

# **Strategies of the *'Parivar'***

**August 2004**

**Khurshid Anwar\*, Bobby Poulouse\*, Dunu Roy\*\***

There is a growing atmosphere of communal and fundamentalist violence all over the world, targeted at upsetting democratic processes. Nothing illustrates this better than the rise of the *Hindutva* forces in India, gaining political ascendancy through demonising the 'other'. This article summarises the findings of a very preliminary study on how the cultural *Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh* is attempting to transform social and political mores in the smaller towns and villages of the Hindi-speaking belt, and what is the nature of the resistance to it. The study was conducted through meetings and interviews, from over three dozen districts of seven northern States. Some printed *Sangh* material was also collected to supplement our understanding of the observed trends in the various States.

The *Sangh* has been systematically building a national apparatus for many decades now. Respondents reported that over a dozen institutions affiliated to the *Sangh* have been set up in every district and every *zila* has a *pracharak*. The theme that binds all these units together is "cultural nationalism" – a nation that seeks a non-Hindu enemy in the form of the 'other'. It is perhaps no coincidence that this 'other' already appears to be burdened with enormous economic hardships in the changing liberalised economy. Most of the non-Hindus are engaged in artisanal work and facing stiff competition. For instance, small-scale plastic goods production is challenging natural handicrafts in the market, and locks are being imported extensively. While the import of chicken and meat (and pork) has also significantly increased, meat-sellers are being squeezed out of the domestic market by various rules and codes. A clear link emerges between the marginalisation of the 'other' and the recent modification of manufacturing and import restrictions.

Such marginalisation also affects the socio-cultural conditions of the minorities. In one study, most of the Muslim girls were reported to have dropped out of school after the fourth standard, while the boys left after sixth. Many of the children were working 16-hour days in the family business, earning between Rs.24-33 per day. The available educational opportunities were mainly in *madarsas* or expensive private schools, as the government schools were either non-existent or the facilities were absent. It is within this context that one has to place the *Sangh's* strategy of attacking the 'other'. Thus, the electronic *Hindutva* circular issued in August 2003 on the occasion of a *Maha Trishul Diksha* in Kerala, elaborated on the 'Boycott Technique': "Hindus would refuse to purchase the goods or services, to patronize firms and shops of the Moslems. The Hindus would also refuse to deal (if necessary, with boxing-gloves) with Hindu firms or shops that deal with the Moslems."

What is sobering about this distorted borrowing from the Freedom movement is that it is already being extensively practised in Gujerat, where minority groups are not getting public or private employment, bank loans and credit, homes and

workplaces on rent, and even re-entry into their previous residences. The indications are that the *Sangh* is now gearing up to practise the same technique in other States. The Christians are also part of the ‘anti-Hindu’ coalition against which the *Sangh* must rally. Thus, a pamphlet circulating in Chhattisgarh calls upon Hindus to “wake up and stop conversion”, because “conversion is an attack on Hindus”. In the name of health and education, “Christian NGOs are receiving funds from Chattisgarh government, WTO and other foreign funding agencies”. As a consequence of this, “in some development-blocks the population of Christians has become 23 percent”. Hence, there is a need “to defend religion even at the cost of your life”.

Once the ‘other’ has been defined, the invoking of religious motifs and activities plays a significant role in sparking off schisms within the community. Strategically planned *havans* and *moorti anushthans*, *Sankalp Diwas* and *Dev Darshan*, renaming *kar sewaks* as *Ram sewaks*; all convert the motivated fury against the ‘other’ into a consolidation of religious and political identity. The geography of a composite culture – adjacent mosques and temples, common drainage systems, religious processions, victory in cricket, music and art festivals, even a chance neighbourhood rape or killing – everything is used to drive a wedge between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In many cases the incendiary role of the local media, the police, and the political leadership owing allegiance to the *Sangh*, stands out starkly. Much of this is connected with capturing parks, shrines, residential areas, and *Wakf* properties by the *Sangh*; sometimes in collaboration with the Muslim leadership.

Since its leadership is dominated by the numerically weak upper castes, the *Sangh* has had to design programmes targeted at the backward castes, tribals and *dalits*. One element, of course, is the repeated use of propaganda. To strengthen an aura of fear and insecurity, a pamphlet supposedly quotes Ambedkar, “Those people who accept the Islamic or Christian religion, they on conversion become anti-national.” Another element focuses on organising *havans* with great fanfare and publicity to attract the lower castes and *dalits*, particularly the women. These trigger the inherent occupational competition between them and the Muslims into conflicts. In the name of protecting *Bharat Mata* and *Hindutva* from foreign forces – an inspired version of ‘cultural nationalism’ – caste conflicts within ‘Hindu’ society are subdued and the *dalits* and backward castes are drawn in as sects consonant with *Hindutva*.

As part of its strategy, the *Sangh* also rejects the notion of *adivasi* as somebody who has lived on the land since ‘*adi*’ (ancient) times, but defines him as one who believes in ‘*adi*’ *dharma*. The ‘correct’ word is, therefore, ‘*vanvasi*’ or forest dweller. Since the shortcomings in our national life enabled foreign invaders to enslave our nation, it is obviously necessary to restore national pride and to build a culture around a national identity – that is, *Hindutva*. The *Sangh*, therefore, regularly organises *dharma sabhas* and *utsavs* in tribal areas to “raise their self-esteem”, always accompanied by the chanting of *Vedic* hymns. In this

manner, the *Sangh* tries to avoid the question of the historical growth of *vedic* culture as well as the subsequent inequalities of the caste system, and attempting to recast *adivasis* as *vanvasis*, an integral part of the Hindu family.

Some elements of the resistance to the growing influence of rabid *Hindutva* have also been noticed during the course of this study. In some cases, the overwhelming impact of communal violence on individuals has convinced them to dedicate themselves to rebuilding their shattered communities. While it is observed that concerted action to put an end to the violence needs State support, these actions have a temporary effect only because the *Sangh* is unceasing in its propaganda through a pliable media. There are some efforts that strengthen community initiative and dissuade the lower castes from participating in the *Sangh* campaigns. But civil resistance to the integrated strategy of the *Sangh* remains scattered and sporadic. How these individual efforts can be interlinked into a coherent strategy remains a vital area of exploration.

(\*Institute for Social Democracy; \*\* Hazards Centre)