

## **The Sociological Imagination of “Bharat” in India**

By Siri Manasa Poluru MA Philosophy, New School for Social Research

History bears witness - intolerance has been a part and parcel of the Indian socio-political climate and civil sphere<sup>1</sup> even before independence. But violence, hate crime and extremism was something that was limited to the devices of right-wing organizations like Rashtriya Swayam Sevak (RSS) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) the effects of which subtly rippled into the targeted masses. The RSS, for example, since its founding in 1925 has been associated with communal violence, which in the Indian context translates to “anti-minority” violence. However, in more recent past, i.e. since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi came into power in 2014, the extremism and violence that was curtailed to the peripheries in the form of these organizations, expanded and crept into the center, thereby subsuming the entire nation - resulting in the “common people” of India changing their manifestation of hatred and othering from implicit methods to explicit violence. It is true, communal politics is not new in India, but what is new and disturbing is the rise of extremism in the people of India. What is also new is the way communal politics is being done under the present regime. Hindutva agenda, since 2014 has blotched the litmus paper that is Indian politics and the litmus test that determines the eligibility of being Indian is the extent of Hindu-ness. “Hindutva (literally “Hindu-ness”) is a modern political ideology that advocates for Hindu supremacy and seeks to transform India, constitutionally a secular state, into an ethno-religious nation known as the Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation). Hindutva is the official

---

<sup>1</sup> Civil society is a sphere of solidarity in which individual rights and collective obligations are intensely intertwined. (Alexander 2006, 55). ‘The civil sphere is bounded by what might be called “noncivil” spheres, by such worlds as state, economy, religion, family, and community.’

platform of the BJP, the extreme right political party in India.” (The South Asia Scholar Activist Collective 2021) Hindu nationalism does not overturn the social order temporarily but serves to redefine and confirm the various actors’ places in that order; the current Indian society is on a brink - it has lost the ability to restore normality, and is headed towards a new stage in the definition of the social order of Hindutva.

Taking the case of India post 2014, the historic landmark in Indian politics when Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came into power with a thumping majority, which also marked the onset of India’s transition to (neo)fascism, a Hindu “nation” that is, a “self-conscious ethnic group [and] ethnic consciousness [which] presupposes an awareness of other groups,” (Connor 1973, 3) I explore one of the most important yet usually neglected components of academic discourses surrounding extremism and fascist studies in India - *the masses*.

Following Freud, I analyze *mass* as the pure form of unconscious that permits individuals to act on impulses they otherwise would disavow. (Freud 1922) I approach this from the perspective of sociology of emotions, culture, and imagination. Employing ‘abstracted empiricism’<sup>2</sup>, or the analysis of ‘events or situated practices’ (Kapferer 2010) through which the ‘assemblage’<sup>3</sup> is realized, I carry out a contextual analysis of newspaper articles that document not just the event but also the *voice* of the people - be it a bystander, supporter, victim, or the wrongdoer, for “when the evidence offered is the evidence of "experience," the

---

<sup>2</sup> Mills coined the term abstracted empiricism in his seminal work *Sociological Imagination*. It refers to a way of doing social research that combines the empirical and the abstract, or theoretical, elements of sociological analysis. According to Mills, social research should be based on empirical observation and data collection, but it should also go beyond the facts to develop broader theories and concepts that can help us understand the underlying social structures and processes that shape human behavior and social phenomena. Abstracted empiricism, then, involves a process of moving back and forth between empirical observation and theoretical abstraction, using each to inform and refine the other. Mills argued that this approach was essential for developing a sociological imagination, which is the ability to see the connections between individual experiences and larger social structures.

<sup>3</sup> Assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) proposed in *A Thousand Plateaus*, in this context, is being understood in its essence, which implies that not only are the relations external to their terms, but also “a relation may change without the terms changing” (Deleuze and Parnet, 2002, 55). “In other words, assemblages are not Hegelian totalities in which the parts are mutually constituted and fused into a seamless whole.” (Fuglsang and Sørensen 2006, 253) Instead, they have their individual autonomy and even when they form a whole, they can be detached

claim for referentiality is further buttressed-what could be truer, after all, than a subject's own account of what he or she has lived through?" (Scott 1991, 777) This approach not only brings to light certain neglected categories and concerns, but also aims at producing a sociological account of relations and practices rooted in subjective actions.

Scholarly works that throw light on this turn to neofascism in India via the analysis of majoritarian state, its politics, impacts on election, the Prime Minister's authoritarian style government and violence (Jaffrelot 1996 and 2021) (Andersen and Damle 1987) (Hansen 1999) have helped deconstruct the rise of Hindu nationalism. What has so far not been adequately explored and what is crucial *now* is to deconstruct the Hindutva right-wing extremism (phenomenon, actions and implications) via a systematic analysis of the *masses* from a philosophical, sociological, and psychoanalytic perspective. The modern political phenomena of fascism are strongly connected to an array of emotions, desires, and states of irrationality and fantasy. As Finchelstein writes: "In fascism, truth was considered real because it was rooted in emotional emanations of the soul, images and actions that fascists identified with political ideology" (Finchelstein 2020, 53) Therefore, this thesis is an attempt to explore and delineate the emotional dimension of the rise of (neo)fascism in India - both at the levels of authority and the masses, especially masses.

