

The Impact of Hindu fundamentalism and its political effect for Asians in Britain

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The resurgence of Hindu nationalism and fundamentalism in India has had a profound political and social impact on the Asian (Hindu) communities in Britain. This contribution will try to trace some of the developments and their political effect for Asians in Britain. I also want to touch on the ways in which Asian women have resisted Hindu fundamentalism in Britain.

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A New Phase of Hindu Communalism

In December 1992, the world witnessed a terrifying unleashing of Hindu communal and fundamentalist violence and frenzy that culminated in the destruction of the Babri Masjid, a mosque in Ayodhya, North India. More than any other single event in recent years, it put paid to the idea that Hinduism is or can be resistant to the fundamentalist project. The widespread assaults, killings and rapes perpetrated on Muslims in India was widely perceived by many Hindus in India and the India Diaspora, as legitimate in the 'war' against all Muslims, other minorities and anyone else who dares to display disloyalty to the notion of a *Hindu rashtra* (nation).

The key players in stirring up communal violence are the Vishwa Hindu party (VHP), Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) and the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). The VHP is a rabid Hindu revivalist organisation that was mainly responsible for the organisation that was mainly responsible for the Hindu yatras (marches) organised all over India in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Its main objective is to forge a mass Hindu identity based on anti-Muslim hatred. The yatras were particularly effective in stirring up communal riots because they were carefully orchestrated to take place in Muslim ghettos. The RSS claims to be a cultural organisation working mainly with boys and young men (and more recently women), but whose leaders in the past, have aspired to emulate German nationalism under Hitler, built on anti-Semitic and racist ideology. Its central objective is to forge a militant Hindu identity, by communalising the arenas of sports culture and other extra-parliamentary spaces. The BJP is a political party whose

primary focus is to gain electoral dominance on the back of Hindu communalism and fundamentalism.

According to many social commentators in India, the 1992 period marked a new phase in Hindu nationalism, a particularly savage form of sectarianism involving a specific construction of the Hindu self; a masculine, aggressively communal self that is intolerant of other faiths and even other conceptions of Hinduism.

Hindus in Britain

The destruction of the Babri Masjid created schisms not only between the Hindu and Muslim communities in Britain but also within families. It had a deep and chilling impact on me personally and more generally on many Hindu families living here. I found myself forced to question the open allegiances to the right wing forces, displayed by my family and relatives. It became clear that many Hindus, across the class divides, sympathised, if not directly supported the cause of the Hindu right. The arguments, quarrels, shouting matches and silences revealed a schizophrenia as memories and feelings of partition resurfaced, even though many were not affected by it, to justify the need to take revenge against Muslims.

We have witnessed the impact that Sikh and Muslim fundamentalism has had in this country in such communities as Southall, Bradford and Tower Hamlets, particularly in shaping male youth identity, many of who have turned to religion as a result of legitimate disaffection with anti-racist and left/progressive movements. But very little is said about Hindus who are perceived to be a homogenous group that has achieved success through economic success and high educational achievement, which in turn has led to a high degree of assimilation within the host community. Any attempt to understand the rise of religious fundamentalism within Asian communities, however, requires a careful and complex analysis of the political development of Asian communities, their history of migration and patterns of settlement with reference not only to the political developments in the Indian subcontinent but also in relation to multi-cultural politics by which the British state relates to minority communities. Muslim, Sikh and Hindu fundamentalism have charted a similar and yet different course leading to different configurations of economic, social and political power at local and national levels, and, to similar and dissimilar demands.

There are two important aspects which feed into the making of the Hindu (political) identity in Britain, the first is to do with direct events in India and secondly, linked to this, is the impact of the rise of Muslim political identity among Muslims in Britain.

In the UK, Hindu revivalism has been quietly gathering strength — a result of the multicultural politics, a largely de-politicising and anti-democratic, homogenising process with the effect of co-opting certain layers of the community, usually business and religious institutions and individuals into the state apparatus by giving them a voice as 'authentic'

representatives of their communities. In this way, more radical progressive voices within the Asian communities are isolated. Hindu communal forces in the guise of cultural and religious organisations have often been well represented and funded at local and national levels. Operating within a social and cultural milieu rather than as overt political organisations, Hindu right wing forces often control resources and exert power over their constituencies in particular localities. During the period of the destruction of the Babri Masjid, many Hindu right wing groups/ organisations flourished, some becoming 'mouthpieces' for the Hindu right, whilst others lay claim to hard pressed resources to meet the needs of the 'new' Hindu community.

