

Education, Media And Hindutva

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"Media are the extensions of man"



Marshall McLuhan's polemical words would evoke a sense of irony especially as the Hindutva conglomerate spreads its tentacles deep the impact of which reverberates through the foundations of democracy on which the edifice called India is built. Given the fact that the media stands firm as one of the pillars of democracy the greatest triumph that the RSS-BJP combine affected was the complete take over of the regional media and the partial *coup d'etat* regarding the national media both print and electronic. The telecast of *Ramayan* stands out as a watershed as far as the relationship between Hindu nationalism and the media is concerned. The blood-splattered ball begins its agonizing roll from here.

As the political center occupied by the Congress collapsed in a heap, the far right moved with lightening speed across the board and settled down perfectly to fill the power vacuum that had been created. The RSS and its parliamentary mask the BJP went from strength to strength aided greatly by the breakdown of the Nehruvian consensus and the quintessential loathing that the middle classes exhibited towards the failure of socialist planning and development. It is however interesting to note that the social and electoral success of the Hindutva conglomerate is essentially built on a monolithic cadre-based organizational platform that inculcates ideological centers in young students and creates fascist narcissists out of perfectly normal men and women.

The organizational strength of the Sangh Parivar emerges out of the educational base that has proliferated and expanded over the years. The grassroots mobilization once stabilized then goes on to infect the body politic of the democratic set-up propelled by the hegemonization of the media. The RSS-BJP combine therefore played its cards right from the start, created cadre cells in the form of schools, punctuated society with its recruits and ideologues in vast numbers, slowly but surely built an impenetrable base and waited for the Congress to commit a mistake. The media gradually became a victim of the Parivar. The vernacular press in Gujarat is just one example of how and to what extent the Hindutva conglomerate has penetrated media in all its *avatars*.

Leading up from Hindutva's grassroots conspiracy, the mass cadre base that the Sangh Parivar has successfully manufactured for itself provides the requisite numbers for the populist, ceremonial and opulent campaigns that the Parivar undertakes from time to time

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in order to maintain support both social and electoral. The most remarkable and beneficial tactic used by the Hindutva forces has been the use of public rituals like processions and large-scale *aratis*. These rituals and processions have increasingly received considerable media attention especially since large crowds started thronging the sidewalks to catch a glimpse of Advani impersonating the new-age Ram.

The image of the god-king Ram has undergone a veritable sea change ever since the Hindutva conglomerate has begun producing new and ingenious images of Ram on the assembly line. From the obedient prince to the armored warrior, Ram has been transformed into the cultural symbol of the Hindus completely neglecting the multifarious divisions within the community in terms of both caste and religiosity. The Hindutva juggernaut has rolled into the media which has been cleverly and insidiously utilized to project the various images of Ram in order to colonize the imagination of the Hindu masses.

The tele-serial *Ramayan* gave the Hindutva forces a massive impetus, the aftershocks of which were experienced on 6 December 1992 for the first time the most recent installment being the post- Godhra carnage in Gujarat. What stands out as particularly interesting is that Ramanand Sagar's magnum opus was telecast on the national network even though religious and community-sensitive programs were debarred from being televised openly on such a mass scale. The impact that the serial had on the masses was phenomenal considering the number of times women actually sat to pray in front of their television sets when the program was on.

Ramayan was successful in accomplishing something more significant than arousing a sense of devotion and piety in the majority community. The overwhelming reception given to Advani's *rath yatra* was largely the impact of the hold the serial had on the Hindu masses. The epic had created euphoria unparalleled in history that was carefully used by the Hindutva forces to unleash their brand of what they very cleverly called *Ram-bhakti* mounted on a Toyota rath followed by a massive crowd of Bajrang Dal cadres impersonating the venerable monkey-god, Hanuman. The people were swept off their feet and why wouldn't they be? After all the Ram plastered across the rath was a replica of the hero of the mythological *Ramayan*.

