

Saffron Gandhi or Nationalist Godse?

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On the occasion of the 2021 Martyrs day, striking ironies have been noticed in the actions of various organizations of the Sangh Parivar. On one hand, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat has released a book “Making of A Hindu Patriot”, intended to emphasize the Hindu identity of Mahatma Gandhi, which apparently was the source of his nationalism. On the other hand, the Hindu Mahasabha intends to open a library in Gwalior, displaying the nationalism of Godse, the assassin of the Mahatma. This evokes a question- what is the substantive basis on which Making of A Hindu Patriot has been written, and why is there so much ambiguity among the Sangh Parivar regarding Gandhi?

The premise for the book lies in the ideology of Gandhi, which had much similarities with that of the Hindu Right. The author of the book JK Bajaj attributed the term “Hindu Patriot” to Leo Tolstoy, with whom Gandhi exchanged letters in 1909 and 1910. “Tolstoy told his diarist that ‘this Gandhi is quite a good fellow except for his Hindu Patriotism’”, said Bajaj, who is also a member of the government-appointed commission examining the sub-categorisation of OBCs , the first step of ensuring that the benefits of reservation aren’t being monopolised by a few groups. According to him, Gandhi responded to Tolstoy’s words later by saying, “My patriotism is patent enough, my love for India is evergrowing but it is derived from my religion and is therefore in no sense exclusive.”

This by itself is a vague and inadequate ground for RSS’s new found love for Gandhi. More can be derived from delving into other aspects of Gandhi’s ideas.

One can begin by examining Gandhi's ideas on caste. It is clear from his debate with Dr. B R Ambedkar that Gandhi did not share the latter's antipathy towards the caste system. Gandhi believed that the caste system in itself was not unjust, rather it was untouchability that was the source of the social ills plaguing the Hindu society. He never endeavoured to establish a casteless society since caste was a natural mode of social stratification of the Hindu society. Gandhi never took a militant posture against casteism, and was denounced by Ambedkar as an upper caste apologist, though he faced upper caste ire for his role in the temple entry movement, inter alia.

Parallels can be drawn with the ideas of RSS on the caste system. Despite their impressive social outreach, they have not taken steps to establish a casteless society. Even more than 70 years after independence, inter-caste marriages constitute a minuscule 5.8% of the marriages in India according to the 2011 Census. RSS emphasizes more on social harmony, but social harmony doesn't in itself lead to social equality, of the kind envisaged by the Indian Constitution. Their aim has been to bring subalterns like Scheduled Castes Scheduled Tribes into the Hindu fold, and resisting mass conversions. Their opposition to the recent Sarna religious code Bill in Jharkhand was out of the Sarna tribe being declared as a separate religion. The RSS has utilized tools like promoting the participation of lower castes into Savarna religious practices. But it is clear that the ideology of its founding fathers does not envisage a casteless society. MS Golwalkar, in his 'Bunch of Thoughts', had criticized Buddhism for diluting the caste system in North West Frontier Province and in East Bengal, which according to him led to Islam taking firm roots there. Bhanwar Meghwanshi, ex-RSS swayamsevak's recent book 'I could not be Hindu' elaborates upon the casteism rampant in RSS leaders.

Gandhi never advocated conversion to another religion for

escaping the ills of the religion in which he was born. He believed in a divine providence in one being born in a certain religion. Even here, he was at odds with the approach of Ambedkar in combating untouchability. He also felt that combating the ills of the caste system was the responsibility of the upper castes, and his Harijan Sevak Sangh eventually came up with a membership criteria on similar lines. Agency of the lower castes in fighting towards equality found scant uptake in him.

Gandhi was known for giving scant regard for his familial responsibilities. He might as well have preferred to live as a bachelor if not married off at an early age. According to him, familial responsibilities impinge upon the necessities of public life, and have to be sacrificed for the latter. The RSS leaders are known to be bachelors, their argument being on similar lines.

Gandhi also had conservative thoughts regarding women, and their role in public life vis-a-vis men. He was skeptical of including women in the national movement initially, and had to be convinced by leaders like Sarojini Naidu on the necessity of encouraging women's participation in the freedom struggle. He exhorted women to embody the virtues of the mythological Sita-Draupadi, and his premise on calling for their participation in satyagraha was based on his assumption that women, by nature, are more inclined towards non violence and psychological forbearance. The kind of equality demanded by modern day feminists would not have cut ice with Gandhi.

This is similar to the views of the Hindu Right, which is averse to a radical change in gender dynamics in Indian society. Women have traditionally been denied agency, and even today, their roles in making key decisions regarding marriage, childbirth and career are circumscribed in vast majority of Indian households despite increasing education.

The idea of feminism as understood today can be called as a

western import, though its importance cannot be understated. But for Gandhi, Western civilization was a source of rampant materialism, individualism, militarism which was unsuited for Eastern Societies. He emphasized on the spiritualism and collectivism of Eastern civilizations and characterized them as superior qualities. The Hindu Right has also been skeptical about Western ideas like feminism, secularism, liberalism and individualism, and dismissed its advocates as Macaulay's children.

This philosophy of Gandhi was extended to the realm of education, where Gandhi emphasized on 'nai talim', a more holistic education than the rote learning and homogenizing English system of education. In Hind Swaraj, he also described his idea of Ram Rajya as one which had a major role for small scale/cottage industries which would bring in Gram Swaraj based on Indian tradition of autarkic village republics. This was in contrast to Nehru's vision of state led large industry that was to be the commanding heights of Indian economy. Gandhi believed that large scale industrialization can lead to job loss, and consumption of Western factory made goods would amount to a kind of psychological colonization of the Indian spirit.

