

India: the BJP-RSS nexus

Fascistic movement plays critical role in India's ruling coalition

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As a result of last month's nuclear tests the capitalist press in the West turned its attention to India, a country of 950 million whose travails and tragedies rarely merit a mention, even in the back pages, by the "serious" dailies. Yet in all the commentary, little of substance has been said about the political and ideological makeup of India's new government.

According to *Time* magazine, the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party)—the dominant partner in India's coalition government—is "a Hindu nationalist" party "that has been forced to make a series of compromises in its climb to power." Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee, according to *Time*, is "a portly, affable ... scholarly moderate."

In reality, the BJP is, even from the standpoint of current-day capitalist politics, a party of the extreme right. It espouses Hindu chauvinism, militarism and anticomunism, while exalting entrepreneurial initiative. At its core stands a mass, fascistic organization associated over many decades with communal violence—the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

In 1992, a BJP-RSS campaign for the building of a Hindu temple in Ayodhya culminated in the razing of a famous mosque, in defiance of the Supreme Court. This outrage precipitated the most extensive communal bloodletting in the post-independence history of India.

The immediate objective of the Ayodhya campaign was the erection of a temple to the Hindu god Ram. But for the BJP, the RSS, an extensive network of RSS-affiliated groups, and the Shiv Sena (King Shivaji's Army), a Maharashtra-based Hindu chauvinist and fascist organization, the *Ram Rajya* mobilization was part of the drive for a radical, but ill-defined change in the Indian polity—the establishment of *Hindu rashtra* (or Hindu rule). According to the Hindu chauvinists, transforming India into a "true Hindu state" will revive the alleged glory of India's past and raise her to the status of a superpower in the modern world.

The bond between the BJP and RSS goes beyond shared objectives and ideology. RSS activists effectively control the BJP party apparatus and dominate the party's leading bodies. The two most important BJP leaders and the two most powerful figures in the current government, Atal Vajpayee and Home Minister L.K. Advani, are RSS cadre. Advani's replacement as party president, Kushabhu Thakre, is a lifelong RSS member. Some 75 percent of the current party executive have RSS roots.

What is the RSS?

Throughout its more than 70-year existence, the RSS has been associated with communal riots and virulent anticomunism. The organization was founded in 1925, ostensibly to defend the Hindus of Nagpur, one of many Indian cities that were convulsed by communal violence after the collapse of the first mass mobilization against British rule (the 1920-22 Non-Cooperation Movement). Two years later, RSS

members drilled in the use of the *lathi* (a traditional Indian weapon made of wood) routed a procession of Muslims, to the delight of sections of the local Hindu elite that claimed Muslims held a disproportionate share of government jobs.

To this day, the life of the estimated 40,000 RSS cells or *shakhas* revolves around a daily martial arts drill, in which youth, from their early teens on, are schooled in fighting and taught complete obedience to their RSS superiors. The RSS refuses to divulge membership figures, but several million people are known to regularly participate in the *shakhas*. The RSS also has built an extensive network of affiliated organizations—for students, workers, women, and religious devotees—that are both broader in membership and take up socioeconomic grievances specific to their clientele.

From its origins to today, the social composition of the RSS has been overwhelmingly urban petty-bourgeois: students, small traders, civil servants, and office clerks and managers. In conjunction with the BJP, it founded a trade union wing in the 1950s, but it remained small until the 1980s. Today the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh claims a membership of more than 3 million, largely among white-collar workers. The urban petty-bourgeois character of the RSS is underscored by its relative weakness in the countryside. Although two-third's of India's population is rural, there is no significant RSS-associated farmer-peasant organization.

The RSS and *Hindu rashtra*

The RSS first emerged as a mass organization during the horrific communal violence that surrounded the 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent. N.V. Godse, the man who assassinated Gandhi in January of 1948, was a former RSS cadre and ardent Hindu nationalist. In the months leading up to the assassination, the RSS had subjected Gandhi to a tirade of abuse for interceding to protect Muslims.

Following Gandhi's death the RSS was banned for close to two years. The organization has always vigorously denied any connection to Gandhi's assassination, but it is hard pressed to suppress its sympathy for Godse. In the words of current RSS supremo Rajendra Singh, Godse's "intention was good but he used the wrong method."

The RSS's ideology of *Hindu rashtra*—that India is the nation of the Hindus and the Hindus alone comprise the nation—was developed in opposition to the liberal-democratic program elaborated by the Congress Party leadership. Congress maintained that all Indians, irrespective of ethnicity, religion or caste, should enjoy equal citizenship rights.

