In *Religion in Indian History*, Edited by Irfan Habib, Tulika, 2007

Textuality and Mass Culture[1]

At least since the 1990s, there has been a phenomenal rise in the numbers and the political clout of communal-fascist forces in India to the point where these forces were actually able to capture state power at the center for the first time in independent India, albeit in 'coalition' with smaller non-communal forces who played a minor role in the regime anyway. Furthermore, they were able to form governments in a number of major provinces in the Northern and the Western parts of the country. In that, they not only exercized prolonged control over vast masses of people, they did so with legitimate electoral approval. What explains this phenomenon?

It is implausible that this vast socio-political phenomenon can be traced to a single and decisive feature of Indian society: social theory is no physics. Hence, the phenomenon has to be understood from a variety of directions, and in terms of interactions between them. Following one of the possible directions in this exploratory paper, we suggest two inter-related theses:

(a) Distinguishing between a textual culture and a mass culture, the role of religion as a *mass culture* is a significant dimension of the overall picture.

(b) Religious mass culture may turn into regressive mass political action *in the absence of* classical, secular platforms for the expression of democratic aspirations of people.

1. The character of communal-fascism

A fair bit of preparatory work is needed before we develop the suggested theses. Unlike syncategorematic expressions such as "real money," the adjective "communal" in the expression "communal-fascist" is genuinely attributive;[2] that is, communal-fascism is a specific version of fascism, not the general one. In fact, we will suggest that the specific form of communal-fascism witnessed in contemporary India may be a rare phenomenon.

Characterizations of fascism vary over a large historical and ideological spectrum. For the limited purposes of this paper, we assume that emergence of fascism in a political

order is characterized by the following features, among others: (1) growing concentration of wealth and the accompanying impoverishment of masses, (2) growing attack on the democratic and economic rights of working people, (3) aggresive promotion of a fundamentalist-supremacist view of history and culture, and (4) constructing external enemies to unite people under the threat of war.

We emphasize that all the (four) conditions need to be simultaneously satisfied for a regime to be counted as fascist. In that sense, fascist regimes are to be distinguished from plain authoritarian regimes, including most dictatorial regimes, without denying that a fascist regime is also authoritarian and, eventually dictatorial. Non-fascist authoritarian regimes certainly satisfy the first two conditions, but unless they satisfy the other two conditions as well, they will not be counted as fascist regimes.

Turning to the first two conditions for fascism, the characterization implies that a fertile ground for fascism obtains at a stage of capitalist development in a country where a further concentration of wealth requires not only greater exploitation of domestic population, but imperialist adventures as well. In other words, the ruling classes have imperialist ambitions that have not yet been realized. Further, as the second condition suggests, the condition of the working masses needs to be in a disarray both in terms of their economic and political impoverishment—a condition that is typically created by defeats in largescale wars, but could also be created by attacks from external imperialism. Hence, both the ruling and the working classes are in a decisive stage of transition. That is, the working masses desire a radical change in their economic conditions without being able to do so in terms of democratic organizations of people. The absence of democratic organizations and institutions sets the material conditions for fascism. If the stage of transition was supported by organizations of the working masses themselves, the radical change would have led to a revolutionary upsurge, as in Russia.

The preceding characterization of fascism also suggests—a point often missed—that the growth of fascism is predicated on *mass support*, though once an authoritarian rule has been successfully imposed and the imperialist ambitions launched, the continuation of such support may not be required; as a consequence, all democratic institutions will be systematically smashed. But in the early periods of *growth*, fascism requires a popular basis that can only arise in political systems where the general public had been tuned to

some semblance of democratic order typically based on universal franchise. So, in some sense, the consent of the people is needed. However, the very fact that substantial sections of people actually vote for a looming fascist regime with the consequent dismantling of all democratic institutions, suggests that the democratic order which paves the way for fascism must be "fragile" in character.[3]

Once the first two conditions are simultaneously met, the characterization leaves much room for variations in how the last two are satisfied. For example, most fascist regimes target indigenous minority communities in order to strike fear in the majority community and to marshall its obedience for the ruling minority. But targetting of minority communities by itself is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for fascism. European settlers targetted—in fact exterminated, as in North America—indigenous populations by sheer power of the gun to establish the rule of the white races. These were massive racist acts, but they will not count as fascism under the definiton adopted.

In the other direction, fascism can arise in a society with almost spontaneous support from the general public without targetting any specific minority community to create the basis for that support. A typical example was the rise of fascism in Italy in which, no doubt, working class organizations and progressive groups were systematically smashed, but it did not have an overt racist formulation. Mussolini, who did hold a supremacist view of history and culture, was opposed to National Socialism in Germany because it was "one hundred percent racism: against everything and everyone; yesterday against Christian civilisation, today against Latin civilisation."[4] Similar remarks apply to fascism in Japan and Spain.

