

India: Hindutva trumps “development”

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Some commentators have deplored the conferment of India’s highest civilian honour, the Bharat Ratna, on Madan Mohan Malaviya, but many have welcomed its award to the Sangh Parivar’s first Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. The latter include even Amartya Sen, himself a Bharat Ratna and Nobel Laureate, who called Mr Vajpayee a “great statesman” while expressing some reservations about his policies, but praising the “human quality” behind “his leadership”.

The first group is emphatically right—not so much because Malaviya was given the award 69 years after he died, thus spurring possible demands for similar honours for those long dead like Tagore, Phule, Gokhale or Vivekananda, or even Shivaji, but because he founded the Hindu Mahasabha, which has for a century has unabashedly propagated and practised virulent Hindu communalism.

The Mahasabha now wants to erect statues of Gandhi’s assassin Nathuram Godse, a wholly disgusting idea, but one which bears continuity with its past leaders Malaviya, Lajpat Rai and BS Moonje. Moonje visited Mussolini in 1931 and tried to shape the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh along militarist lines following the Italian fascists’ model of national “regeneration”. (See www.sacw.net/DC/CommunalismCollection/ArticlesArchive/casolari.pdf)

Malaviya in 1923 falsely complained that “Hindu numbers are depleting”, advocated the “reconversion” of Muslims and Christians to Hinduism, would accept food and water only from Brahmins, and was devoted to the cause of protecting “the sacred thread (janeu), religion, the Vedas, Puranas, cows and Brahmins”—ideas which would embarrass Hindus who believe in inclusiveness and oppose the caste system.

Malaviya was honoured because he’s considered the founder of Banaras Hindu University. But Tejkar Jha, who is researching a book on BHU, says on the basis of documentation of the period 1905 to 1916 (when the university was established) that Malaviya was at best a “fringe player” in its foundation, the major role being played by British Theosophist Annie Besant and the Maharaja of Darbhanga, who toured India collecting funds for it. (See <http://scroll.in/article/697214>)

The government’s motive in honouring Malaviya is parochial and narrowly related to Mr Narendra Modi’s nomination as the Lok Sabha candidate from Varanasi by his grandson Giridhar. It also seems calculated to impose a Hindutva icon on the public and create a precedent for bestowing honours upon other sectarian and divisive leaders.

What of Mr Vajpayee? He does appear less extreme and divisive than Malaviya. But we must not forget his intimate relationship with the Ramjanmabhoomi movement, which catapulted the Bharatiya Janata Party from two Lok Sabha seats in 1984 to 85 in 1989, but resulted in the demolition of the Babri mosque and a spate of riots in which thousands of citizens were killed.

Mr Vajpayee was responsible for India’s 1998 nuclear tests and embrace of nuclear deterrence (which India for 50 years described as a “repugnant” doctrine). This fulfilled a long-term Sangh obsession, but it degraded India’s security and created a dangerous regional environment, triggering an arms race not just with Pakistan, but more damagingly, China.

Prime Minister Vajpayee was soft-spoken, but his government laid the foundation for extreme communal intolerance. This found its bloodiest expression in the butchery of Muslims in Gujarat in February-March 2002. He first criticised Mr Modi's complicity in the massacre and reminded him of "Rajdharma", but defended him in his infamous "aag-kisne-lagaayi" speech in April.

Had Mr Vajpayee himself followed "Rajdharma", specifically the Constitution, he would have dismissed Mr Modi and not allowed Assembly elections in Gujarat's communally surcharged climate. These paved the way for the triumph of Hindutva in Gujarat and communal polarisation nationally. Polarisation eventually brought Mr Modi to power as India's Prime Minister.

True, after Pokharan, Mr Vajpayee made a half-hearted attempt at peace with Pakistan, and launched the Lahore-Delhi bus. But he allowed the 2001 Agra summit with Pakistan to be sabotaged. He also ordered a scary 10-month-long military standoff with Pakistan after the 2001 Parliament House attack, costing Rs 8,000 crores, which achieved nothing.

Similarly, he failed to free the BJP of the RSS's malign influence and put it on a moderate path when he had a chance to do so in 1999, when the party returned to power with an expanded National Democratic Alliance.

On every critical occasion, Mr Vajpayee proved too timid or too loyal to the Sangh to do the right thing, as distinct from what's expeditious. A dispassionate evaluation of his legacy cannot ignore this largely negative role. On balance, he didn't prove a responsible, even if conservative, leader committed to democracy—leave alone a statesman.

