together Hindus into a single bloc, in conditions where caste barriers are declining, where electoral conditions are getting competitive and where you get a new middle class who are essentially conservative and who you can push into a kind of religious position. What L.K. Advani calls the uncommitted voter."

Why has the majority of peace-loving, politically liberal Hindus quietly allowed the mob to occupy the 'leadership' of the religion, and the community? Under what circumstances did people forget that pre-Muslim India was not a predominantly Hindu country, that Buddhism was the dominant religion for many centuries and that Jainism had an equally long history? How do the revivalists manage to woo their flock in places like Gujarat, for example - so successfully?

Insecurity: Pratap Bhanu Mehta, a professor at the Centre for Philosophy at Delhi's JNU, attributes the 'crisis' to inter-related reasons: the absence of a positive reformist leadership (like Dayanand, Vivekananda and Aurobindo, who were responsive to the challenges of caste, colonialism); and a general breakdown of confidence in the community rank and file. "Hindus seem to be suffering from insecurity," says Mehta. "It's linked to the crisis of self-esteem about India. A crisis connected to India's well-being and place in the world. There is a feeling that we have been left behind and lost out in the globalised world. So they look for scapegoats and the convenient one is the Muslim." Ergo, in Mehta's scheme of things, the community suffers from a sense of victimhood. But political scientist Kancha Illaiah insists Hinduism is "inherently *crisis-ridden with its inegalitarian ideology*". He argues, "To overcome the cracks being forced by SCs, STs and other backward castes, *the brahmanical core of Hinduism has to resort to communal pogroms* to sustain its identity." Chennai's social scientist M.S.S. Pandian concurs: "It would be a surprise if a religion as hierarchical as Hinduism is not in a state of crisis."

That's possibly only half the story. Hindu leaders and scholars say the time has come to introspect *how the mob usurped the moral high ground*. What happened to the reformism of the late 19th-early 20th century? The Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission? Or even the latter-day Swadhyaya, a Gita- and Upanishad-based spiritual movement in Maharashtra and Gujarat that blends eastern and western philosophies?

Conversion: To be sure, such reform was provoked by the conversion of low-caste Hindus to Christianity, a prospect few could accept with equanimity. The fears of proselytisation *backed by colonial powers* worked as catalyst for a modernist introspection. "Where is that pressure today?" asks Madan. "The reformism is lacking in Hinduism today because they are not being challenged enough." Khilnani agrees: "What we see is the exhaustion of the historical impetus of social reform which arose in the 19th century and continued till about the mid-20th century. Those have really run out of steam."

Clearly, the challenge from the mob is not considered serious enough for Hindu reformism, frozen in an ideological limbo. Agnivesh is critical of this waning zeal. "The reformist movements are no longer mass movements," he says. "They have taken on an institutional form, running schools, colleges. Much energy is wasted securing funds and running these places. They have become part of the establishment. This has taken a toll on ideological commitment and dynamism."

Even the Ramakrishna Mission, a prominent vehicle of that old spirit, has doubts about reformists. Asked why there were no Hindu reformers today in the mould of, say, Raja Rammohun Roy, Swami Dayanand, Vivekananda and Keshab Sen, the assistant secretary of the Mission at Belur Math, Swami Shivamayananda, replied, "Barring Vivekananda and Dayanand,

the social measures attempted by the reformers you mention mostly affected the upper strata. They did not pay much attention to the poor and downtrodden."

Pluralism: Was there something inherently flawed with that reformist spirit that it wasn't able to stand up to the biggest challenge in post-independence India? Political psychologist Ashis Nandy thinks so. "Reformist Hinduism wanted to remodel the religion in a fashion," he says. "The result was that, in some sense, the religion became more unified, sharply defined. Belief began to play a central role. There was decline of family priests, personal gods, community gods and community *puranas*. Reformists looked at a pan-Indian Hinduism instead of universal Hinduism. A lot of reformers forgot that Hinduism's basic tolerance and creativity is dependent on plurality and diversity." Which means the revivalism of today has links - albeit unwittingly - with the reform movement.

