

The RSS and the tricolour

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As Indians get ready to celebrate the nation's 70th anniversary in a few days, our main worry should not be whether some have suddenly decided to become anti-national, but it should be on a new, dangerous game of competitive hyper-nationalism that has recently been unleashed. Ridiculous ideas are being floated to instil this 'nationalism', like installing a military tank within the precincts of a genetically restless university. With systematic attacks on plurality, the atmosphere has already been heated to the desired degree that facilitates the branding of inconvenient dissent as anti-national. We shall soon witness how a government that excels in event management zaps the nation on Independence Day with dollops of patriotic fare produced at public expense which must, of course, come with that mesmerizing oratory. But one fact is certain: the organization, which runs the party that runs the regime cannot just appropriate the 'Indian national movement' as its own.

This is extremely relevant because of the ongoing well-planned exercise to slaughter the Nehruvian legacy and pluck other national leaders of stature - from M.K. Gandhi to Vallabhbhai Patel - almost out of context and replant them within the rightist pantheon that is so understaffed. True, both these leaders hailed from Gujarat, as does the Gir lion, whose weird, gear-crunching 'Make in India' animation has put the elephant, the icon of a traditionally-peaceful India, in the shade. Even Swami Vivekananda is not spared by those who cannot see beyond his saffron dress and fail to read his stern anti-communal messages. And, in all such cases, the political right makes selective use of the words and deeds of icons to claim them as 'mentors' in the hope that their association may lend some 'mainstream lineage' and respectability to an allegedly sectarian and secretive ultra-national outfit. Despite tireless and systematic attempts to distort history, the version we possess till now is quite clear that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh had refused to participate in the freedom struggle. It has, therefore, no right to claim its glory even though the Congress cannot also monopolize on any 'sole heir status' for various reasons.

K.B. Hedgewar, who founded the RSS in 1925, did have some initial loose association with the freedom struggle. But from the 1930s, he ensured that his boys in *khaki* shorts stayed away from this historic movement. His biographer, C.P. Bhishikar, quotes him thus: "Patriotism is not only going to prison. It is not correct to be carried away by such superficial patriotism." On the other hand, the Hindu Mahasabha's V.D. Savarkar, who is another cherished role model of the current dispensation, had been active long before Hedgewar but he was rather mercurial. He did lead strident anti-British agitations and was jailed, but he also signed multiple clemency petitions to the colonial government, promising total cooperation if he was released. The Congress retaliated in 1934 and banned its members from joining communal organizations like the Hindu Mahasabha, the RSS and the Muslim League. In any case, during the critical phase of the Quit India movement and other agitations, not only was the RSS missing but we also have British reports of the 'good

conduct' and the law-abiding nature of its members, while thousands of women, children and men all over India braved the onslaught of imperial repression.

Nana Deshmukh raised the issue in his book, *RSS: Victim of Slander* (1979): "One might well ask: why did the RSS not take part in the liberation struggle as an organisation? The question arose for the first time when Gandhiji launched his movement in 1929-30. It was decided that the members of the RSS were free to take part in their individual capacity". Fine. But it may be instructive to know which particular RSS member actually took part and what suffering he went through for it. The National Archives in Delhi have preserved the home ministry files that contain intelligence branch records of the role played by them as well as by the nationalists. It is only logical that the RSS and its dedicated cadre that run the government should come clear on this phase of history before attempting to snatch credit in this new version of ultra-nationalism.

This caveat is essential as we come to the next issue on how the RSS had actually opposed the Indian national flag. On the eve of Independence, when much of the nation was preparing to celebrate freedom, the RSS's mouthpiece, *Organiser*, declared that the Indian tricolour will "never be respected and owned by the 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." Apart from distorting facts like the age old reverence of Hindus for 'three', as is evident in the trimurti of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar, this reveals the nonsense that rules the minds of those who peddle faith for votes. We must also understand the psyche that declares cow urine to be a divine antidote and that an elephant's head was grafted on a decapitated Ganesh through plastic surgery in very ancient times.

The earlier issues of the *Organiser*, such as those of July 17 and 22, 1947, had also voiced the RSS's opposition to many such national issues. But to get to the root, we need to see the book, *Bunch of Thoughts*, that the second head of the RSS, M.S. Golwalkar, published. He lamented that "our leaders have set up a new flag for the country. Why did they do so? It is just a case of drifting and imitating... Ours is an ancient and great nation with a glorious past. 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?" We would, in all fairness, be enlightened if Golwalkar could show us the ancient national emblem or the flag that he refers to, unless his intention is to substitute the nation's culturally-composite flag with the *Bhagwa Dhwaj*. This saffron 'split flag' of the RSS symbolizes not only divisionism but is also synonymous with Hinduism and Hindutva that militate against the plural reality of India.

Gandhi's assassination on January 30, 1948, however, changed the political chessboard of India decisively. The government banned the RSS and the then deputy prime minister, Patel, declared quite unequivocally that though "the RSS was not involved... his assassination was welcomed by those of the RSS and the [Hindu] Mahasabha who were strongly opposed to his way of thinking and to his policy." Golwalkar repeatedly pleaded with Patel, but the leader, whom the current regime seeks to appropriate, remained firm. He lifted the ban on July 11, 1949, only after the RSS

pledged to stay away from politics, not be secretive and abjure violence. More important, it had to profess "loyalty to the Constitution of India and the National Flag". Is it this 'complex' that engenders the government's efforts to publicly demonstrate patriotism everywhere?