This variety supports Georgi Dimitrov's well-known observation: "No general characterization of fascism, however correct in itself, can relieve us of the need to study and take into account the special features of the development of fascism and the various forms of fascist dictatorship in the individual countries and at its various stages. It is necessary in each country to investigate, study and ascertain the national peculiar ties, the specific national features of fascism and to map out accordingly effective methods and forms of struggle against fascism."[5]

Communal-fascism arises in a very specific social history of a country. It is restricted to the form of fascism that satisfies conditions (3) and (4) by targetting a minority

community as the source of all malaise affecting the economic and cultural supremacy of the country. Even within this restricted category, it is debatable whether a fascist regime that targets domestic minorities needs to have an overtly *religious* dimension to it.

Nazi Germany is a case in point. That specific form of fascism targetted the jews, but it is unclear if the jews were targetted because of their Judaic religion, or simply because they could be characterized as belonging to an inferior—semitic—race. Moreover, it is also unclear if the supremacist view of history promoted by Nazism was itself based on a conception of a superior religion such as Christianity; as noted, Nazism is often characterized as un-Christian. It is also unclear how far the targetting of minorities was needed to garner *mass support*. Although Nazism did exploit the historical fallout of anti-semitism in the general culture, the actual campaign of extermination was mostly carried out in secret; in any case, these campaign were not ratified in terms of electoral support, because by then all democratic institutions had been smashed. The present point is that the religious dimension of German fascism is at best ambiguous.

In contrast, the muslims in India do not belong to a separate race; thus, targetting the muslim minority—including open, state-sponsored attempts at extermination—can only be based unambiguously on its religious identity.[6] It follows that the religious identity of the *majority community* was somehow marshaled to construct a supremacist view of history that viewed Islam as a threat. In other words, in the Indian case, conditions (3) and (4) were satisfied, at least in part, specifically in religious terms. The task is to explain what those terms are.

3. Insufficient explanations

Given the focus of this paper, we will attempt only a cursory review of the politico-economic environment—conditions (1) and (2)—that prevailed in India during the recent growth of communal-fascism. We hope to show that a study of the politico-economic dimension by itself falls short of explaining the phenomenon of communal-fascism; thus, the argument reinforces the specific need to study the religious dimension reached above.

The aspects of concentration of wealth and the impoverishment of the masses during the period under consideration may be summarized as follows. Although the GDP growth had indeed increased to about 6.7% per annum during the 1990s, employment growth rate has actually fallen from 2% in mid-eighties to 0.98% in 2000.[7] Turning to other

indicators, there is clear evidence that there has been a drastic fall in the off-take of subsidized grain by the poor from the Public Distribution System, and, between 1995-96 and 1998-99, a total of 60.84 lakh subscribers have ceased their memberships to the PF scheme.[8]

So, who grew? During the same period, "the MNCs increased their sales by 322% and gross profit by 369%," and the "Indian corporates garnered an increase in gross profit of 336% and net sales by 303%," while their excise duty obligations increased by less than half of these figures.[9] While per capita income, boosted by the rising GDP, showed substantial growth by Indian standards, massive poverty in rural India culminated in largescale suicide of farmers across the country. It is not dificult to understand how the effect of the noted growth was distributed. During this period of aggressive neoliberal agenda which saw a number of Indian corporations enter the Fortune 500 club and a relatively affluent middle class—roughly, 20% of the population—emerged, the rest of India essentially turned into what the noted economist Utsa Patnaik called the “republic of hunger.”[10]

Interestingly, Utsa Patnaik (this volume) traces the rise of communal-fascist forces in the country during the same period to this massive attack on agriculture. Our contention is that, although the near-collapse of the agricultural sector did create the necessary material basis, via condition (1), for these forces to acquire strength, this condition by itself does not explain the specific form of fascism that emerged. For example, a very similar collapse of rural economy was witnessed in the late 1950s to early 1960s with the telling features of shrinkage in cultivated area, massive fall in productivity, exponential increase in unemployment, near-famine conditions, etc. But that period, instead of giving rise to fascism, led to one of the most impressive phases of people’s movement in India that ultimately led to the consolidation of the public distribution system, rural credit, state-control of agricultural pricing, and the like. An explanation of the current scene therefore needs some additional dimension missing from the economic dimension alone.

As hinted, part of that additional dimension, in sharp contrast to the 1960s, was the failure of people’s movements to launch progressive political action. Democratic movements seem to have suffered a downward trend after reaching a peak around the mid-seventies. Since then, basic livelihood issues such as land reform, prices, health care,

education, and human rights, among others, have ceased to dominate the agenda of electoral politics, not to speak of the stark absence of nation-wide movements on these issues. At least for the last two decades there has been no large-scale working class movement, no significant peasant uprising, nothing comparable to the food movements of the 1960s. This is not because there has been any amelioration on these counts—just the opposite in fact, as we saw—but because the very democratic basis for these movements has lost the power to develop. Given the fractured and uncertain nature of governance in these decades it would have been dificult for the state, other things being equal, to repress any large-scale democratic movement such as the rail strike of 1974. Yet there is a strong feeling that other things are not equal, that the conditions are such that movements like this cannot even be contemplated.[11] Needless to say, a study of this complex phenomenon is beyond the scope of this essay.[12]