Hindus have always organised along caste lines in this country. Divisions in caste and class perhaps, more marked than in other Asian communities, coupled with prejudice against Muslims has led to fragmentation amongst Hindus. Until recently, these divisions at least at the political level, were often submerged under more general Asian and Black identities that prioritised struggles against racism. The aftermath of the Rushdie affair and the construction of a global Muslim identity and politics, has however, led many Hindus to forge a unity in order to achieve some measure of political power in Britain. The politics of multi-culturalism with its tendency to construct Asians as religiously monolithic entities, have also entrenched and perpetuated class and caste divisions, benefiting fundamentalist projects in Asian communities. Multi-culturalism has therefore successfully avoided a challenge to the divisions of class, caste and power. In many respects, British Hindus are following the example set by Muslim communities, demanding an end to the so called discrimination of Hindus. This demand was one of the driving forces behind the attempts to unify all British Hindus over the Watford (Bhaki Vedanta Manor) Temple affair. The temple was for a long time run by white Hindus and were largely regarded by Asian Hindus, as an alien and 'inauthentic' development. Now, however, demonstrations and rallies around the temple are organised by Asian Hindus, attracting thousands of Hindu men and women from around the country, creating a timely opportunity for the display of a daring and militant face of Hinduism. Hindu leaders have cynically used the temple as a way of asserting the new Hindu identity. The struggle to keep the temple from closure has become a symbol of an 'unacceptable' threat from the British state to Hindu cultural and religious autonomy.

When the Babri Masjid was razed to the ground, Hindus in the country made a number of important demands through numerous press releases. The most important of these was the demand to be recognised as 'Hindus' rather than as Indians or even Asians? Interestingly, whilst 'applauding' and 'celebrating' the carnage that was perpetrated on Muslims in India, Hindus asserted their 'respect' for the law as British citizens in this country. Hindu leaders were careful not to directly attack Muslims here, instead they referred to them as fundamentalists, so differentiating between mythical notions of Hindus as essentially non-violent and western and Hindu constructions of Muslims as unruly and fanatical. In the face of Muslim (imagined) provocation in India, Hindus appealed for calm and for the right to be protected presumably from Muslim retaliation, although this

was never clearly stated.

Yet the aggressive and intolerant face of Hindu fundamentalism was clearly visible in their attempts to censor and ban plays and films that were deemed to have caused 'offence' to Hindu sentiments and religious beliefs. For example, a play by the renowned playwright, Habib Tanveer was picketed in Leicester. Leicester council was also lobbied (unsuccessfully) in order to enforce a ban on its staging. In the case of the film 'Bhaji on the beach' predominantly Hindu men actually surrounded a cinema in Nottingham, intimidating women as they attempted to get in. Many Gujarati newspapers refused to carry articles that voiced criticism or opposition to the Hindu right wing in India.

Women and Hindu Fundamentalism

In their Hindu manifesto of sorts, contained in the press releases they put out, Hindus also reiterated their commitment to family values. In India the impact of Hindu fundamentalism has been particularly devastating for women, for example the revival of sati practices and the attempt to universalise the Hindu personal laws are perceived to be integral to the new Hindu identity. The VHP has been very vociferous in demanding that the Hindu personal code should be applicable to all. The BJP, with its eye on electoral power, on the other hand, has been more guarded arguing for a Hindu code under the guise of a uniform civil code. Another frightening manifestation of patriarchal control was revealed when Hindu demonstrations took place in the city of Ahmedabad against abortion. In fact it has been vigorously promoted by the Indian state, over the years, with very little opposition, as part and parcel of family planning programmes. In Ahmedabad however, the demonstrators condemned abortion as acts of 'murder'. One can only make sense of this demand in the context of the overriding need for Hindu nationalism to encourage all Hindus to feel a sense of belonging to a 'dominant' community or risk becoming an oppressed minority! The anti-abortion demonstrations also condemned working women and advocated that women should give up their jobs in favour of unemployed men. Whilst, in this country, Hindus have not been as vociferous in the demand around abortion or to be governed by personal laws as have some Muslims, their manifesto reiterates a commitment to the rule of patriarchal law. The law in Britain, in relation to marriage, divorce and child custody matters, has become a particularly fertile ground for fundamentalists of all hues. Much of the day to day casework of Southall Black Sisters and other Asian women's groups bears witness to these developments - where the law and the welfare system have become effective arenas in which fundamentalists and orthodox leaders attempt to assert the precedence of religious and traditional customs over rights and remedies laid down in civil family law. If India heads towards a thorough implementation of personal family laws, it is very likely that this will have significant impact on Asian women in this country.

