

HOW ULTRA-NATIONALISTS HAD OPPOSED THE NATIONAL FLAG

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As the nation prepares to celebrate the 26th of January as the 70th Republic Day and also the 70th anniversary of the date on which the Indian Constitution was given effect to, it is customary to recall the sacrifices made by the courageous. In this short article, we shall, however, recall the disruptive role of those forces that opposed the Freedom Movement, decried and cursed the Tricolour, refused to accept the Indian Constitution in making and rejoiced at the heinous assassination of the Father of the Nation. The immediate provocation is the complete and aggressive monopolisation of patriotism by the descendants of these dark forces of communalism who masquerade as ‘ultra-nationalists’ and compel all citizens, especially Muslims, to publicly demonstrate their patriotism or face their wrath.

History tells us how the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Hindu Mahasabha considered their Hindutva to be above nationalism and did not participate in the freedom movement. In his Bunch of Thoughts, Madhav Golwalkar, the second supremo of the RSS, clearly thrashed the “reactionary view” of “equating anti-Britishism with patriotism and nationalism” and claimed that this was “disastrous”. During the nation’s ‘do or die’ agitations that followed Gandhi’s launch of the historic ‘Quit India’ movement of 1942, British officials sent reports that these two Hindu organisations were ‘loyal’ and ‘law abiding’. The Muslim League also played a devious role and the Communist Party took an official resolution to collaborate with the British during the ‘anti-Fascist’ Second World War. This helped the British to divide and rule and emboldened them to let loose terrible repression on the mainstream freedom fighters of the Congress. Recently, the Central government has been accused of destroying several valuable archival files to obliterate incriminating evidence, but there are enough records or mentions elsewhere.

The other Hindu fundamentalist organisation, the Hindu Mahasabha, was led by VD Savarkar. He had started as a revolutionary but by 1923, he had abandoned the national movement. He published his book Hindutva, outlining the very nebulous concept of Hindu fundamentalism. In it, he made it clear that India is for Hindus only and declared the Muslims and Christians to be enemies. This is the Bible of Hindu fundamentalists. In 1911, Savarkar was sent to the Cellular Jail in the Andamans and is paraded around by Hindu Right as the only ‘Freedom Fighter’ they ever produced. What they do not publicise is that very soon thereafter this ‘Veer’ capitulated and begged the British for clemency. The Government of India’s 1975 publication entitled Penal Settlement in Andamans records (page 213) VD Savarkar’s mercy petition of 14th November 1913, addressed to the British government. Savarkar’s fervent plea was “if the government in their manifold benevolence and mercy release

me, I for one cannot but be the staunchest advocate of constitutional progress and loyalty to the English government.” There were other such pleas and it is easy to understand why Savarkar’s Hindu Mahasabha stayed out of the National Movement. But, unlike the RSS, it participated in elections in 1937, when the first-ever polls were held in British India under the Government of India Act of 1935. The Indian National Congress won 707 seats in eleven Provinces, while its challenger, the Muslim League, got 107 only. The League hardly won seats in Muslim-majority areas, which were captured mainly by regional pro-Muslim parties. Savarkar’s Hindu Mahasabha and ‘regional boards’ or ‘independents’ supported by it scored miserably, except in a couple of Provinces. Congress formed governments in 8 of the 11 Provinces and when these resigned in 1939, to protest against the unilateral British decision to drag an unwilling India in the War, the communal parties made best use of this situation.

In Bengal, while Shyama Prasad Mookerjee was virulently opposing Muslims and their politics, his Hindu Mahasabha had no compunctions in joining Fazlul Haq’s government. In Sindh, the Hindu Mahasabha joined the Muslim League government and the Mahasabha ministers did not resign even after this government passed the first official resolution in March 1943 — to divide India and create Pakistan. For power and when in power, neither Muslim nor Hindu fanatics stop at anything. Despite the Mahasabha’s own role in the Partition of India, it justified its party member, Nathuram Godse’s assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in January 1948 — as it felt that Gandhi was too soft on Muslims, which led to the Partition of India. This is important at the present juncture because India’s Home Minister has been making statements that the Congress had partitioned India, while facts reveal that not only did the forces of Hindutva agree with Jinnah that Indian Hindus and Muslims are two separate nations, but they had supported the Muslim League’s governments that resolved to partition India. To cite the part played by Shyama Prasad Mookerjee during this critical period, we may refer to his letter to the Governor of Bengal on 26th July, 1942, wherein he urged the British Raj to suppress the freedom movement most sternly and offered the services of his ministers in propagating pro-government, anti-Congress messages among the people of Bengal.