But, here as well, it is unlikely that the specific explanation can be reached in terms of general politico-economic conditions alone. Consider some of the suggestions of Prabhat Patnaik on related issues.[13] Patnaik traces some aspects of the phenomenon, with the consequent rise of communal fascism, to the loss of "socialist vision" after the collapse of the socialist block. Again, without denying the international significance of this event, it is unclear if the rise of communal-fascism is necessarily linked to the collapse of "socialist vision." Two related phenomena immediately come to mind: the massive anti-war movements witnessed across the globe since 9/11, and the formation of the World Social Forum in 2001. Noticeably, much of the groundwork for these large movements was conducted over the last few decades independently of the socialist block—some would say, *inspite* of it, since the "socialist block" had ceased to inspire the "socialist vision" decades ago. In any case, these movements took their current shapes at least a decade after the collapse of the block.

In fairness, Patnaik is careful to note both that "the triumph of the inegalitarian ideology predates the collapse of the Soviet Union and hence requires a separate explanation," and that "the collapse of socialism does not per se explain the growth of communal fascism that has occurred." According to him, one of the basic factors for "the emergence of the inegalitarian ideology and the growth of fascism worldwide, including in our own country," is the emergence of "international finance capital, based on the

'globalisation of finance'," that "undermines the capacity of the nation state to play any agency role, such as is enjoined upon it by all socialist and redistributivist visions." While we agreed that much of the impoverishment of the masses and the concentration of wealth can be linked to the new form of international finance capital that gave rise to the current neoliberal economic agenda,[14] it is unclear if it necessarily leads to the loss of socialist vision on a grand scale, much as the rulers of the neoliberal regime want it to be so. No other region of the world than Latin America has been subjected more to decades of direct enforcement of neoliberal order, often backed by the power of the gun. Except for Cuba, no country in that region could be viewed as belonging to the erstwhile socialist block. Yet, in recent elections in country after country, the neoliberal order has been directly challenged by people's movements geared to "redistributivist visions."

In India, despite the smaller (but growing) presence of neoliberalism and fifty years of pluralist democracy, nothing comparable to the people's movements just mentioned has been seen for some decades; for example, the anti-war demonstrations in the major metropolitan centers of India fell far short of what was achieved in small university campuses in the West.[15]

These disturbing concerns took an ominous shape in Gujarat. In early 2002, the simmering power of communal-fascism launched an open attack on the muslim minority in Gujarat in perhaps the most savage communal pogrom in contemporary India.[16] As Patnaik rightly observes in his article, "informed by honesty, integrity and a humaneness," and "with rare unanimity," the mainstream secular media "exposed the complicit role played by the State government in the attacks on the minority community and demanded the removal of the State Chief Minister."

Despite the extensive coverage by the media, the pogroms went on for several months while the rest of the country essentially watched. In fact, as observed at the beginning of this essay, while the communal-fascist BJP had lost most of the elections after coming to power in 1999, the BJP won handsomely in the elections that *followed* the pogroms in some major provinces. Subsequently, elections were also held in Gujarat itself where the BJP was returned to power with overwhelming majority.

Part of the explanation for this phenomenon, no doubt, can be traced to "islamic terror," rather than to Islam itself. As Basharat Peer observes, the victory of the

communal-fascist forces in Gujarat "lengthened the shadow of Hindu religious violence and Islamic terror attacks that loomed over India throughout 2002. In Gujarat, the fear of Muslim-sponsored terrorism consolidated effectively the Hindu nationalist votes."[17] In the post-9/11 scenario, in the name of assisting the civilized world in its fight against terrorism, the government of India sided with the US military and economic interests with a straight face. Having thus appeased the US and its neoliberal support in India,[18] it returned to its basic communal-fundamentalist agenda in the atmosphere of unconcealed Islamophobia that engulfed the non-Muslim world after 9/11.[19] What the US aggression and the accompanying propaganda machine enabled the *Sangh Parivar* to do is to claim not only moral legitimacy, but also some form of international solidarity for its attacks on minorities, especially the Muslims.[20] Exploitation of this "window of opportunity" paid handsome dividends for both the right wing, jingoist governments in India and US.[21]

However, the explanation essentially places the cart before the horse. The massive propaganda around "islamic terror" could be launched and acted upon by the BJP-led governments both at the Center and in Gujarat precisely because people had already voted them to power. The Gujarat phenomenon, which includes the electoral successes, demonstrates the peak of that power; we need to explain how the communal-fascist forces reached that peak. In other words, the ability of these forces to exploit the opportunity provided by 9/11 required that the popular ground was already covered. The development of this popular ground for the communal-fascist forces *is* the major concern here.