Bharat Ratna awards apart, the Sangh Parivar is making its overbearing influence felt in numerous institutions of the state, even as its functionaries indulge in hate-speech contrasting ramzadas and haramzadas and in provocative acts including ghar wapsi ("reconversion" of Muslims and Christians) through inducements. For RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat, these minorities are "our maal" (goods), stolen by "outsiders", which "us Hindus" have the right to "recover".

The downgrading of Christmas Day as "good governance" day because it coincides with the Malaviya-Vajpayee birth anniversaries is an assault on religious freedom and an insult to a minority.

Even foreign minister Sushma Swaraj, who has a Socialist past and is sober by RSS-BJP standards, has demanded that the Bhagwad Gita be declared India's "national scripture"—a demand that's simply incompatible with the Constitution, under which the state cannot espouse any religion, but must treat believers (or non-believers) as equally entitled to the right to practise their tenets.

What we are witnessing is a concerted campaign by the Parivar to impose a redefinition of the Indian state as essentially Hindu and of citizenship as something based on religion and culture, not civic equality and a participatory community which respects diversity and plurality.

Mr Modi may have made a few token and ineffectual noises about restraining Parivar-style hate speech, but his actions suggest the opposite. Thus he refused the opposition's eminently reasonable demand that he make a statement in Parliament on the hate-speech issue—on pain of holding up Bills on insurance, coal-mining, land acquisition, etc, declared central to the "development" agenda.

By pushing these measures through ordinances, the government is denigrating and demeaning Parliament. Making our democracy rickety, anaemic and dysfunctional is the price Hindutva is extracting from India, in addition to the spread of virulent sectarianism and hatred.

The Sangh's antics are drawing protests from businessmen and chambers of commerce. This group, comprising Mr Modi's wealthiest domestic supporters, includes, among others, Confederation of

Indian Industry president Ajay Shriram, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry president Jyotsna Suri, and HDFC chairman Deepak Parekh (who, incidentally, was among the first to criticise him for the Gujarat pogrom, but who soon became part of the pro-Modi chorus).

This group has been joined by self-styled liberals who are soft on Mr Modi. They contrast the BJP's "economic Right" to its "cultural Right", and back the first against the second. They all regard the Parivar's anti-minority campaign as an "aberration" or deviation from the "development" agenda (read, pro-business neoliberal policies), and as some kind of BJP "self-goal".

They are profoundly mistaken. Contrary to media propaganda, Mr Modi wasn't elected on a "development" plank. This was mere sugar-coating on its hardcore Hindutva agenda, meant to broaden its appeal to the as-yet-non-communalised sections of the middle classes. In 2013-14, the BJP didn't even claim, as it did in earlier years, to have diluted or distanced itself from that agenda.

The agenda was implemented through systematic incitement to communal violence, with 247 recorded incidents in 2013 in Uttar Pradesh alone—from Pratapgarh and Faizabad in the East to Allahabad, Bareilly, Bijnore, Mathura and Bulandshahr, and worst of all, Muzaffarnagar Westwards.

The RSS was drafted under Mr Amit Shah into the BJP election campaign with greater intensity and numbers than ever before, with huge backing from the electronic and social media, and bankrolled by enormous sums, of the same order as that spent in the US presidential campaign.

Hindutva motifs were carefully deployed, as also slogans like "Pink Revolution" (beef exports) to chide Muslims. As journalist Harish Khare puts it in his very perceptive new book *How Modi Won It* (Hachette), he "succeeded in instigating another Hindu uprising to become Prime Minister".

For the Parivar, as for Mr Modi, the top priority is not economic growth, not job creation, leave aside holistic development, but politics—how to deepen and widen Hindutva's influence and ensure its long-term dominant presence in India, if necessary by coercion and repression. If there's a clash between promoting growth (or even the economic giveaways promised to Big Business) and furthering the Sangh agenda, the Sangh must take precedence—always and every time.

This poses a new challenge to secular-democratic forces. This challenge cannot be met solely through rational argument and Parliamentary debate, important as these are. It demands grassroots mobilisation based on issues that concern the core-rights of the people which are threatened by Hindutva-dominated neoliberal order which oppresses them.

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P.S.

[*http://www.prafulbidwai.org/index.php?post/2015/01/04/Hindutva-Trumps-%E2%80%98Development%E2%80%99%E2%80%993A-BJP%E2%80%99s-real-agenda](http://www.prafulbidwai.org/index.php?post/2015/01/04/Hindutva-Trumps-%E2%80%98Development%E2%80%99%E2%80%993A-BJP%E2%80%99s-real-agenda)