Hindutva's Grassroots Conspiracy: Education, History and Culture

Before we go anymore into how the Hindutva conglomerate used the national media, it is imperative to understand the grassroots mobilizational conspiracy underway in various states. This exercise cannot be completed unless one examines the educational structure of the Sangh Parivar. Teaching, one needs to realize is crucial to the saffron agenda. The first Sangh school emerged in a significant context of the partition at Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh in 1952.² A Shishu Shiksha Prabandh Samiti was set up to coordinate the

² Sarkar, Tanika, 'Historical Pedagogy of the Sangh Parivar', *Seminar* February 2003

primary schools while *bal mandirs* began to develop for high school levels. In 1977, Vidya Bharati was institutionalized to coordinate schools at the all-India level.

By the 1990s, it was running the second largest chain of schools in the country controlling about 4000 schools, 40 colleges, a total of about 36,000 teachers and ten lakh students. It developed the Halflong Project for the North East where Christian educational consolidation had blocked their spread. It also reached out beyond the regular school and college circuit. There are *shishu vaticas* for pre-school infants to orient their physical, mental, social and spiritual qualities in tune with Sangh *sanskaras* or dispositions. The other project is that of *sanskar kendras* in geographically remote or socially marginalized areas. Once a week lessons are provided by single teachers to generate training in 'religion, patriotism and Indian culture.'

Teachers are recruited from RSS families. To domesticate teachers who come from other backgrounds there are training camps that are organized several times in the year widening the ideological net considerably. The regular schools are located in areas that have an RSS center and a VHP-controlled temple usually attached to the school premises. The school is thus embedded within what Tanika Sarkar calls a tight and comprehensive range of institutions that would in calibration, coordinate the child's leisure, education, ideological growth and religious understanding.³

Schools are founded in neighborhoods that have a fairly homogenous caste, class and community profile. The bonds are strengthened by the teachers who make regular home visits and dialogue with parents outside the school premises. The boundaries between the school and the family, between students and parents are fluid and Sangh teachers carry forward the school pedagogy beyond the school into the familial space. The school thus functions as a pivotal point within a larger envisioned community that aligns neighborhood ties to Sangh influence.

Even though the Sangh schools follow the regular school board curricula and examination system they have their own distinctive method of disseminating knowledge. An apparatus of audio-visual and pedagogical operations was developed to intervene and remake the historical understanding in opposition to the old secular textbooks. School walls display refigured maps of undivided India to drive home the point that the Hindus do not consider the current one to be the true map of India. The attempt is to pin the blame for the partition on the Muslims so that a justification for contemporary revenge can be sought.

The walls are festooned with pictures of Hindu heroes like Shivaji and Maharana Pratap. A continuous narrative of Muslim wrongdoing is immediately and imaginatively disseminated while the idea of resistance is ineffably associated with royal figures rather than with common people. Distinctive notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, enemies and defenders of faith and nation are produced and instantaneously conjoined. In school assemblies, principles address students frequently on themes of Hindu patriotism. Many of these principles are *kar seva* veterans and the ultimate objective is to build an undying thirst for revenge.

³ Sarkar, Tanika, 'Historical Pedagogy of the Sangh Parivar', *Seminar* February 2003

The textbooks used by these schools are true to Savarkar's definition: Hindutva, as a continuous historically stable cultural essence unifies India. All those who live outside its orbits are non-Indian or enemies. The geographical features of India are depicted as objects of worship for the Hindus. Place names are fleshed out by pointing out their contiguity to Hindu pilgrimages, to sites where Hindu heroes fought against the Muslims. Modern or medieval cities are identified by their ancient names. All past achievements are referred back to the ancient pre-Islamic era.

The landscape is bereft of all Muslim or Christian cultural or religious presence. Nor do they figure as historical actors except as fifth columnists for foreign powers or as invaders. History is shown to develop around a single axis, which neatly bifurcates Indian people into true Indians and aliens, as Hindus and others, as victims and tyrants, as invaders and vanquished.

The past is not used as an evolving process nor does it have a synchronic unity or connectivity. Events or figures are pulled out of it at random, violating historical sequences at will to illustrate the same point across time and space. This methodological violence is imperative if the present politics has to convince people that Ram, a Hindu epic hero was humiliated by Babur, a medieval emperor and that present day Muslims must be killed and humiliated to avenge that past. There is no analysis of caste, poverty, gender abuses, no mention of what Hindus have done to Hindus. Power seems to generate from Muslims as a homogenous bloc directed at a seamless mass of Hindus. The students therefore are not insulated from violence rather they are fed with a surfeit of violent tales, demanding violent reflexes in response.