In the said article, Prabhat Patnaik suggests that "what is true of the present situation, I think, is that people no longer have clear notions of 'right' and 'wrong'" such that "a degree of confusion, uncertainty and fuzziness has got introduced into the moral conceptions of the people." As noted, Patnaik traces this state of moral confusion to "the collapse, for the time being at any rate, of all dreams of building a society that is not based on private aggrandisement." Further, "the recent inegalitarian thrust of social analysis, which has acquired credibility and hegemony, associated inter alia with the collapse of the socialist project, has altered these long-held notions without substituting anything in its place." It is natural therefore that the moral void "forecloses the possibility of going beyond the existing 'authority class'."

It is at least debatable if the fairly definitive electoral verdicts across northern and Western India and, more specifically, in such large provinces as Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh, can be explained in terms of a moral vacuum, rather than as an expression of a specific regressive moral choice. Furthermore, the case for the (recent) collapse of "socialist vision" seems overstated since the left had no penetration in the regions of the country under consideration; hence it is difficult to understand what "socialist vision" engaged the people in those regions prior to the rise of communal-fascism. If anything, explanation is needed as to why the left movement with its "socialist vision" failed to penetrate the greater part of India. In any case, Patnaik's suggestion explains at best the tilt towards authoritarianism—a phenomenon visible in the Indian scene long before the current advent of communal-fascism. The explanation requires an additional dimension to link the general rise of authoritarianism to one specifically of the communal-fascist kind.

4. The religious dimension

The preceding considerations lead—inexorably, in my view—to the significance of the religious dimension as a factor in explaining the spectacular growth of communal-fascism. In addition, taking clues from Patnaik's suggestion, it seems that this religious dimension enabled vast masses of people of the majority—Hindu—community to endorse the programme of communal-fascism, albeit with "a degree of confusion, uncertainty and fuzziness." In particular, the vote in Gujarat suggests a massive moral failure of a substantial section of the general public.

It is difficult to admit that a moral failure of the masses, especially at the grass roots, is the starting basis for a progressive social analysis. Even with examples of Nazi Germany in hand, we ought to adopt the null hypothesis that people are essentially rational and non-communal such that we are asked to proceed to a deeper understanding of an apparently conflicting phenomenon. This is not to deny either that large sections of people may hold false beliefs, or that they can be temporarily driven to frenzy. But to explain a sustained mass political action of the kind under discussion here, we are obliged to search for rational grounds based on sustainable historical practices, even if those grounds and practices sometimes lead to largescale false beliefs, and regressive political forms. Ascription of moral failure to whole peoples can only be a last resort in

social analysis, if at all. This is all the more pertinent in the recent Indian case since the same people voted the communal-fascist forces out of power in the stunning elections of May 2004. We cannot have it both ways.

To that end, it is instructive to state explicitly the argument that ascribes moral failure to people as a conclusion. With the argument in hand, we can proceed to examine each premise carefully to see if the argument can be blocked. It seems to me that the following argument underlies the discussion of morality in the last section.

It is undeniable that a vast majority of people engage in religious practices; we will presently see the extent of this phenomenon. These practices are religious, rather than something else, because they are typically prescribed by religious texts. Religious texts are bodies of beliefs that have been enshrined in a literary form, including oral form. The textual content of these beliefs are largely false, irrational, and often communal. The communal aspect of religions ensues from the fact that, proclamations of universal brotherhood and the equality of all religions notwithstanding, every religion embodies at least subliminal—often explicit—claims of exclusivity and supremacy of lineage. Most major religions contain a sharp category of the 'other' as essentially suspect and inferior: pagan, heretic, *kafir*, *mlechha*, to name a few. It is also undeniable, as we saw, that masses had voted for the communal-fascist forces consistently for over a decade.

Schematically,

I. Religious beliefs are largely false, irrational and communal in character.
II. Religious beliefs are largely enshrined in texts including folk-texts.
III. Masses participate widely in religious practices.
IV. Masses have voted for communal forces, especially in Gujarat.

It follows that, other things being equal, masses are/ have become communal, irrational and agents of false beliefs. The argument is not strictly deductive: which interesting argument ever is? Nonetheless, with the insertion of suitable missing premises, the general negative message seems to follow.

4.1 Valid Premises

It seems, even on cursory inspection, that the steps of the argument just stated are individually valid; or, more cautiously, it can be maintained that these steps are at least

prima facie plausible such that it is not irrational to hold them together consistently. If so, then the disturbing conclusion sketched above becomes plausible as well. The only way to defeat the argument, if at all, is to show that other things are *not* equal; that is, the premises allow an interpretation in which the conclusion does not follow even if the premises are individually true. This move, we will see, leads to the distinction between textuality and mass culture.

