



The Paradox of the Popularity of Hitler in India

It is a paradox that in a country that has never really known anti-Semitism, and where it remains largely unknown even today, Hitler is gaining popularity. Hitler's autobiography has increased in sales to the tune of fifteen percent in just a decade. The phenomena can also be seen in the release of films in various Indian languages with the eponymous protagonist with the namesake of Hitler. Similarly, the name Aryan has recently become popular as a first name among

Indians and there is a growing demand for Hitler memorabilia.

Although Jews have lived in India for at least twelve centuries, most of the Indians are ignorant of their presence among them. This can be explained by the small number of Jews in India today. There are less than 5000 in a total population of 1.3 billion (0.0004 per cent of the total population of India).

Another interesting fact to note is that

despite their long presence in the country, India doesn't teach about the Jews, whereas in the neighboring country of China, Jewish Studies are flourishing at the university level.

Although the University Grants Commission of India prominently mentions Nazism in its syllabus for the National Eligibility Test for Lecturerships in History, the word Holocaust isn't mentioned. Some believe the partition of the Indian subcontinent has been

as tragic an episode of history as the Holocaust has been for the Jews, yet Indian Partition Studies also doesn't exist as an academic discipline in India, the way Holocaust Studies exist in the West. There seems to be a certain degree of reluctance in Indian academia and cinema to deal with issues perceived to be communally sensitive.

Hitler's Mein Kampf was translated by the Nazis in all major Indian languages, and is still readily available today across India for less than a dollar, while there is almost nothing available on the Holocaust in Indian languages. The only Hindi (the most widely spoken language in India) book on the Holocaust is a thin collection, *Frequently Asked Questions about the Holocaust*, published by Yad Vashem.

Another paradox is that the very people who have been the most vocal advocates of Indo-Israel relations are the ones who have traditionally admired the Nazis. This has been mediated by their attitude towards Muslims, but it is not only the Hindu Right Wing that should be held responsible for the absence of Jewish and Holocaust Studies in India. Indian politicians fear that the introduction of Jewish and Holocaust Studies might adversely affect Muslim support. They are aware of the anti-Semitism that exists in a section of the Muslim population. This group happens to be the most vocal among them. They express their anti-Semitism in various forms, often disguised as anti-Israelism. They also deny that the Holocaust ever took place or raise doubts about its magnitude and scale. Even if they do acknowledge it as a historical fact, any serious reference to the Holocaust is often accompanied by a comparison with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is worth noting how during the post 9/11 American led military strikes against Iraq,

Israel's flag was drawn in addition to that of the United States by Shi'a Muslims in Lucknow (a major centre of Muslim scholarship) on the floor of the entrance to their most prominent monument there, the Bara Imambara. This also happens to be the most popular tourist attraction of the city, so nobody could enter it without trampling on the flags.

Furthermore, Muslim opinion has carried great weight in matters of foreign policy in India. This is seen in India's refusal to have diplomatic relations with Israel for the first four decades of Israel's existence despite the absence of any dispute or conflict with it. During this period, India continued to have relations with both China and Pakistan in spite of the wars India fought against them.

How Did These Opinions Rise to be Accepted?

To understand how these opinions became accepted requires a look at history. Nazi propagandists were active in India from 1933 to 1939. There were several newspapers that carried direct Nazi propaganda. These included: *Spirit of the Times*, *Salar-e-Hind*, *Princely India*, *Karnataka Bandhu*, *Lokhandi Morcha and Trikal*. What is paradoxical is that the propagandists tried to influence both the Hindus and the Muslims. They raised the issue of Palestine to win Muslim support. To win Hindu support, they highlighted the Nazi symbol of the swastika and the Aryan race theory because they were aware that the swastika is an ancient Hindu symbol and the Northern Indians consider themselves Aryan. They also tried to impress upon them that India belonged to them alone and not to the Muslims and other communities such as Germany belonged only to Germans and not to the Jews, who were outsiders. The Nazis operated in India through various cultural and business organizations, both

Indian and European, which included International Railway Information Bureau of Madras, Bombay Press Service, Indo-German News Exchange of New Delhi, Aligarh University German Society, Bhattachar Movement in Bengal (Bhattachari), German Institute of Bombay and certain branches of Hindu Mahasabha in Maharashtra.

Even India's response to the Holocaust was determined by Muslim opinion. Conscious of the Muslim opposition to the grant of refuge to Jews from Nazi Europe, the British Government of India made it mandatory for Jews seeking asylum to produce proof of guaranteed employment in India before being allowed entry, resulting in a sharp decrease in the number of people able to enter.