The school hymns and mantras invoking a militant and militarized nation worship are modern ones though composed in Sanskrit and Sanskrit lessons teach spoken and modernized Sanskrit. There is little actual knowledge of ancient Indian history or conditions, which are congealed into stylized icons. Myths, epics and select fragments of historical episodes are joined together again traversing chronological sequences freely obliterating generic boundaries. Consequently Babur becomes the enemy of Ram, displacing Ravana and the history of the demolition of the Babri mosque is attached, with illustrations to form a sequel to legends of Rajput and Maratha valor against the Mughals.

Demons and Mughals flow into each other and the Muslim becomes a free-floating signifier completely detached from concrete historical context. Patriotism is entirely identifies with hatred and revenge, the country with threatened borders. The nation figures as death- the courting of it, the infliction of it.

The disturbing and extremely dangerous fact is that a similarly vitriolic and unfounded historical perspective is being disseminated through the State Education Boards in BJP-run states. Apart from being the successful laboratory of the Hindutva experiment of which the saffron conglomerate is extremely proud, Gujarat is also one of the first states in which the school curriculum was changed for the worse. The measures implemented by the state of Gujarat are not restricted merely to the content of the social studies or

history textbook. They include measures within the arena of education that point to distinct attempts to impose a slant and color on educational institutions, stifle the basic rights of children belonging to the religious minorities and impose hegemonic cultural pretexts and values.⁴

Before we go into a detailed critique of the contents of the Gujarat textbooks, it is important to look at some attempts made by the Gujarat Board to give a distinct sectarian slant to education. On January 9, 2000 the Gujarat state education department sent out a GR directing all schools to subscribe to the RSS magazine, *Sadhana*. When principles of institutions especially minority institutions protested at the outrage, the circular was withdrawn. Another circular brought out in December 2000 has insisted on principals of all schools compulsorily sending their teachers to Sanskrit training camps in preparation for the move to make the subject mandatory learning and teaching in schools.

In well-known Ahmedabad schools where the students are Muslim and the teachers Hindu, the management has discovered a unique way of inflicting hurt on the minority community- they just refuse to teach. Muslim students in several schools are compelled to give exams on Ramzan Id or Bakr Id. The question papers for standards V and VI at the Ahmedabad Municipal Council schools in the year 2000 contained a particularly derogatory reference to Muslims-"What is the basic difference between *miyas* and others?" The Social Studies textbooks of the Gujarat State Board are sorry examples of where a narrow and sectarian ideology can take us. In the Standard V textbook Indian culture is outline as Hindu culture.

There is a clear and underlying assumption that the popular faiths and beliefs of the vast majority of people who lived here before the ancient period were Hindu as we understand the term today. The conflict or convulsions between the Dravidian and Aryan cultures and their belief are not merely glossed over, they are presented as non-inimical to each other in the desire to substantiate the claim that Hinduism was able to absorb contradictions and conflicts peacefully. By implication or actual assertions the textbooks also state that the real conflicts came with the interaction with other faiths.

The state syllabus detailed in the texts being currently used by the Gujarat state board outlines clearly for the teacher and student of history that when the authors of the textbook write about India they use the term for the modern nation as synonymous with Hindu. The student is instructed that the idea of studying social studies is to develop a true understanding of ancient India. The political implications of these assumptions are significant and dangerous because immediately for the history learner paradigms have been drawn.

The textbook allegedly aims at understanding the ancient Indian culture in the proper 'perspective'. This perspective outlines erroneously that the ancient age begins with the Vedic times. It becomes clear from this introductory text for the fifth standard child that no perspective of world ancient civilizations is given through the syllabus, the desire is

⁴ Setalvad, Teesta, 'Gujarat: Situating the Saffronization of Education', The Saffron Agenda in Education- An Expose, *Sahmat* August 2001

just to begin and end with India, but ancient India has been made synonymous with the Vedic and that values like 'respectable status of women in Indian culture' are rooted in the characters depicted through stories taken from the Vedas.