The RSS runs a network of schools under its educational wing Vidya Bharati. Dinanath Batra, former General Secretary of Vidya Bharati, said that they were fighting an "ideological battle against Macaulay, Marx and Madrasawadis". In comparison to which Vidya Bharati advocates "Indianization, nationalization and spiritualization" of education. In the areas of study that are peripheral to the core curriculum, like physical education, music and cultural education, the institution worked out its own curriculum.

The RSS is also known for its fetishization of swadeshi and cottage industry, and skepticism to free trade. Their opposition to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership was a factor in the NDA government deciding to walk out of it.

The Atmanirbhar Bharat agenda has been enthusiastically embraced by the Hindu Right.

Gandhi was known to be an anarchist, though not in the modern sense. He believed that the state is a symbol of oppression and a soulless machine, unresponsive to satyagraha. He thought that the imposition of the state's will is a hindrance on human development. He believed in the capacity of humans to regulate their behavior, without the sword of the state hanging on them. This also is similar to the views of the Hindu Right, which believes in society's self regulating role in the absence of an overbearing state. Gandhi also harbored skepticism towards parliamentary democracy, and envisaged a socio-cultural movement to encourage popular participation. He rejected personality cult, and emphasized on the power of the masses. This again overlaps with the ideas of the RSS.

Culturally too, Gandhi had much in common with the Hindu Right. From his endeavoring to establish Ram Rajya, to using Hindu religious iconography and advocating cow protection, it is clear as to what might be the basis for the 'Making of A Hindu Patriot' being written.

However, overlooking the vast differences will be doing a disservice to the Mahatma. For starters, Gandhi did not share the Hindu victim mindset that the Sangh Parivar thrives on. His basis for non-violence was out of the immense capacity for tolerance in the Indians, who had resisted countless invasions throughout centuries and still managed to retain their culture, and even indigenise the foreigners. Unlike this, the Hindu Right thrives on stoking anger of historical injustice among Hindus, and encouraging cultural revanchism. Unlike Gandhi, they have not made peace with the tumultuous history of the subcontinent. Gandhi was clearly more progressive in this aspect.

Gandhi also included prayers of different religions at the start of his meetings. For him, religious identities were

fluid, and subject to the overarching identity of being an Indian. Unlike Mohan Bhagwat stating that 'It was in the basic character of Hindus to be patriotic', Gandhi never implicitly questioned the patriotism of non Hindus. Besides, as elaborated by his grandson Tushar Gandhi, his ideas were borrowed from other religions like Christianity and Jainism as well. Gandhi was truly in sync with the Vedic mantra 'Aano bhadra krtavo yantu vishwatah' (Let noble thoughts come to me from all directions). Gandhi was known for saying- "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any".

Though Gandhi was known for his devotion to Lord Ram, it is unlikely that he would have supported desecration of a mosque in order to build a Ram temple in its place. For someone who said that his religion was his source for his non-violence, resorting to violence to achieve religious objectives could never be forgivable by him. Even his concept of Ram Rajya, despite his contradicting stand on caste system, would have been a place where Indians of all castes and religions would have lived in perfect harmony, without harboring any ill-will towards each other. Gandhi shared the view of emperor Ashoka – 'Whoever praises his own religion, due to excessive devotion, and condemns others with the thought "Let me glorify my own religion," only harms his own religion. Therefore contact (between religions) is good. One should listen to and respect the doctrines professed by others'.

Gandhi was the one national leader who stood against partition of the sub-continent till the very end. His constructive program did not avert the partition, but his visit to Noakhali and other places helped soothe communal passions during the peak of the pre-partition riots.

Contrast this with the work of organizations of the Sangh Parivar who advocated militant Hinduism as a response to

Muslim communalism, and contributed in consolidating religious identities that led to the Partition. No student of history can ever forget the assassination of Gandhi by a Hindu extremist belonging to the Sangh Parivar.

How are the above ironies to be interpreted? It is clear that the premise of Gandhi was the same as that of the Hindu Right on many fronts, but the conclusion was drastically opposite. This stems from Gandhi's qualitative understanding of the Hindu religion, and his forward looking ideology. The Sangh Parivar could not possibly digest that a philosopher leader called their bluff in the interpretation of Hinduism, and enjoyed such wide support among the masses.

Today, as the founding edifice of the Indian state and society faces creeping onslaught of these self-declared sentinels of Hinduism , one may do well to understand the motivations of the RSS in appropriating Gandhi. The goal would be to broaden their outreach, keeping in mind the wide popularity enjoyed by Gandhi in India and the world. On the other hand, organizations like Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Hindu Mahasabha operate on the fringe, and can get away with actions like opening 'Godse library' and enacting assassination of the Mahatma on Martyrs' Day every year.

Gandhi has historically been appropriated by various schools of thought- communists, socialists, liberals and distinct Gandhians like Vinoba Bhave and Jay Prakash Narayan. This can be attributed to Gandhi's ideas which were amenable to multiple interpretations and ambiguity.

The complexity of the distinct school of Gandhism has been encapsulated in only one document- the Indian Constitution. On this martyrs' day, let us acknowledge this.