4.1.1 Steps I and II: The 'inverted world'

The argument can be challenged at various points. For example, one could challenge Step I by simply denying the irrationality of religious beliefs. In effect, this challenge amounts to placing religious beliefs at least on a par with secular, scientific beliefs that are typically held to be the prime examples of rationality. In fact, it is not uncommon to hear these days that religious beliefs are *superior* to scientific beliefs, and only a euro-centrically warped notion of 'rationality' prevents us from realizing so. For the purposes of this paper, we wish to stay away from this debate, and will simply adopt, without further argument, Karl Marx's classic view that "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as a spirit of a spiritless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people."[22] The challenge is to block the argument while admitting the truth of premise I.

According to Marx then religions enable people to escape the heartless world and its spiritless conditions because "this state, this society produce religion, an *inverted world-consciousness*" giving shape to an "*inverted world*." The point to note is that Marx identifies religions with a certain world-view, namely, an "inverted" one. World-views are nothing but systems of belief; in the case of religion, these systems of belief are centered around concepts of divinity, after-life, migration of the soul, liberation from material conditions, hell, heaven, and the like. Together, they help in the construction of an inverted world since none of them arise from the empirical conditions of the "heartless world" itself.

Due to their non-empirical basis, the fundmental concepts of religion are only of 'philosophical' interest insofar as they do not directly link up with the material conditions of people; just the system of concepts is useless for "this state, this society." The canonical structure of religions therefore are lot more complex. There are analogies from

common experience, often mixed with little allegories involving real and fictitious characters, that generate an abiding, *memorable* interest in the conceptual system. There are logical claims, typically supplemented with metaphysical argumentation, to rule out alternative conceptions, or to show the superiority of the current conception. Moreover, there are complex attempts to derive specific guidances or goals—for example, significance of attaining *moksha*—from the conceptions so reached. Finally, there are recommended practices—often elaborate and many-tiered with massive dosage of symbolism—whose successful renditions are supposed to satisfy the guidances.

We call this total canonical system the *textuality* of religions. Typically, the noted textuality is enshrined in actual texts phrased in a complex technical vocabulary internal to the textual tradition: hence the need for preachers, *pundits*, evangelists, and the like. It is important to understand just which aspect(s) of this complex structure fall under Marx's conception of religion. Inter alia, it is also important to see just where the common people enter this complex system. We return.

For now, if religions are viewed primarily as belief-systems, then it is difficult to assign rationality to the textual forms which enshrine such beliefs. In that sense, religious beliefs can well be harnessed, under suitable historical conditions, to give rise to a communal-fascist state of mind, even if religious texts by themselves may not have a unique fascist interpretation.[23]

4.1.2 Steps III and IV: Extent of religious practices

These steps of the argument are empirical in character. Step III is amply supported by facts. Keeping to the religious practices of the Hindu community, several million people take a dip in the cold waters of the Ganges every day during Kumbhmela; millions throng the annual religious celebrations at Gangasagar, Puri and Dwarka; hundreds of thousands of people travel long distances to visit the temple at Tirupathy; despite heavy odds, several million travel to the shrines at Amarnath, Kedarnath, and Badrinath every year.[24] These are some of the more publicised events carried by the newspapers. Beyond these, there are thousands of temples and other shrines scattered across the country—Tarapith in Bengal, for one—which attract massive crowds for several days every year. Apart from these, there are local temples, gurus, assemblies, *akharas*, yoga centers, and the like, where thousands of people gather on a daily basis. We should also mention more

community-based folk festivals with a pronounced religious dimension such as the *Durga puja*, *Dussera*, *Ram Navami*, etc. Once we take a cumulative view of the total phenomenon, it is hard to see any significant section of the population—except urban, western-educated, well-off sections of the intelligentsia—not taking part in some or other practice. The left has largely ignored the massive fact.

As noted, Step IV—vote for communal-fascist forces—is also well accounted for by facts. Even if we factor out the effects of clever political alliances, electoral malpractices, and the winner-take-all system of election, we simply cannot deny the phenomenal rise in the popular support for the BJP and the Shiv Sena since the 1990s.[25] A tiny part of the support, that came from the wealthy sections of the population, was no doubt based on explicit endorsement of the communal-fascist agenda of these parties. With the eclipse of the strong, authoritarian base of the Congress and the rise of the neoliberal agenda, the class-interests of these sections coincided with the politico-economic goals of BJP and Shiv Sena.

But the support of this section, though significant for marshaling state policy, is not sufficient for winning nearly 200 seats in the Parliament and capturing power in such major provinces as Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan. Despite its unconcealed neoliberal and pro-imperialist agenda, how did the BJP manage to secure the votes of vast masses of urban poor, landless peasants, labourers and tribals, none of which is likely to have a fascination for the stated agenda? The only explanation, it would seem, is that impoverished masses have turned communal.

As far as we can see, this uneasy conclusion can be blocked only by severing the link between steps II and III. In other words, the argument assumes that the widespread religious practices of the masses is causally linked to the religious beliefs enshrined in the texts. If, therefore, there is a separation between religious *texts* and religious *practices* of the masses, then the conclusion will not follow. I will argue that on empirical evidence this separation seems to be case.