Apart from the stated objective of portraying ancient Indian culture as synonymous with the Vedas, the textbooks also proceed to depict Indian culture as inherently superior to any other culture. In a chapter titled 'The Cultural Heritage of Ancient India' the young ninth grade student is told: "Ancient Indian history covers a period of about four thousand years. It can be divided into the following periods-

- The Indus Valley Civilization period
- The Vedic period
- The post-Vedic period
- The Epic period
- The Age of Buddha and Mahavira
- The Maurya and post-Gupta period
- The Early Muslim period"

The same text goes on to assert that from the beginning of the Indus valley period to the end of Hindu supremacy the contributions of the Indian civilization were unique, implying that thereafter with the Muslim period the contribution could not be measured in a similar fashion.

Meanwhile, the syllabi followed by the various Vidya Bharatis and Shishu Mandirs in other parts of the country continue to disseminate knowledge through the ruthless violation of all historical facts. The introduction of such texts in the regular school system and the rewriting of history in BJP-ruled states has massively increased the number of children who are being made victims of this second rate and poisonous knowledge. The following examples would further illustrate the argument-

- Our land has always been seen with greedy eyes...this story of invasion and resistance is our 3000-year long *Gaurav Gatha*. When this proud tradition began is difficult to say as no books were written in this period but we believe that the first man was born on this land (page 8, *Gaurav Gatha*, for class IV, Shishu Mandirs)
- To our ancestors those marauders were like mosquitoes and flies that were crushed (*Gaurav Gatha*, page 9)
- Lakhs of foreigners came during these thousands of years but they all suffered humiliating defeats...the Mughals, Pathans and Christians are some of these people (*Itihaas Gaa Raha Hai*, Class V, Shishu Mandirs)
- *Nutan Gadya Padya Sangrah* has articles by Rajju Bhaiya, Tarun Vijay, K.C Sudarshan and Jalam Singh Ravlot of the Swadeshi Jagran Manch. Among the claims made in this book are the 'truth' that the earth is round and revolves around the sun was given to the world by Indian scientists thousands of years ago.

Some gems from the *Sanskrit Gyan* series are particularly engaging:

- Homer adapted Valmiki's Ramayan into an epic called *Illiad*.
- The cow is the mother of us all, in whose body the Gods are believed to reside.
- The Egyptian faith was based on Indian tradition according to Plato and Pythagoras.

The following one takes the cake:

Ram Janmabhoomi is the birthplace of Ram.

The *Sanskar Saurabh* textbook for class V presents Sati as a Rajput tradition that we should be proud of (Chapter 28, *Sanskar Saurabh*, Book 3 for Class V). Another edition of the same series for class IV reveals that it is because we are the children of Manu that we are called *manushya* (*Manu aur Manav*, Chapter 3, *Sanskar Saurabh*, Class IV). A chapter of the same book goes a step further and exhorts the Hindu students to action by calling the Muslims as butchers and killers of cows and therefore if the Hindus kill and butcher the Muslims there is nothing wrong in it (Page 57, *Sanskar Saurabh*, Class IV). Afghanistan, Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh are shown as parts of India and the student is urged to pray to a picture of this Akhand Bharat and pledge that he will achieve the same shape for our country (Page 31-32, *Sanskar Saurabh*, class IV).

A few more examples are illuminating-

- Bharat is the most ancient nation in the world. Our original ancestors Manu and Shatrughan gave life to the earth. The Indian ocean is referred to as the Hindu Mahasagar (page 1, *Akhil Bharatiya Sanskriti- Gyan Pariksha Pradhnotri*, ed. Vidya Bharati, for Class 8)
- The Hindu belief are characterized as *Dharma* while Sikhism, Christianity and Islam are described as sects (page 16, *ABSGPP*)
- Urdu is not an independent language. It is Hindi written in a different script (page 65, *Sadachar ki Batein*, class IX)
- Sri Krishna is referred to as a nationalist (Page 65, *Dharma Shiksha*)

Students are tested on questions such as the following:

- Who got the first temple built on the birthplace of Shri Ram in Ayodhya?
- Why is Babri Masjid not a mosque?
- How many times did foreigners invade the Ramjanmabhoomi? The answer being seventy-seven times.

- What was the number of the struggle for the liberation of Ram Janmabhoomi, which was launched on 30 December 1990? Answer: 78th struggle
- The students are also asked to mention the names of the young boys who laid down their lives while unfurling the saffron flag at the birthplace of Lord Ram.