At times the RSS and its associated organizations, particularly the BJP, try to camouflage their communalism by pointing to the contrasting meanings of Hindu. (A word of non-Indian origin, it originally denoted all those living east of the Indus River.) But the principal ideologues of *Hindu rashtra*, the RSS-leader M.S. Golwalkar and V.D. Savarkar (head of a like-minded communal political party, the Hindu Mahasabha) have made clear in their writings and speeches that Muslims and Christians are alien groups who in a Hindu nation will enjoy citizenship rights only at

the sufferance of the majority.

Both Golwalkar and Savarkar draw direct inspiration from Nazi Germany. “Germany has ... shown,” writes Golwalkar, “how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole—a good lesson for us in Hindusthan to learn and profit by.”

While Indian Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee and Home Minister L.K. Advani of the BJP refrain from praising Hitler—unlike their ally, Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray—they do insist that India’s 120 million Muslims must “nationalize” themselves.

The RSS-BJP have a thin, anti-capitalist veneer. They denounce capitalist or “Western” society for its individualism and corrosion of community, but they uphold private property and profit.

The RSS has always described itself as a cultural nationalist, and not political, organization. This has been a stratagem to avoid direct conflict with more powerful political opponents. But the denigration of politics, the claim that there is a “national” interest that stands above both traditional bourgeois politics and the class struggle, is central to the RSS’s mystical-fascist ideology. Moreover, in totalitarian fashion, the RSS considers itself to be the Hindu nation in embryo.

Golwalkar derides democracy for promoting social conflict and disrupting the harmony and tranquillity of the nation, while lauding the caste system, purged of its worst abominations, as a model for a corporately organized society. At the same time the RSS and BJP leadership have found it politic to routinely pledge support for democracy and India’s constitution.

However, the Ayodhya mobilization must be taken as a measure of the RSS’s commitment to the bourgeois-democratic institutions of the Indian Republic. That enormous provocation ended in a communal carnage, despite pledges made to India’s Supreme Court by Advani and the BJP’s chief minister of Uttar Pradesh (the state in which Ayodhya is located) that the mosque would not be touched.

The RSS’s antidemocratic ethos finds expression not only in its communal ideology, but also in its methods of organization. The organization is led by a *sarsangchalak* (a supreme director), who is appointed for life by his predecessor. Other leadership positions are also determined by appointment.

While RSS violence has principally targeted Muslims and the ex-Untouchables, fanatical anticommunism has always been central to its ideology. In appealing to J. Nehru, the then-prime minister of India, for the lifting of the 1948 ban on the RSS, Golwalkar wrote: “The RSS having been disbanded, the intelligent youth are rapidly falling into the snares of communism.... The one effective check, the RSS, no longer exists.”

The Indian National Congress and the RSS

Gandhi and Nehru, the foremost leaders of the Indian National Congress (INC), were vigorous opponents of religious chauvinism in general, and the RSS in particular. In the 1930s Nehru analyzed communalism as a form of fascism. Gandhi characterized the RSS as “a communal body with a totalitarian outlook.”

Yet the INC proved unable to fight communalism and ultimately connived in the partition of India. Gandhi employed Hindu phraseology in his appeals to the masses, and Nehru chose to unite India from above by inheriting the state apparatus built by the British. They both feared the consequences of a struggle to unite India from below, through an appeal to the class interests of the workers and peasants, i.e., by uniting the Hindu, Muslim and Christian masses in a struggle against their landlord and

capitalist oppressors.

Following independence, S.P. Mookerjee, a former president of the Hindu Mahasabha, was invited into the Congress-dominated cabinet. Nehru’s Home Minister Vallabhai Patel, the Congress president and a virulent anticommunist, was plotting to bring the RSS into Congress. Gandhi’s assassination, however, cut across Patel’s plans, enabling Nehru to isolate the RSS from the mainstream of ruling class politics.

The resurgence of the RSS and the tasks before the working class

The emergence of the RSS as a potent political force is a testament to the organic incapacity of the Indian bourgeoisie to overcome the legacy of India’s feudal and colonial past and bring about the genuine, democratic unification of its many peoples. Indeed, the history of the Indian republic has been characterized by growing social inequality and the ever-increasing communalization, caste-ization and regionalization of politics. Unable to offer any progressive solution to the prevailing conditions of mass unemployment, poverty, disease and illiteracy, the bourgeoisie has dredged up the most retrograde ideologies as a means of channeling the frustrations of the people in a reactionary direction.

