

# Radical Hinduism

by Charles Whitaker

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The 9/11 attacks have made *Al-Qaeda*, *Jihad*, and *Islamist* household words in America, whose citizens recognize them as the terms of terrorism. Few Americans, however, would be able to pronounce, much less define, *Sangh Parivar*, *Hindutva*, or *BJP*. Yet, these are terms of terrorism that could change their lives in the near future, says Paul Marshall in his article, "Hinduism and Terror" (*First Things*, June/July 2004, p. 10; all quotations his).

Sangh Parivar represents a strong reaction against the more secular independence movements that grew up as India's colonial days were ending. Dating back to the 1920s, Sangh Parivar is a political movement whose platform is built of essentially two planks: Indian nationalism and Hindu fundamentalism. It uses terror and violence to advance its ideology of Hindutva, the "India-first" doctrine that Hindus descended from the "Aryans," an ancient people who built India around a common religion, culture, and race. Hindutva teaches that Muslims and Christians, who make up about 17% of the Indian population, must be "subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges."

The racist component of Hindutva is unmistakable. In fact, it is tarred with the same brush as Nazism, as these quotes from the 1930's indicate:

» Concerning the future of non-Hindus in India: "If we Hindus grow stronger, in time Muslim friends . . . will have to play the part of German Jews." "The non-Hindu . . . must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn respect and revere Hindu religion. . . . Or [they] may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation."

» Regarding Nazism itself: "Germany's solemn idea of the revival of the Aryan culture, the glorification of the swastika, her patronage of Vedic learning, and the ardent championship of Indo-Germanic civilization are welcomed by the religious and sensible Hindus of India with jubilant hope."

The Sangh Parivar movement's racism and jingoism brought it into conflict with more moderate Indian independence movements and organizations. For example, Mahatma Gandhi called Sangh Parivar's primary organization of his day, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), "a communal body with a totalitarian outlook." The RSS in turn viewed the pacifist Gandhi as weak, accusing him of pampering Muslims—and weakening Hinduism—through the 1947 partitioning of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan. Gandhi was later assassinated by an RSS member. Refusing to be marginalized, Sangh Parivar early on showed its proclivity for violence.

Today, Sangh Parivar is everything but marginalized. Under different guises, it has grown to become the dominant political force in India. The RSS is now a large paramilitary organization with millions of members. Its educational component is comprised of about 20,000 schools, 100,000 teachers, and two million students. To ensure complete cultural coverage, the RSS has

separate organizations for tribal peoples, intellectuals, teachers, slum dwellers, leprosy patients, cooperatives, consumers, newspapers, industrialists, Sikhs, ex-servicemen,

overseas Indians, and an organization for religion and proselytization, as well as trade unions, student and economic organizations, and a women's chapter.

Another powerful Sangh Parivar organization is the Vishnu Hindu Parishad (VHP, or World Hindu Council), formed in 1946. This is an unabashedly India-first organization, exploiting as it does the fears many rank-and-file Hindus have of losing their cultural dominance in the face of the "exploding" Muslim population. The VHP's stock-in-trade is the propaganda of virulent hatred. The Hindu mobs that destroyed the Ayodhya mosque in 1992 did so under the aegis of the VHP.

More than all that, India's ruling party since 1998, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is closely aligned with both the RSS and the VHP. The Prime Minister, as well as many high-ranking government officials, are members of one or both of these groups.

Not unexpectedly, the ascendancy of the BJP in the Indian political world has brought with it an increase in attacks on non-Hindus. A number of Indian states report a "surge" in attacks on Christian missionaries and converts. These attacks, which now number "several hundred" each year, do not stop with sexual assaults, church vandalism, cemetery desecration, and Bible burnings. They include gruesome murders, such as the 1999 immolation of an Australian missionary who had worked with India's leprosy population for 30 years. Burned alive with him were his two young boys.

The far more numerous Muslim population remains the primary target of Hindutva chauvinism. The most publicized violence took place in February 2002 in the State of Gujarat. Around 2,000 Muslims died in what the Indian press, largely under BJP control, called a "riot," a gross misnomer. Independent evidence indicates that this massacre was no spontaneous "riot," but a well-planned act of terrorism. Gujarat's state legal system only "impeded" the subsequent investigation of the massacre. Charges against defendants were regularly dismissed. Hindu witnesses (and their families) were intimidated by BJP sympathizers.

The president of the VHP called the riot a "successful experiment," warning that it would be repeated throughout India. The words of the VHP's General Secretary strike at the heart of the matter:

All Hindutva opponents will get the death sentence, and we will leave this to the people to carry out. The process of forming a Hindu rule in the country has begun with Gujarat, and VHP will take the Gujarat experiment to every nook and corner of the country.

Here is state-sponsored terrorism, pure and simple! The battle for cultural and religious (not to mention economic and military) control of the Indian subcontinent, including (if the VHP has its way) the nations of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Tibet, is under way. As it heats up, nuclear war between India and Pakistan may become all but inevitable.