Historian Irfan Habib⁵ is of the opinion that since Hindu- Muslim antagonism has provided that main ground on which the RSS has flourished since its birth in 1925, it is not surprising that it has devoted much attention to projecting a view of medieval India that should justify its founder Hedgewar's description of the Muslims as "hissing Yavana snakes". It is professedly because of the primary place it accorded to the Muslim threat that it remained out of the freedom struggle. It had indeed from the beginning its own version of the two nation theory. Medieval history therefore had to be so shaped as to present two nations always at war, one brutally assaulting, and the other nobly defending.

Pre-eminent in its discourse is the image of the Muslim as destructive barbarians, foreigners and immoral degenerates. K. S Lal, the favorite historian of the RSS began his career as a RSS spokesperson with his book *Growth of Muslim Population in Medieval India* (published 1973). Here he gave a picture of the continuous decline of the total Indian population from 190 to 120 million between AD 1200 and AD 1500, through large-scale massacres of Hindus perpetrated by the Muslims. With these unsubstantiated figures he has become an authority on history for the RSS.⁶

The purpose of this explication was to outline and define the fundamental attempts being made many of them successful at creating a whole class of young men and women who are fed on blatant historical lies and distorted strains of thought so that when required this youth can make the numbers at *Dharm Sansads*, rallies, processions and participate in blood-curdling genocides. Having implemented the agenda at the grassroots level and while this large group of fanatics are being nurtured, the RSS went ahead and started making inroads into the media, both print and electronic. Let us first look at the print media.

Saffronizing Newsprint: The Assault on the Print Media

Two questions are extremely important in this regard: Is it possible that the mass media can be implicated in the manifest saffronization of society and politics? And What role does the media play in the orchestration of violence and pogroms? Any analysis of the media's role in communal politics in riot situations must differentiate between two distinct but mutually dependent phenomena.

⁵ Habib, Irfan, 'The Rewriting Of History by the Sangh Parivar', Against Communalisation of Education: Essays, Press Commentary, Reportage, *Sahmat* 2001

⁶ Lal's other publications include *The Mughal Harem* (Aditya Prakashan, 1988), *Legacy of Muslim Rule* (1992) and *Muslim Slave System* (1994).

First, the act of incitement of violence and the rationalization of the same after the event and second, the act of disarming the reader or viewer by conflating religion and nation, constantly lowering the level of political discussion, inundating readers and viewers with diversionary or trivial issues and by the very forms and techniques of news dissemination.

Walter Benjamin in the 1930s described the modern newspaper as a theatre of literary confusion. The current situation in India vindicates the stand taken by Habermas that political discourse in the public sphere dominated by the mass media is driven by corporatism, advertising and most importantly the state.

The RSS has made use of every cunning vein its body to manipulate and set the agenda in terms of what the people should know and internalize. The agenda more often than not is diversionary and the media has gone along as an accomplice both willingly or out of ignorance and lack of professionalism.⁷ The rise of the BJP in the 1980s led to the most dramatic shifts in media coverage. A section of the press especially the language press has systematically communalized itself, while openly communal notions have found favor and gained respectability to an extent in the secular English language press as well. The Shah Bano case was converted by the BJP and a broad section of the print media into a symbol of the supposed Otherness, separatism and backwardness of the Muslims.

Media analysts opine that the BJP's forte is the creation and management of the pseudo-event. A pseudo-event is the product of the complex interplay of various factors including the emergence of journalists as publicists of partisan causes and the presence of an issue, however remote that can be exploited to put the party into the headlines. For instance the BJP attempted to create a pseudo-event by claiming that hundreds of Hindu temples had been destroyed in Kashmir after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Unfortunately for them the journalists decided to verify the BJP claim and found it to be a total fabrication.

The pseudo-event par excellence of the BJP however was the fictitious martyrology it generated following the aborted assault on the Babri Masjid in October 1990. So biased was the media coverage that the Press Council had to censure four Hindi newspapers- *Aaj*, *Dainik Jagran*, *Swatantra Chetna* and *Swatantra Bharat*. *The Pioneer* in the same month front-paged a report which claimed that the Muslim driver of Advani's chariot was encouraging Muslims at several places to offer kar seva in Ayodhya.