The rise of the BJP-RSS is a consequence of the acute crisis brought about by the collapse of the nationalist economic strategy on which the Indian bourgeoisie based its rule until 1991, the collapse of the Congress-centered political system with which that strategy was associated, and the absence of a broad-based, independent working class alternative. Historically, the Indian working class has been amongst the most combative in Asia. Its current paralysis is the product of the betrayals of the Stalinist parties, which have systematically subordinated the working class to so-called progressive sections of the bourgeoisie.

Already in the latter half of the 1980s the BJP was able to capitalize on the turn of its bourgeois rivals to communal and caste-based politics. It also garnered considerable support by voicing the demand of sections of the middle class for a loosening of import controls and greater access to Western consumer goods. The RSS, meanwhile, has exploited the absence of proper public services to extend its influence through a network of schools and social service organizations.

The post-1991 dismantling of import controls and the reorienting of India’s economy more openly and directly to the world capitalist market has generated contradictory impulses in the Indian petty bourgeoisie. It has whetted its appetite for more privileges, while increasing its anxiety over the pace and direction of economic change and its sense of inferiority in relation to its Western counterparts.

The Indian petty bourgeois, anxious about his future and debilitated by his present position, takes solace in a mythical past of Hindu greatness—RSS-inspired academics argue that virtually all modern inventions were anticipated in the Vedas—and by striking out against the minorities, the former Untouchables and the toilers. *Hindu rashtra* holds out to aggrieved petty-bourgeois layers the delusion of a radical, but ordered change, which will give them access to all the consumer goods of the West, without subjecting India to imperialist domination.

A government of extreme crisis

The BJP-led government is a regime of extreme crisis. Its majority in parliament is paper-thin and dependent on parties that are agitating for the central government to use the constitution’s emergency powers to fire

various state governments. Moreover, the Asian economic crisis is increasingly impacting the Indian economy.

In the three months that the BJP-led coalition has held office, government, BJP and RSS spokesmen have repeatedly made contradictory declarations about Ayodhya and other contentious issues. Undoubtedly, there is a measure of calculation in this, for the BJP leaders are striving to keep the ruling coalition together and at the same time maintain the allegiance of the extreme Hindu chauvinists who comprise the rank-and-file RSS-BJP activists.

But tensions between the RSS and BJP are inevitable, for the two organizations, although intimately linked, are not synonymous. The BJP and its predecessor, the Jana Sangh, have always included non-RSS elements—princes, ex-*zamindars* (feudal landlords), Congress defectors and others with closer ties to ruling class circles. The BJP's role in parliament, and now in government, has given the RSS cadre in the BJP leadership a base of power independent of their mother organization. It has also made them more dependent on the financial and political support of India's largest business houses.

Its much-touted discipline notwithstanding, the RSS is, by its very nature, unstable. It is not based on a coherent socioeconomic program, but rather on the contradictory and ephemeral moods and phobias of the petty bourgeoisie. Unable to satisfy the real needs of its petty-bourgeois constituency, the RSS must engage in the politics of spectacle, communal demagogic and violence. In the long run, Vajpayee, whether heading a coalition government or a majority BJP regime, cannot but disappoint his petty-bourgeois RSS followers.

Nothing, however, would be more dangerous than for the working class to conclude that the threat from the extreme right will collapse of its own accord. The BJP will use its control of the machinery of government to install its supporters in leading positions in the bureaucracy and repressive forces of the state. The former chief of India's naval staff, Admiral J.G. Nadkarni, recently warned, "Sympathy for Hindutva [another name for *Hindu rashtra*] is far more widespread amongst senior officers than suspected."

Most importantly, behind the BJP and the RSS stand the big bourgeoisie. Whatever the fate of the Vajpayee government, the ruling class will press forward with the dismantling of all barriers to imperialist exploitation, through the gutting of social expenditures, privatization and the abolition of land controls. It will employ caste-ism and communalism and authoritarian forms of rule to contain and divert the resulting social unrest.

To avert a catastrophe, the Indian working class must take a new road. It must organize itself as an independent political force and elaborate a democratic and socialist program for a workers and peasants government. The workers must rally behind them the peasantry and urban petty bourgeoisie in a common struggle against the national bourgeoisie, and unite the struggle of the Indian masses against imperialist oppression with the struggle of the international working class.



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