Despite this, shortly after Prime Minister Nehru's return from Europe, he sponsored a resolution in support of the Jewish refugees. It was however rejected by then Congress President Subhas Chandra Bose who four years later, in 1942, was reported by the *Jewish Chronicle* of London as having published an article in *Angriff*, a journal of Goebbels, saying that "anti-Semitism should become part of the Indian liberation movement because the Jews had helped the British to exploit Indians (21 August 1942)." Although by then Bose had left the Congress, he continued to command a strong influence in the party. Nehru's proposal was also opposed by the Hindu Right. The fact that Bose met Hitler and tried to win his support in raising an army against the British in India often deludes the Indians into believing that Hitler actually made a significant contribution to India's struggle for freedom.

This absence of Holocaust Studies in India makes it only easier for the Hindu Right Wing to project Hitler as a

hero among the Indian masses hungry for strong leadership. It also sets an atmosphere conducive for them to adopt Nazi-like measures against Muslim and Christian minorities in India if they were ever to form a government with full majority.

Leaders of militant Hinduism have time and again expressed their admiration for authoritarian leaders like Hitler and Mussolini and for the fascist model of society. This influence lingers on through the present day as portrayed by speeches and statements given by the founder of India's right-wing Marathi party, Bal Thakeray and his nephew Raj Thakeray among many others. Interestingly Bal Thakeray's last rites were performed with full state honors in India, a country that prides itself on being the world's largest democracy.

One of the leaders of the Hindu extremist group Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh (RSS), Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar expressed his approval of Nazi policy towards the Jews, in the following words: "To keep up the purity of the Race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic Race – the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by."

Historically, the Hindu nationalists not only admired the Nazis but were also in direct contact with them. The first Hindu nationalist to come in direct contact with the fascists and their leader Mussolini, an ally of Hitler, was an RSS leader, B. S. Moonje, well acknowledged as Hedgewar's mentor (founding supreme leader of RSS). Between February and March 1931, on his way back from the round table conference, Moonje made

a tour of Europe with a long stopover in Italy, during which he met Mussolini. His thirteen-page account of the trip and the meeting is available at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi. During his stay in Italy he visited the Balilla and Avangardisti organizations, the keystone of the fascist system of indoctrination of the youth, strikingly similar to the RSS. The RSS and other Hindu fundamentalist organizations and parties project the structure of the RSS as the result of Hedgewar's vision and work, "however Moonje played a crucial role in molding the RSS along Italian (fascist) lines," as Marzia Casolari, author of the research paper "Hindutva's Foreign Tie-ups in the 1930s: Archival Evidence" found. She points out that as soon as Moonje returned from Italy, he started working for the militant reorganization of Hindu society in Maharashtra on the lines of the work done by the Italian organizations Balilla and Avangardisti.

Soon fascism became so popular among the Hindu nationalists that a conference on it was organized on January 31, 1934, which was presided over by Hedgewar. An intelligence report published in 1933 warned that: "It is perhaps no exaggeration to assert that the Sangh hopes to be in future India what the 'Fascisti' are to Italy and the 'Nazis' to Germany." (NAI, Home Poll Department, 88/33, 1933). Savarkar openly defended the Nazis and the Fascists. As the president of RSS, Savarkar's rhetoric against Muslims became increasingly radical, distinctly unpleasant and continuously referred to the Nazi treatment of Jews as a role model. In a speech he made on October 14, 1938, he suggested the following solution for the Muslim problem in India: "A Nation is formed by a majority living therein. What did the Jews do in Germany? They being in minority were driven out from Germany." (MSA, Home Special Department, 60 D(g) Pt III, 1938,

Translation of the verbatim speech made by VD Savarkar at Malegaon on October 14, 1938).

A Thread Has Been Woven

What emerges before us is a thread, established in history, in which the fear of losing the crucial Muslim support keeps the Indian politicians from standing up against anti-Semitism and from introducing Jewish and Holocaust Studies in India. But this, as shown, is not entirely unique to the Muslims for it is seen in the Hindu right wing as well. A development that has been simultaneous to the rise in Hitler's popularity in India is the decline in the popularity of M. K. Gandhi among the youth. It may not be correct to see it as a mere coincidence for Gandhi always saw Hitler as his antithesis. It is this very Hindu Right Wing that killed Gandhi.

This absence of Jewish and Holocaust Studies overall makes the general Indian population largely ignorant and therefore vulnerable to propaganda unleashed by the Hindu Right, the Islamophobes in India. They continue to project Hitler as a hero with the aim of developing an acceptance for Nazi-like practices that they would like to adopt, with regard to Muslims, if they ever gain political power with absolute majority.

A minority opinion alone however is seemingly capable of carrying very great weight. ✎

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