Incidentally, Prime Minister Modi visited the Cellular Jail in the Andamans recently and prayed before the portrait of Savarkar in the cell from which he managed to get out, by grovelling before the British Imperial Government. Without mentioning Savarkar’s abject surrender, Modi tweeted “I visited the cell where the indomitable Veer Savarkar was lodged. Rigorous imprisonment did not dampen Veer Savarkar’s spirits and he continued to speak and write about a free India from jail too.” Incidentally, the BJP government has already named the main airport of Port Blair in the Andamans after Savarkar and much of the ‘sound and light’ show at the Cellular Jail focusses on him — not on the countless freedom fighters who underwent the trauma of the toughest form of imprisonment without ever breaking down. Many, in fact, died within these premises.

In spite of the opposition from communal parties, when Congress managed to wrest Independence, the RSS opposed the Indian tricolour flag and the Indian constitution. One of the major reasons why at present ultra-nationalists compel all Indians to salute the national flag, by law or by intimidation, is, perhaps, to atone for their own prolonged opposition to this very tricolour. In fact, the RSS's mouthpiece, Organiser declared its opposition to the decision of the Constituent Assembly to select the tricolour as the national flag. In its editorial entitled 'National Flag' published on 17th July 1947, less than a month before Independence, it demanded that its own saffron coloured split-flag, the Bhagwa Dhwaj, be selected as India's national flag. The RSS and Organiser raised this issue in its editorial named 'Hindusthan' on the 31st of July and on the eve of Independence, in its issue of 14th of August, where its editorial titled 'Whither' rejected the basic idea a composite nation. This issue also carried an a special article under the title 'Mystery Behind the Bhagwa Dhwaj (saffron flag)', which demanded its saffron flag be hoisted at the Red Fort in Delhi and castigated government for selecting the tricolour as the national flag.

The RSS declared that "the tricolour..... will never be respected and owned by Hindus. The word three is in itself an evil, and a flag having three colours will certainly produce a very bad psychological effect and is injurious to a country." This is a contrived logic because three is considered holy in Hinduism and most powerful trinity of gods comprises of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar and even Shiva's sacred weapon, the trishul, that aggressive RSS supporters brandish is a three-pointed spear. The Hindu Right went on opposing the tricolour even after Independence and in a chapter titled 'Drifting and Drifting' in his book, Bunch of Thoughts, its sarasanghachalak or commander-in-chief, MS Golwalkar made some bitter but unsubstantiated claims. "Ours is an ancient and great nation with a glorious past", he said, "then, had we no flag of our own? Had we no national emblem at all these thousands of years? Undoubtedly we had. Then why this utter void, this utter vacuum in our minds?" Golwalkar did not, however, tell us what ancient flag or national emblem of India we had lost. . Similarly, the RSS severely criticised the new Indian Constitution as "cumbersome, heterogenous articles" that were copied from western nations and demanded that the Manu-Smriti be our guide. It is clear from the Savarkar Samagar and Golwakar's We, Our Nation Defined that both wholeheartedly supported Manu's injunctions to treat all lower castes and women as sub-humans.

As we know, Muslim and Hindu extremists were on the boil immediately before and after Independence, which was accompanied by the partition of this subcontinent and consequential riots. On the 30th January, 1948, Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated by Nathuram Godse, a fanatic Hindu Mahasabha member and diehard follower of Savarkar.

Sardar Patel, Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister of India had enough and he clamped down on the RSS, banning it. Over the next eighteen months, he refused to budge in spite of several pleas from Golwalkar. In a speech on the 24th of February 1948, Nehru spoke sorrowfully of how 'at some places members of the RSS

dishonoured the National Flag. They know well that by disgracing the flag they are proving themselves as traitors...' (Vol. XIII of the Collected Works of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, edited by P.N. Chopra and Prabha Chopra). On 17 December, 1949, Patel said at a Congress meet in Jaipur that any organisation seeking to supplant the National Flag by another would be sternly dealt with. Home Secretary H.V.R. Iyengar had written to Golwalkar in May 1949, stating, "An explicit acceptance of the National Flag (with the Bhagwa Dhwaj as the organisational flag of the Sangh) would be necessary for satisfying the country that there are no reservations in regard to allegiance to the State" It was only after the RSS swore "loyalty to the Constitution of India and the national flag" did he lift the ban, on July 11, 1949. Even on 16th August 2000, Vajpayee's government informed the Lok Sabha that according to the Home Ministry's resolution dated 26 November, 1949, "There was an agreement between the RSS and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel which clearly states that RSS will hoist the national flag on 26h January 1950 at its Nagpur headquarters."

This history needs to be made more public and this firm crackdown on the RSS needs to be inscribed — even at the site of Patel's colossal statue that Narendra Modi has built.