Resistance

The part played by Asian women, across the South Asian religions, in resisting Hindu fundamentalism in Britain has been vital, especially in revealing interrelations between nationalism, fundamentalism and gender and in expoding the myth that muslims are the only fundamentalists in Asian communities. Women, have in particular, borne the brunt of the new found Hindu militancy and intolerance, insofar as it has been utilised to maintain the patriarchal family and to shield women from the 'corrupt' and 'secular' influences of British society. There have been numerous confrontations between Asian women, and anti-communalist forces, and Hindu right wing supporters and leaders. One such confrontation took place between Asian women from Southall Black Sisters and Brent Asian Women's refuge and the Kutch Leva samaj, a Hindu caste community, who had organised a mela in north London in 1993. The mela attracted thousands of Hindus and gave the appearance of being a cultural event, although it was presided over by religious figures, including some who openly supported the Hindutva movement. We decided to use the occasion to distribute leaflets advertising a forthcoming anti-communal public meeting organised by another group in which we were actively involved, the Alliance Against Communalism and for Democracy in South Asia. The leaflets, appealed to all Hindus to uphold a tolerant and humane vision of Hinduism espoused by the likes of Mahatma Gandhi.

At the mela, we were met with a hostile and aggressive response. The stewards, including some women, hurried dignitaries and visitors in without giving them a chance to take a leaflet from us. Some stewards became hysterical and apologetic at the contents of our leaflet, screaming and lurching forward to assault us. Throughout, they hurled abuse at us, calling us 'Muslim' whores and bitches. They even threatened to rape us and humiliate us by publicly stripping us naked. Boys as young as 11 also mimicked the adults, threatening rape and making lewd gestures. Men and boys alike, distinguished us from their 'wives, mothers and sisters' to justify their acts of sexual aggression towards those who did not belong to them. (This logic does not apply when disciplining women within the family). It is not without irony that their threats of rape and humiliation were reminiscent of the actual act of rape and humiliation suffered by Muslim women in Surat, India, by Hindu mobs who then videoed the event and distributed the tapes for public viewing.

Those members of the public who did take our leaflets, were made to return them to the stewards at the gate. If they refused, stewards simply pulled the leaflets out of their pockets and tore them up. Very few members of the public protested in the wake of what they perceived to be 'justifiable' control of 'trouble makers' by the organisers, although a few did try. The tearing up of our leaflets took on ritualistic dimensions as they delighted in their displays of aggression. We were told that we were causing offence to the public, although the public were not allowed to make up their own minds. Eventually, the stewards called the police who duly arrived in a special riot control van and threatened to arrest us for 'breach of peace'! The police were themselves bemused by the confrontation but were

clearly intent on upholding the rights of the organisers. Our protests then took on a two-fold struggle as we also battled with the police for failing to arrest or even warn the stewards who tried to assault and threaten us.

Geographically and metaphorically, we were confined to the margins of the events and by implication, the Hindu community, by being cast as 'outsiders' and 'whores in the pay of Muslim fundamentalists'! But the most insidious aspect of their behaviour was the fact that they became the 'thought police' and 'gate keepers' of the community, guarding against any threat to their power and control over their constituency. No one was permitted to question the fact that, almost quietly and stealthily, using the pretext of a 'social' occasion, Hindu religious leaders were moulding their identities and destinies, from which escape would be at the cost of banishment from their communities.

We came away bruised and angered by the experience but also with resolve to fight the rise of Hindu fundamentalism here and to support progressive secular forces in India. With the help of younger boys who were given the task of looking after 'visitor' cars, our last act of defiance was to place our leaflet on the windscreen of every parked car in the compound. There were hundreds of cars and we had a field day.

Conclusion

For the first time in Britain, the destruction of the Babri Masjid, led to an articulation of 'Hindu' interests: Right wing religious and orthodox forces have consolidated their hegemony of so called Hindu interests. Intellectuals and cadres alike, are fostered, either to speak on behalf of a very class and caste ridden community as if with one voice, or to train fodder for the ongoing 'war' against Muslims. We are witness to a militant and political Hindu identity in the making evident in the demonstrations around the Watford temple, the now regular Hindu marathon, organised in the North of England or, in the confident way in which social and religious institutions in Asian communities are policed and controlled by leaders who are desperate to hang onto their power and authority. It remains to be seen how the new Hindu identity will develop in the wake of resistance against religious control particularly by women within all Asian communities on the one hand, and against right wing and racist developments in India and in Europe.

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Postscript

L K Advani, leader of the BJP, made a very successful visit to Britain in the summer of 1995. A move designed to win favour and funds from the Hindu Diaspora as the Indian general election looms large. He was given a warm reception by Asian community leaders, businessmen and politicians such as Piara Khabra. The latter invited him to the Houses of Parliament but claimed not to have talked politics! L K Advani was also the chief guest, along with the Home Secretary, Michael Howard, at the opening of the

biggest Hindu temple outside India, the Swaminarayan Mission is a highly evangelical and affluent wing of the Hindu religion — sometimes regarded as the 'growth religion' in this country. It purports not to be involved in politics. The facts speak for themselves.

References

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P.S.

* <http://www.sacw.net/aii/Hfund.html>