Newspapers in India tend to follow a rather quaint practice of selectively providing news in riot situations. Reports are particularly insidious whenever the victim of an outrage is a Hindu and the perpetrator a Muslim. However, when the victim is a Muslim more often than not the news reports will be terse and lacking in nomenclature or other clues. Even though 90 per cent of victims in a riot are Muslim the fact that their names are not reported when the names of a few Hindu victims are can create a false and dangerous impression of Muslim aggressiveness. Likewise the majority of those indulging in looting

⁷ Vardarajan, Siddharth, 'The Ink Link: Media, Communalism and the Evasion of Politics', *The Concerned Indian's Guide to Communalism* (ed.) K.N Panikkar, Viking 1999

and arson may be Hindus but the naming of one Muslim can contribute to the fiction of Hindu victimhood in a communally vitiated atmosphere.

The Gujarati press is particularly guilty of acts of omission as well as clear attempts at incitement during communal riots. That most newspapers in Gujarat are owned by hardcore RSS members is another issue altogether. Stories about the dishonoring and molestation of our women is a recurring theme in communal media coverage. The legacy of the 1969 pogrom was carried forward to the carnage in 2002 where leading newspapers reported the rape and murder of Hindu women in lurid detail. The Editor's Guild of India Fact Finding Mission has directly indicted the vernacular newspapers in Gujarat particularly *Gujarat Samachar* and *Sandesh* for abettment and incitement to anti-Muslim violence.

Sandesh crossed all limits of responsible journalism and was at its inflammatory best. The major characteristic of the newspaper had been to feed on prevalent anti-Muslim prejudices of its Hindu readership and provoke it further by sensationalizing, twisting, mangling and distorting news or what passes for it. On 28 February 2002 the main headline says: 70 Hindus burnt alive in Godhra. Another report on the front page called to the Hindus to avenge blood by blood.

The 1 March edition of the same newspaper claimed that Ahmedabad had been handed over to the army when the worst killings in the city happened on that very day. Another report claimed that the whole Sabarmati Express would have been torched had it not been delayed as a mob of Muslim fanatics was waiting at Signal Falia with petrol bombs.

Sandesh on March 2, 2002 featured a ghastly picture of charred and mutilated bodies claiming that they belonged to the Godhra train victims without establishing the facts. The pictures were so gruesome that they actually fanned the flames of violence in localities that had hitherto remained peaceful. The following morning the front page of the newspaper contained the photograph of slaughtered women, allegedly Hindus but no details were given.

The newspaper continued its biased and one-sided coverage further into March as the 6 March 2002 headlines screamed: Hindus beware-Haj pilgrims return with a deadly conspiracy. The denunciatory adjectives used liberally to describe the Godhra incident is strikingly absent in reporting the subsequent genocide. The most horrific acts of violence were repeatedly sensationalized with the use of a few devices like bold letters and large pictures of mangled dead bodies. When reporting the death count, red stars were used for crude emphasis.

Sandesh also effectively circumvented the code of conduct that disallows naming of communities involved in the violent conflagrations. Areas in the state or the city with large Muslim populations are referred to as 'mini-Pakistan'. Scattered across the paper were numerous reports of 'religious fanatics' abducting tribal women and thus facing the wrath of the Hindus. Selective usage of words and phrases serves to identify and further communalise the minds of the people. More significantly and often with tragic

consequences, it also serves to denounce all Muslims as religious fanatics and all Hindus as devotees.

Often the news items did not seem to have much concern about the veracity of facts presented. There is no attempt to qualify statements or to name sources of information. On 7th March a report claims to have discovered Godhra's 'Karachi connection', the connection being that an entire area in Karachi is named Godhra. There was no attempt to authenticate the information.

The role of pamphlets and handbills is also extremely essential to note. Computer generated or more crudely and clandestinely printed pamphlets and handbills, without any imprint line were brought out and widely circulated. The dissemination of such material was reported in the press though the Gujarati press did not give it much importance as it went against their pro-RSS bias. Their authenticity was difficult to establish but their diabolical intent was unmistakable.