Gujarat, today's tinderbox, is most illustrative in this regard. Hinduism's plurality also lies in the fact that there are hundreds of communities still which are Hindu and Muslim, Hindu and pagan. Anthropologist Shail Mayaram, who works on such 'in-between' communities, says Gujarat has the largest number of them: Dawoodi Bohras, Khojas, Piranas, Aga Khanis, et al. "So it's doubly tragic that such polarisation should happen in Gujarat," says Mayaram. "It also clearly proves that we have failed to grasp the complexities of Hindu society. We don't realise that the identities of Hindu groups are far more complex than what they seem to be. Some Rajput identities, for example, had a lot of negotiations with Islam. We've tended to ignore the entire exchange."

Cynicism: Exacerbating the breakdown of this exchange, insists Gandhi, was Partition. "The political consciousness of Hinduism and Islam were polluted by Partition," he says. This spiritual pollution on both sides makes it easier for the mob to pursue its cynical agenda. "There's a curse upon the continent," he says. "We haven't performed the last rites of two million Partition victims. There is an unfinished agenda of atonement. A divided continent has a divided, distorted spirituality. Both Hinduism and Islam are suffering." Agrees Copley: "Hindus should be made to realise the threat to their own well-being from communal conflicts looking back on Partition is so self-evident that they can be persuaded to step back from the brink and recognise the absolute need for mutual tolerance."

Then there are the usual suspects-our feckless 'secular' political parties, a dumbed-down media and a fickle intelligentsia-who have helped the mob. Nandy singularly pins the blame on 'secular' parties, including the Left, for "willy-nilly giving away the leadership of the community": "The BJP doesn't get more than a little over 20 per cent of total votes. Yet, we have been building them up as natural leaders of the Hindus. They are trespassers, not leaders."

The traditionally disconnected and head-in-the-clouds intelligentsia ("It's time for intellectuals to come out as Hindus and condemn what's going on," says Madan) and a careless media have unwittingly put believing Hindus off, much to the glee of the mob. "The media's politics of labelling," says Mayaram, "can have a bad effect. The papers keep talking about the saffron brigade. Historically, saffron is the colour of renunciation. Now you have taken away the colour from the believing Hindu and given it a pejorative ring."

What can be done to 'save' Hinduism? There is a belated bid by liberal Hindu leaders and organisations to come out of the shadows and appropriate the ideological space that is possibly rightfully theirs. Some 500 community religious leaders from all over India are planning to congregate at the Chinmaya Mission in Delhi soon and tell the RSS, VHP and their mob cohorts that they had no place in Hindu thinking. "We need to consolidate liberal Hindu society," says Agnivesh, who is organising the congregation. "The liberal forces should feel proud to be Hindus." There seems to have been some stirrings of change in the near-total boycott by 13 *akharas* (sects) of the meeting of the VHP's apex advisory body, Kendriya Margdarshak Mandal, last June at Haridwar, openly accusing its leader Ashok Singhal of having used them as "bait to blackmail Hindu society and the government".

Caste Divide: But consolidating liberal Hindu forces is easier said than done. First, the state, repository of legitimate force, has to start acting with an iron hand. As Madan says: "The prime minister said he wanted to remove (Gujarat chief minister Narendra) Modi but later changed his mind thinking of the popular reaction. This is a recipe for disaster. The state must begin exercising its authority." Nandy talks about shutting out the mob: "Just don't talk to these so-called leaders. Talk with elected representatives of Hindus of all parties. They are the natural leaders of the community."

There have to be some long-term solutions as well. McGill University's Sharma has an interesting idea: introducing compulsory study of world religions in Indian curricula at all levels. Gandhi has a quixotic solution: convening a "cultural parliament of the Indian subcontinent, where 50 per cent of the representatives would come from Jammu and Kashmir and the rest of the subcontinent".

Varshney, of course, believes there's no need to get panicky: the Sangh is "doomed from within" since the lower castes and rural folk constitute a majority of India. "Elections remain the biggest stumbling block to the VHP-Bajrang Dal style of Hindu fanaticism at the national level. The self-correcting mechanisms of Indian democracy will kick in before long." He points to the glaring flaws of a "state-based Hindu nationalist thinking": that democracy is equal to majoritarianism; that Hindu nationalism has a majority vote in India ("It is the inability of Hindu nationalists to win a majority vote and, in effect, their failure to convince even the Hindus, let alone others, that they should equate the welfare of Hindus with a Hindu control over the state, that makes them so anxious and paranoid."); that it matters whether a Ram temple can be built in Ayodhya ("Ram can reside in people's hearts, or in their household shrines"); and that Hinduism should dominate the state and government policy ("a sure recipe for India's disintegration").