5. Texts and practices

Religious thought as enshrined in religious texts can be separated from religious practices engaged in by common people on the following grounds, among others.

First, as Rajat Roy and his colleague (this volume) explain with a specific example, religious texts are often coded with many-layered meanings. The primary layer, open to common interpretation, conceals much of the secondary metaphorical meaning that can be reached by a more discerning audience with knowledge of the specific religious tradition. Moreover, the secondary meaning may conceal a tertiary meaning that is essentially maintained as a secret and is made available, under specific instructions from the *Guru*, to the most devout members of the sect. A very similar account of religious texts was offered by Robert Nozick.[26] Working through a number of religious texts in the Hindu tradition, Nozick argued that, on the surface, expressions such as "supreme ecstasy," "self-revelation" and "universe unfolding onto itself" are literary devices for describing religious experience. Below the surface, however, the specific expressions might well indicate intricate sexual practices that help the practitioner attain the suggested state; needless to say, those practices are a closely-guarded secret and are never made available to the common devotee.

Second, even with respect to the primary, "popular," level of meaning, it is common knowledge that the religious practices of masses have little to do with the religious texts themselves. In an underdeveloped setup such as India, vast illiteracy is a clear impediment to an access to texts. Even within the literate sections of the population, formal literacy is essentially insufficient for marshaling the intricate and abstract character of religious texts. In many cases, masses are excluded from an access to religious texts by conscious design. In the Indian case, the use of Sanskrit, for example, is designed to create an elite, male, and *brahminical* audience from which other castes, tribals, and women have been systematically excluded. Even within the favoured group, listening to Sanskrit *sloka*s—often rendered by ill-equipped *purohit*s who have little knowledge of the language themselves—is a matter of ritualistic obedience rather than of comprehension. In most cases, such rituals are the *only* link between a text and the practices that are supposed to follow from it. In effect, Marx missed the empirical point that, even if religions offer an "inverted world," it is hard to see that the masses live in it with full understanding.

Third, a clear division between the practice of rendering the texts and *other* practices has evolved over centuries. As noted, women have been largely excluded from the

sanctum sanctorium of religious textuality in the Hindu tradition, yet most of the preparatory work for the solemn events are done by women themselves: cleaning up the place, collecting and arranging flowers, cooking food, looking after the comforts of the *purohit* or the *Guru*, and the like. Not surprisingly, women themselves *do not* view these practices as additional domestic labour, but as priviledged *religious* practices. The scene generalizes to other religions as well. Anecdotally, it is well-known that poor, illiterate Muslims eagerly travel long distances with enthusiasm to reach a mosque for the Friday prayers much before the prayers begin. Their task is to clean up the place, organize the prayer area, control the crowds, etc. Just before the prayers begin, they recede to the background, and the elites walk in to occupy the area from where the surmons are delivered.

Fourth, as a result, what comes to the masses as expressions of religious textuality at best are folk-lores, adventures of *Guru*s, anecdotes of miracles, and large dosage of surmons on health, morality, sexuality, values of patriarchy and other social heirarchy, and the like. Although it is obvious, it is important to emphasize that *these* advices ensue from the class-divided society itself, and have little to do with the specificity of religious texts. For example, these surmons are perfectly consistent within an atheistic setup or a tradition, such as Buddhism, which makes no specific textual appeal to divinity and the metaphysical order in which it is embedded. In fact, in the case of most of the tribal religions, the entirety of religious practices may be viewed as closed around these moral guidances that do not seem to be based on any overarching metaphysical concern. However, the distance between the textuality of religions and the religious practices of the masses is neither sharp nor absolute. It comes in grades depending on the organizational character and the historical spread of the concerned religion: less for Islam and Christianity, more for Hinduism and the rich variety of individual-based sects allowed there. New religions such as Sikhism seem to occupy intermediate positions.

6. “Festival of the masses”

What then explains the sustained historical fascination of the masses with religion? How are religious systems able to work as the “sigh of the oppressed” and an “opium of the people?” If the analysis sketched above is even partially valid, then it is hard to ascribe the historical fascination to the intellectual content of religions, which appears to be the

basis of Marx's critique of them. In other words, there must be some other way of describing the sustainability of religions that remains invariant across the explicit articulation and changes of their scholastic narratives. Given the separation between texts and the practices engaged in by the masses, it follows that those sustaining features could be located in the internal properties of religious practices themselves.

It also follows that those practices can be viewed as largely independent of textuality despite the professed link between them. Practices, especially those with a massive symbolic character, need some or other thought-system to anchor them. In the absence of any other thought-system, it is not surprising that those practices attached themselves, tenuously, with the available *religious* thought-systems; they could have attached themselves to something else if that were historically available. What could be the features of such sustainable practice? I will briefly mention six dimensions that seem to me to be immediately relevant for the purposes in hand; surely, there are others.