One pernicious piece of hate propaganda calls for the economic boycott of the Muslims. Another four-page pamphlet calls for funds for the security of the Hindus as their life is in danger. The most damaging of these is an alleged secret RSS circular listing ways of killing or debilitating the minorities. A booklet called the riot manual was in circulation Ahmedabad containing a list of -do-it-yourself brutalities.

While we discuss the stranglehold of the saffron brigade on the print media particularly in the states, it is imperative to ask a very fundamental question: What role did the national television network play in cementing a concrete base from where the Advanis and Joshis could launch their offensive? As has been mentioned before, the telecast of *Ramayan* created a ready flow of devotional support to the Ram Temple campaign. The RSS-BJP combine made a clever choice of time to whip up mass hysteria and Ramanand Sagar's televised epic served them well.

Televised Hindutva: Ramayan and the Saffron Onslaught

Although not many analysts are prepared to make the link between the serial and the feverish propaganda campaign for the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, subsequent events do suggest a strong link. For Tapan Basu and others, 'the serialized Ramayan reduced Hinduism to its mythology which was then presented as the essence of nationhood...it provided to the new aggressive middle class spawned in the 80s a packaged, collective self -image which with the mobilizing by Hindutva became the motivating force for changing by force and violence the image of the country itself.' Elsewhere Appadurai and Breckenridge have argued that even though the televised epic was not openly incendiary with regard to religious sentiments there can be no question that the electronic rediscovery of the Hindu epics gave tremendous leverage to Hindu religious nationalists as they escalated the communal stakes in places like Ayodhya.

Television gave the epic a potency it never had before and the state knew this. Peter van der Veer states that Faizabad High Court's decision to open the padlocks and the joyous

televised coverage of this act of 'Liberation' were attempts by the ruling Congress to manipulate the politics of Rama devotion in its favor. This is where the Congress went wrong and the BJP showed that it could play the game better. The benefits were more iconic than ideological. Rather than Ram espousing Hindutva, the RSS-BJP gang fully exploited the popularity of the televised epic, even going so far as to strike godly poses for propaganda photographs and using Sagaresque décor for their *raths* and stages at political rallies.

An early and perceptive critic of the serial was Romila Thapar who linked the televised epic to the Indian state's desire to iron out socio-cultural diversities and fabricate a homogenized culture that would be easier to control. Speaking at a gathering of the *Virat Hindu Sammelan*, Ramanand Sagar justified his work by comparing the serial to the rediscovery of a forgotten presence.

The serial's broadcast however violated a Nehruvian taboo of the secular and non-partisan status of government institutions, in this case Doordarshan. The government's avoidance of religious imagery had aimed to secure a modern democracy that ruled irrespective of caste or creed. The weekly telecast of *Ramayan* inaugurated a new era not only in television but in politics as well, with the popularity of these serials allowing the ambivalent status of religion to be exploited and to sanction Hindu nationalist initiatives in the name of the people.

The decision to telecast *Ramayan* represented an important departure from previous practices in three respects. At a fixed time every week, there would be a program marked by the symbols of a particular community. The broadcast was to a nationwide audience, not to a local or regional one. And by rendering it in a format meant for the general audience, Hindu programming was now being offered not as part of some quota system but identified with culture in general, not limited to particular festival days, stations or communities.

It was the show that definitively established the Delhi-centered, Hindi language medium across the country's diverse population: a serialized version of one of the world's oldest epics featuring prominent gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. In a 1988 op-ed. piece, S. S. Gill, who had recently retired as Secretary to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, explained his reasons for commissioning of the tele-epic. He identified the *Ramayan* with the national-popular.

"*Ramayan* is basically a secular epic," he wrote, "which portrays a bewildering range of human relationships and socio-political situations...In his search for an expressive metaphor to symbolize a welfare state of his dreams, Gandhiji could do no better than think of Ram Raj. You take away *Ramayan* from the consciousness of the Hindus and you leave them socially and morally maimed...The fact of the matter is that the Hindus constitute 83 percent of the country's population and the large Indian ethos is predominantly Hindu and the *Ramayan* is its center-piece."

Beginning with the argument that the *Ramayan* is universalist and humanist, Gill proceeded to describe it as essentially Hindu, and then to say that India itself is essentially Hindu. He attributed the *Ramayan's* powers successively to its plot and characters, its values and its omnipresence. Disagreement could only spring from liberal guilt or from the minorities who were in any case outnumbered, he asserted.

