

THE Sangh parivar poses a grave threat to the Indian polity and society, not so much because it mixes religion and politics, but because it resorts to criminal acts. For instance, had the BJP-VHP-RSS, Bajrang Dal and company stopped at the demolition of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya and proceeded to celebrate their victory through *aarti* and *bhajan* (devotional songs), more people might have accepted their claim that they were motivated by religious sentiment.

The deposed and recently murdered mahant of the Ram *janamsthan* mandir, Baba Lal Das, openly stated in various interviews that none of the VHP leaders even came to pray or made any offerings at the Ram temple during this period. Lal Das alleged that after demolishing the Babri Masjid, the VHP cadres barged into the Ram Lalla mandir, looted the cash box containing a month's offerings and stole ancient idols worth several crores. According to the late Lal Das, they even stole the original, ancient Ram Lalla idol and replaced it with a fake one.

While some were looting the Ram Lalla temple, others went on a murderous spree. Between nightfall on December 6 and mid afternoon the next day, these supposed *kar sevaks* killed and burnt 13 Muslim men and children. They could not lay their hands on more because the majority of Muslims in Ayodhya had fled before December 6 and the rest fled on hearing the news that the Babri Masjid had fallen. The rioting in Ayodhya began in the early morning of December 7; for nearly 12 hours Sangh parivar gangsters roamed the streets plundering and torching every single one of the 134 Muslim homes and business establishments in the city. First they looted all the valuables and currency they could lay their

Criminalisation of Politics

Madhu Kishwar

hands on. Then they smashed to pieces everything that was in the houses. What couldn't be broken, whether it was a motorcycle, cattle, clothes or books, went into huge bonfires. After this the Muslim houses

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were set on fire. Barring two, all the masjids and idgahs of Ayodhya were either destroyed or damaged.

This was not just a euphoric mindless reaction of the Sangh parivar to celebrate their victory in razing the Babri Masjid to the ground, but part of a well prepared plan. The Sangh parivar had made prior lists of

the locations of all Muslim homes. So careful was the planned targeting of Muslim homes that, where a Muslim house was situated too close to a Hindu house, they only looted and destroyed whatever they found within, but refrained from setting the place on fire, lest the neighbouring Hindu houses catch fire. They could do all this openly in broad daylight because both the police and the Provincial Armed Constabulary brazenly assisted them in the mayhem.

This pattern of targeted killings of the Muslims with the open help of the police and paramilitary forces, and often with government support, has been witnessed in all recent massacres and riots such as those in Meerut and Malliana in 1987, in Bhiwandi, Bhagalpur, Ahmedabad and more recently in Surat and Bombay. In many of these riots,



Vijay Raje Scindia of BJP leading kar sevaks on December 6

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women have been stripped and paraded naked in the streets before being gang raped and brutally put to death.

These acts are not as much due to mixing religion with politics as they are a consequence of the brazen use of criminal means to win political battles. The issue is, therefore, not so much the survival of secularism as it is the increasing criminalisation of our political life, and the active protection criminals receive from the political machinery. It is this nexus which needs to be broken.

Just as the Hindutva of the Sangh parivar relies heavily on murder, mayhem, loot, rape and arson, so does the "secular nationalism" of the Congress party. In recent years this party has been increasingly using riots and pogroms as a means of winning over vote banks. The anti-Sikh massacres of November 1984 were organised with a view to consolidating their Hindu vote bank.

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Anti-Muslim violence has been a regular feature of several Congress ruled states. The Congress party has openly patronised the anti-social politics of Shiv Sena hoodlums and has joined the Sangh parivar in legitimising the politics of hatred and bloodshed. This increasing criminalisation of the political and social fabric is the main danger, not the mixing of religion with politics.

Unlike in Europe, where religious authority, especially the Roman Catholic church, has a long history of intervening in the secular domain, India has no such comparable tradition. Religion has never sought

to dictate politics in India because there has been no consensual centralised religious authority which could claim to speak on behalf of the entire Hindu or Muslim population. Modern India is witnessing the very opposite of the battle fought in Europe to free politics from encroachments by religion.

In our country, there are hardly any instances of religious leaders insisting that politics be subservient to them. On the contrary, it is politicians who have in recent history attempted to take over religious institutions and destroy their sanctity. In Punjab, it was the battle between the Akali party and the Congress party over who was to have exclusive control over gurudwaras so as to use them as their political base that caused so much bloodshed and strife. The tradition was started by the British who tried to prop up corrupt mahants in gurudwaras leading to a long struggle by the Akalis to free the



The Dan Patra (donation box) inside Ram Mandir, Ayodhya

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gurudwaras from British influence. There have been similar intrusions by the Congress government and Congress party with the affairs of the mosques through control over waqf boards.

Since Hindu temples do not have a centralised body, they could not be taken over by politicians staging a coup from above. But in recent decades there has been a systematic attempt by politically affiliated criminals forcibly to take over temples. This is one of the reasons for the success of the BJP-VHP-RSS combine in politicising the Ram Mandir issue in such a murderous fashion.

In India, it is not politics which needs saving from religion but religion which needs to be protected from political hoodlums. Temples, gurudwaras and waqf boards provide criminals with vast amounts of economic resources and a readymade political base. They have converted these religious institutions into battle grounds for gang warfare.

Even this politicisation of religion would be a relatively harmless affair, if the parties concerned vowed not to use criminal means to secure their political ends. This is what made Jinnah so dangerous. He could secure the partition of the country not on the strength of religious fervour but by instigating riots and bloodshed in the name of mass action for the purpose of polarising Hindus and Muslims. That is what began the process of forcible Hindu exodus from certain Muslim majority areas leading to retaliation by Hindus in areas where they were numerically dominant. Thus the foundation of Pakistan was laid through bloodshed and criminal acts of politicians rather than by religion dominating politics.

Advani, Bal Thackeray, Singhal and many in the Congress party insist on following the path chosen by



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A temple in Ayodhya painted with political electoral slogans

Jinnah. In city after city where Hindu-Muslim riots have been politically engineered, we are witnessing the increasing polarisation of the two communities. The Muslims of the subcontinent, especially Mohajirs of Pakistan and those left in India, are paying a heavy price for not opposing Jinnahism with vigour and determination. If we Hindus allow our own Jinnahs to get the better of us, we too will be following the path of self destruction.

Calling the Sangh parivar politics communal amounts to giving them undue respectability. To be communally minded involves a strong devotion to the interests of one's own ethnic group rather than to those of society as a whole. However, the politics of the Sangh parivar is instigating a large scale criminalisation of the Hindu community.

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For years both the Congress and the Sangh parivar used poor Dalit men to launch attacks on Muslim *bastis* while the middle and upper classes could feign ignorance of what was going on in their city. In recent years, however, young people from so-called respectable middle and upper class homes have also been encouraged to become leaders of looting and murdering brigades. Their success in mobilising large numbers of women to join in the violence, as well as to abet and encourage rape of Muslim women, as happened in Bombay and Surat in January to March 1993, ought to cause serious alarm.

This criminalisation of the Hindus by the Sangh parivar shows that these groups are no well wishers of the Hindu community. Like the Khalistani terrorists, they too resort to murder to silence the voices of dissent within the Hindu community, as the murder of Baba Lal Das may show.

I tape recorded the following interview with Baba Lal Das when he came to Delhi in July 1993 to give testimony before the Citizen's Tribunal on Ayodhya. □