Solidarity: Religious occasions bind people under a common cause shared by the members of the gathering. Successful performance of complex religious rituals requires co-operative gestures which foster a sense of community spirit among the participants.

Altruism: Most religions contain a clause devoted to the welfare of others, especially underpriviledged members of the same community. It could take the form of collecting donations, organizing community meals, health care, and the like.

Egalitarianism: Notwithstanding the lifestyles and locations of top religious leaders and their cohorts, most religions advocate on paper a disapproval of extreme concentration of wealth and recommend a redistributive vision of society. In effect, religions advocate a 'simple life' that most people are compelled to lead anyway by dint of their material condition. A religious point of view in that sense renders value to the otherwise difficult lives led by the masses.

Pacifism: Although religious wars have been at least as frequent as purely territorial ones in history, religions also recommend, other things being equal, a peaceful vision of the world that includes the notion of universal brotherhood.

Domesticism: Although religions such as Christianity, Islam, and, growingly, Hinduism aim for universal coverage, all religions typically embed themselves in local cultures to attain a variety of ethnic identities. In that sense, religious institutions are common grounds for the preservation of local cultures in the face of cultural onslaught from outside. When the cultural onslaught is accompanied by imperialist programmes, these institutions can in fact play a limited anti-imperialist role.

Spirituality: The preceding factors, alongwith the subliminal expectation that religions offer a coherent perspective to the complex problem of living, make participation in religious activity a meaningful preoccupation that every human being yearns for: religion is a spirit of a spiritless conditions.

Festivity: Religious events are typically marked with lots of decent colours displayed amidst general whiteness, flowers, cleanliness, joyful participation, and music. In fact, the structure, content and the delivery of religious music gives a coherent unity to each of the factors just listed. Most religious music, without failing to be essentialy good music, is accessible to the common people so that they can actively engage in it.

One does not have to be communal to feel attracted to such a system of practices if religions provide them, especially when this is the *only* source available in an otherwise degrading human condition. It also explains why the elite, intellectual sections of the people feel less attracted to religions: they have other secular resources in which these universal human dimensions are satisfied—access to a high-culture, for example.

More significantly for our purposes, each of these practices is very much a part of progressive mass organizations. Those who have some acquaintance with people's movements—peasants, workers, teachers, youth, etc.—can amply testify to the festive character that almost spontaneously ensues when people gather under a cause. By parity of reason, the absence of broad, sustainable, and democratic movements geared to the

basic livelihood issues of the people has left a wide vacuum in *political* practice of the masses. It is not surprising that masses have found those practices within religious systems since they are historically available in any case. In the last two decades—precisely the period of democratic deficit under consideration—the *Sangh Parivar* has been able to enter and fill that political space by adding an explicit religious dimension to their communal-fascist agenda. It is worth noting that the phenomenal growth of *Viswa Hindu Parishad* and *Bajrang Dal* are more recent dimensions of the *Parivar*. By joining and thereby co-opting the religious lives of the masses, they have been able to marshal much of their religious energy towards the *political* agenda.

It is a well-known human fact that when the positive penchant for the values of solidarity, altruism, and the like, are satisfied, a certain sense of loyalty to institutions that offer them develops. As a result, the participants may in fact ignore or downplay the negative features often associated with these institutions, especially when their act of participation can be viewed as essentially separated from the fall-out of such negative aspects. When the negative aspects begin to dominate, values of solidarity and domesticity tend to restrain the ability of the participants to voice protest, generating thereby moral confusion among the masses and allowing the insidious forces to pursue their agenda.

The phenomenon is not retricted to communal-fascist programmes alone. The chequered, and often problematic, history of the communist movement in the last century provides enough examples. Given the loyalty to "infant socialism" and the values associated in defending it, people essentially downplayed the outrages committed by the ruling oligarchies in "socialist" countries. When facts about mass pogroms, wide-scale repressions, and secret operations began to attain a public face, people either recoiled in disbelief or lapsed into silence, while continuing to lend support to the regimes out of their historical loyalty to the basic cause.

In the Indian case, the absence of the left—and, hence, of people's movements—across vast stretches of the country allowed the *Sangh Parivar* not only to fill the political space, as noted, but also to implement a massive propaganda almost at will since the loyalty of the people had already been secured through their entrenchment in the religious machinery.

However, as with every repressive order, people ultimately withdraw their support when material conditions over-ride the binds of loyalty and an alternative political space begins to open up. The general elections of 2004 testify in part to this phenomenon: class concerns supercede cultural loyalties.[27] We most note though that the salvaging of the body politic from the clutches of communal-fascism was achieved only in part. Given the massive historical presence of religions in the consciousness of the people, religious platforms can always be used by communal-fascist forces if secular alternatives fail to ameliorate the material conditions of the masses.

NIRMALANGSHU MUKHERJI

Notes

[1] This is a revised version of a talk given at the panel discussion on Religion and Material Life organized under the auspieces of the Indian History Congress at Mysore in December 2003. I am indebted to the distinguished audience present on that occasion for a very lively discussion.