A confusion of genres highlighted the mysticism of the serial. Commentators described it variously as a mythological soap opera and an epic soap opera. In the Hindi press, the *Ramayan* was described as a *dharmic* serial. Many viewers actually felt that God was giving them a *darshan* every Sunday morning. In this sense, the serial was able to create a collectively observed weekly ritual, one that was extraordinary to witness. It offered narratives of the ethical life and its trials, tribulations and rewards, told in alternatively melodramatic and devotional modes.

When Ramanand Sagar depicted ancient Hindu society as politically and socially equal to the challenge of modernity, indeed to have anticipated and surpassed it, he drew on an Orientalist-inspired current of thought that had achieved considerable circulation by the nineteenth century. His ability to stage it on national television with the approval of government censors as well as enormous audiences, indexed its continuing political potency.

Most of the other signs of ancient science are pronouncedly military in character. The Maarich-Subahu incident, in episode four, is the first disclosure of the largely 'defence' oriented understanding Sagar offers of ancient Indian learning. The incident also provides the first encounter in the story with the 'Other', namely the *rakshasas* (demons). The notion of righteous destruction as a fit means to deal with "sin, injustice and oppression" is categorically affirmed in the serial. There is the suggestion of the necessity of the national, racial defence. The repeated sanctification of weaponry is noteworthy.

Sagar also interpolates themes that seem directly inspired by the then nascent Ram Janmabhoomi campaign. There is deep discussion of Ram's conversation with his birthplace, which more or less corresponds with the imagery projected by the Hindutva ideologues. Audiences could read the serial as offering a benign tale of a bygone age but one with an urgent message for the present. Viewers could understand the *Ramayan* as offering a way of talking not just about faith or the epic past but about what kind of leadership a society required.

In the VHP's iconography, Rama is a heavily armed warrior. The devotional movement towards femininity in the worship of Ram was jolted towards militancy as a result of the more martial portrayal of Ram and his actions in the *Ramayan*. Moreover through the power of television Ayodhya and Ram's life in and return to that city are brought very close to the viewer. There can be little doubt that Ayodhya as a real historical place in Uttar Pradesh has been effectively connected by the RSS and the VHP to the campaign at Ayodhya through television.

In contrast with the old iconography, which provoked reverence and contemplation, the VHP representation is propagandistic and seeks to steer and direct thoughts and action. Thus there is careful selection and rearrangement of elements from the available repertoire according to the kind of behavior sought to be provoked. The point is not of course to stimulate Hindu consciousness as such—least of all in the vaunted plurality and inclusiveness of that term, but to attach the appellation 'Hindu' to the desired aggression.

The Rama story was presented as belonging to the public domain. After the screening of the epic consecutively many Hindu myths and rituals began to be declared as legitimately belonging to the public sphere inviting the participation of one and all in their commemoration and re-enactment. The images of saffron-clad *sadhus*, ancient science working wonders, women suffering benign oppression and the idea of a proto-modern state seemed to be resembling the VHP-RSS propaganda to such an extent that it is impossible to tell one from the other.

The rhetoric of Ram Janmabhoomi, to its ineffable advantage centered on the violence of loss, on the pain and humiliation of an enforced deprivation, all encapsulated in the demonized figure of the Muslim 'other'. The Hindu imagery in market circulation, in the *Ramayana* videos, calendar art or advertising redefined popular symbols and proffered an invigorated sense of identity by inserting these symbols into a narrative of improvement.

The attempt at creating a hegemonic cultural space where all other influences are carefully ignored and removed from public memory succeeded with *Ramayana*. The Congress government in granting permission for the telecast neglected the power of the televised media. The support to the Ramjanmabhoomi campaign began its ascendant rise from here. The Sangh Parivar soon captured the imagination of the swooning Hindu masses and the rest they say is history.

Hindu nationalism's flirtation with the media today has turned into an open relationship with more and more regional newspapers donning the saffron garb. The hegemonizing process begins with the *shakha* schools and spreads outwards into the public domain through the print media. The creation of a dominant Hindu public sphere can be traced back to the decision to broadcast a mythological on state television for the first time. Therefore the saffron offensive comes at you from all sides, a sort of a three-pronged attack.

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