The fundamental questions I seek to answer are: What really happened? How did the common people of the country act towards and for an emergent social reality that is not rationally beneficial to them? How does this 'historic' present (of Hindu Nationalism and neo fascist turn in a diverse country) help us *reimagine* sociological imagination<sup>4</sup>? How are memories being manipulated and rekindled in the Indian context to muster support from the masses and make them act towards fulfilling the Hindu nationalist agenda? And finally, as

highlighted in the first section, is there a possibility for dialogue, and what are the preconditions that make dialogue possible? What merit does the discourse of multiplicity of selves offer in such conditions?

The locus of fascism is the masses, which is why fascism, or any form of extremism to that matter, never leaves or comes back, but is always there ‘within’ the society. It is a matter of time and situation until both of these feed onto each other, help each other grow and simultaneously fuse together. Arguing that the basis of this relationship rests on the pillars of identity, emotions and language, I systematically deconstruct and contextualize each of them. Both actions and ideology, violent or otherwise, in case of extremism are suspended in a liminal space - between the two islands of sense and senselessness. Arguing that it is “emotions” that push masses into this liminal space, I propose a framework that analyzes how pride, ego, fear and anxiety work for the Indian masses.

While acknowledging the possibility of liquidity and elements of liminality that categorization is never foolproof of, through the analysis of social media posts, comments, narratives and voices, we have identified the Indian masses as categorized under four major groups, i. The Imaginary victims, who are the Hindu Nationalists, ii. The Actual Victims, who are the religious minorities, and iii. The Performative Neutral masses, who necessarily aren’t neutral in so far as their belief system is concerned, but are neutral in performative terms, and iv. The Ratiocinative Actor, which consists of the individuals who across the spectrum of the population, irrespective of their political and religious beliefs and ideologies, of being an insider or an outsider to a particular social group, are able to preserve and echo rationality in their actions, which aligns with the larger notion of justice and truth. They are able to stand up against and oppose the distorted consciousnesses that emerge and rest on the structures of

violence and oppression. In a situation where the other three categories find themselves wrapped and warped in their own existential question produced through the immediacy of a phenomenon like Hindu Nationalism, the ratiocinative actor, though caught up in the same web of the emerging social phenomenon, concern themselves with the task of critiquing the dominant ideology which distort the reality. By being involved in and studying the practical struggle and popular consciousness of individuals across all the three categories, through protests, writings, art and everyday praxis emerging out of either their professional duties or social interactions, they question the ways in which these dominant ideologies come into existence, the experiences, promoted and inhibited behaviors that lead to them being propagated. Their focus is to awaken the collective instincts of the masses to sustain and create a worldview that is just and egalitarian by integrating the critical with the commonsensical. This sense of identity of the masses in all the four categories comes with a participation in the movement of this Hindu Nationalism, that is spatiotemporally unraveling itself, one that is created and is in creation, by the self and other; the masses boxed into collective selves appear in gleams, beams, darkneses, hues and blindspots, just like light reflecting the turbulent waters.

Therefore, in this project and with the help of the ICI research grant, I attempted to develop a novel theoretical framework to address the issue of Hindu Nationalism, and better understand the problem from the perspective of the masses. While this project was in the works for the last one year, with the help of India China grant, I was successfully able to conduct interviews in person, of the Indian masses, the common people, that helped me get an in-depth sense of how emotions and memories especially operated. Interviewing close to seventy people in the two and half months I spent in various cities of India, I was able to see

the merits and gaps in the thesis I proposed. Talking to these people, I realized my thesis lacked a major category - of the ratiocinative actor, which I then added over the summer.

I am now in the process of applying for my PhD program in Sociology, and I can proudly say that it was because of the ICI grant that I was able to take the first step in fulfilling my dream of bridging the gap between sociological seeing and philosophical reflexivity, which is the need of the hour to address dynamic and pressing problems. ICI research grant helped me fulfill the gap between theory and praxis by enabling me to conduct ethnographic research.

#### References

Andersen, Walter K., and Shridhar D. Damle. 1987. *The brotherhood in saffron : the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu revivalism*. N.p.: Avalon Publishing.

Hansen, Thomas B. 1999. *The saffron wave : democracy and Hindu nationalism in modern India*. N.p.: Princeton University Press.

Jaffrelot, Christophe. 1996. *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*. N.p.: Columbia University Press.

Jaffrelot, Christophe. 2021. *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*. Translated by Cynthia Schoch. N.p.: Princeton University Press.

Freud, Sigmund. 1922. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Translated by James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press Ltd.

Kapferer, Bruce. 2010. "In the Event—toward an Anthropology of Generic Moments."

*Social Analysis* 54 (3, Winter): 1-27. doi:10.3167/sa.2010.540301.

Mills, C Wright. 2000. *The Sociological Imagination*. With a new Afterword by Todd Gitlin ed. Oxford, New York City: Oxford University Press.

Scott, Joan W. 1991. "The Evidence of Experience." *Critical Inquiry* 17 (4): 773-797.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343743>.

The South Asia Scholar Activist Collective. 2021. "What is Hindutva? — Hindutva Harassment Field Manual." Hindutva Harassment Field Manual.