[2] See W.V.O Quine, *Word and Object*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960, p.103, for the relevant distinction.

[3] Noam Chomsky, "Manipulation of fear," foreword essay in N. Mukherji, *December 13: Terror over Democracy*, Bibliophile South Asia, New Delhi, 2005, p. xvii.

[4] Benito Mussolini, "Doctrine of fascism," cited in *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia*, Volume 7, p. 185. It is a different issue that Mussolini joined Hitler later for the conquest of Africa and other regions.

[5] Georgi Dimitrov, "Unity of the Working Class against Fascism," in *Selected Works, volume 2*, Sofia Press 1972, pp. 86-119.

[6] This point needs some qualification in view of current Islamophobia. We return.

[7] Planning Commission figures, released May 21, 2001.

[8] "Unions pick up reforms gauntlet," Government Business, p.VIII, *The Times of India*, May 25, 2001.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Utsa Patnaik, *The Republic of Hunger*, Sahmat, 2004.

[11] The official leader of the impressive struggle of the railway workers, George Fernandes, has turned into a leading collaborationist with the communal-facist forces.

[12] See my "On reasons for the state," *Indian Social Science Review*, Volume 1.2, 1999, p. 311-28, for some preliminary gestures at explanation. Unfortunately, I have not been able to locate any full-length study of this crucial issue.

[13] Prabhat Patnaik, "Market, morals and the media," *Frontline*, Volume 19 - Issue 15, July 20 - August 02, 2002.

[14] See Prabhat Patnaik's illuminating introduction to a new edition of V. I. Lenin's *Imperialism: the highest stage of capitalism*, Leftword Books, New Delhi, 2001.

[15] In contrast to the massive, nationwide protests against the presence of Robert McNamara witnessed in the 1960s, the captains of the neoliberal world order, including

their representatives in the US government, are given red-carpet treatment in their increasingly frequent visits to India with the left watching quietly: the list includes Bill Gates, James Baker, Bill Clinton, Condolissa Rice, Donald Rumsfeld, Colin Powell, Richard Armitage, and the like.

[16] See *Crime Against Humanity: An Inquiry into the Carnage in Gujarat*, Concerned Citizen's Tribunal, published by Anil Dharkar for Citizens for Peace and Justice, 2002. Also, *State Sponsored Genocide: Factsheet Gujarat 2002*, CPI(M) Publications, 2002.

[17] Basharat Peer, "Victims of December 13," *The Guardian Weekend*, 5 July 2003.

[18] Within months after the carnage in Gujarat, the same media turned around and vigorously supported the regime in its "India shining" campaign. Events in Gujarat, though condemnable, were systematically projected as an aberration.

[19] Vaskar Nandy, "War against terrorism: perspective on protests", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 27 October 2001. Also, Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War and the Roots of Terror*, Pantheon Books, 2003. For the Australian scene, see Iain Lygo, "Who will be charged under terrorism laws?" *Znet*, 23 October 2004.

[20] See my "Gujrat and the world order", *Znet South Asia*, June 2002.

[21] See Vidya Subrahmaniam, "Two gods, one message," *The Hindu*, 11 November 2004. The topic is discussed in some detail in my *December 13: Terror over Democracy*, Bibliophile South Asia, New Delhi, 2005, Chapter One.

[22] Karl Marx, "Contribution to the critique of Hegel's philosophy of law," in K. Marx and F. Engels, *On Religion*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, p. 38-52.

[23] As hinted, I doubt if religious beliefs can fail to have a communal character. In saying this, I am obviously identifying genuine secularism with principled atheism. I am also questioning the widely-held view—often aligned with secularism—that religious beliefs may be viewed as essentially 'personal' in character. These stronger theses are not needed for the purposes in hand.

Moreover, as noted, the textuality of religions are complex bodies of doctrines; hence, it is unlikely that every item in those systems strictly qualifies as a 'religious' item. Those non-religious items of the texts then may well supply an edifice for genuinely secular

thought. In *Problem of False Beliefs* (M.Phil. dissertation, Delhi University, 2004), Mitsu Jain made a preliminary attempt to study this issue.

[24] It is well documented that millions of pilgrims have been visiting these shrines for centuries travelling by foot for months over dangerous mountain roads, often infested with man-eating animals; thousands perished along the way. More recently, the crowds for the annual pilgrimage to Amarnath had to be stopped by force at Jammu and Pathankote; while the rich generally stayed away, poor people with scant resources, kept on gathering despite the terrible situation in Kashmir.

[25] Political compulsion seems to be the only reason why parties such as the AIADMK are not generally counted as communal-fascist.

[26] Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, Chapter Three "why is there something rather than nothing," the final section on mysticism, Harvard University Press, 1978.

[27] See my "2004 Elections and after," *Revolutionary Democracy*, Vol. 10, No.2, 2004.