What is referred to as communalism – intolerance and tensions between religious communities – would seem to be part of a worldwide phenomenon of religious resurgence and the rise of religio-political movements and groups of all kinds, amidst an even broader emergence, over the last three decades, of various kinds of cultural exclusivisms.¹

Capitalist modernity is characterised by the permanence of change, of constant flux. Contrary to early Enlightenment assumptions and hopes, the certainties of tradition and custom (religiously-based or otherwise) have not been replaced by the new certainties of reason and knowledge but by uncertainties. Modernity institutionalises as never before the principle of radical doubt. Modernity constantly disrupts and revolutionises everyday life, imposing social and psychological costs, even as it also creates the more self-reflexive personality (a more dynamised self in a more dynamised society, as compared to the relative inertia of self and society in the pre-capitalist past) for whom existential dilemmas can be more intense because there are no longer any easy answers. The devastation of older values, ways of life and forms of belonging (even if these were relatively recently acquired) is traumatic. These costs are compensated for and made more bearable by the promise of collective amelioration and better times – by the notion of steady and cumulative progress.

But the advent of neoliberalism has seen still further transformations, greater social disorientation, loss of dignity and male self-respect, creating fertile ground for the rise of all kinds of aggressive self-assertions, religious or ethnic, that can serve as some form of consolation and whose affirmations (the more negative forms of identity politics) are a balm for social despair.² It is the failed promise of modernity, both in its current neoliberal version and in its previous socialist version, that has led to the cultural intolerances of today whose forms vary geographically, preceded as they have been by different histories, rooted in different combinations of the old and the new. When the present is unsatisfactory and the future looks bleak it is the unchangeable
past that appears to provide a source of security and certainty.

Here it can be legitimately asked what difference does the emergence of a neoliberal phase make to the lives of the vast majority of Indians, for whom poverty and insecurity have been long enduring features? The fact that there is a rich and continuous history of struggles from below, and that unlike in other bourgeois democracies there is no electoral apathy – indeed not only are voter turnout rates high, and relatively higher for marginalised sections of the population, but they become progressively higher as one descends from the national level to the state and then to the municipal and panchayat levels – this fact is testimony to the expectations and hopes of progressive change that persist among the most downtrodden. However, where these popular aspirations once faced a self-declared ‘developmental state’ that saw itself as in some way answerable to the public for its developmental failures, such hopes now have to deal with a state that sees itself and its role in quite different terms. The Indian state now sees itself as a ‘competitive state’, with little responsibility for ensuring development for all, whose role is instead to establish the conditions for the emergence of a globally competitive economy driven by private wealth. Losers must now blame themselves and should no longer make unwarranted demands on the state. Nor must they be allowed to become too socially and politically disruptive. The Indian state has become ideologically and politically more ruthless and uncaring.

This global spread of neoliberalism – understood as a general economic direction, not an achieved ‘state of affairs’ – can only take place, moreover, via the states system. The stability of neoliberalism necessarily rests on non-economic structures – political, social, cultural and ideological. It is states, above all, that provide the legal, regulatory, infrastructural and institutional framework in which neoliberalism can operate and flourish. It is states that police capital-labour relations in favour of the former. It is states that manage macro-economic tensions and are the means, especially if they are electoral democracies, of legitimising elite rule. There is thus both a transnationalism as well as variant nationalisms associated with the stabilisation of neoliberalism. At the geopolitical level there is the issue of coordination of the states system to be provided by a ‘hegemonic stabiliser’, single or collective. Posed in Marxist terms, this is a debate about ultra- or super-imperialism and the cross-country elite alliances that follow from these alternative global arrangements, now that it is evident that in this latest phase of capitalism, inter-imperialist competition must be played out in an altogether different register, marking a decisive break from its militaristic past. At the nation-state level, the rightward shift represented by neoliberalism could only be sustained because it was accompanied everywhere by a rightward shift of
politics (internal and external) and of ideology, whose forms have, how-
ever, always been determined by national specificities. Indeed, the sources,
patterns and rhythms of this fusion of the national and the geopolitical are
invariably distinctive. In India the key factor has been the rise of Hindu na-
tionalism or, more accurately, of Hindutva (the ‘politics of Hinduness’) and
its transformative impact – including its impact on the paradigmatic form
of violence in India – communalism. Before concentrating on communal
violence, however, we need to take into account the fact that violence is in
fact an all-too-normal feature of the country’s modern history.

VIOLENCE IN INDIA: ANYTHING BUT ABNORMAL
Since independence India has always posed something of an enigma.
Barring the two year interlude (1975–77) of Emergency Rule – and even
then the Indian state was less authoritarian and ruthless than the average
Latin American or African dictatorship of those times – India stands out as a
developing country exhibiting, at the macro-level, a remarkable durability
and stability of democratic institutions and processes. Yet at the meso- and
micro-levels, few developing countries can match the frequency, scale and
intensity of either routinised or episodic violence that exists in India. This
structural coexistence raises disturbing questions about the relationship of
such violence to, and its functionality for, the existing political, economic,
social and cultural order. Any comprehensive study of violence in India
must therefore operate on an extraordinarily wide terrain of interacting re-
lationships, recognising its multiple forms and sites. Amidst the welter of
different typologies of violence and of approaches towards understanding
it, from the socio-psychological to the most abstractly structural-functional,
this essay will mainly limit itself to addressing Hindu communal violence
against Muslims, and the rise of Hindutva with which it is connected – the
violence that has done most to reshape the trajectory of Indian politics and
the behaviour of the Indian state.

Nevertheless, one’s point of departure even here must be an awareness
of just how pervasive violence is in Indian society and polity and just how
inadequate the mainstream political discourse is in recognising this, in un-
derstanding its sources, and in evaluating its consequences. A brief if sche-
matic listing of the types of violence prevalent can perhaps help drive home
this point. There is 1) criminal and gang violence; 2) sectarian intra-group
violence, e.g., Shia versus Sunni; 3) patriarchal violence; 4) inter-ethnic vi-
olence, e.g. between Kuki and Naga tribes; 5) socio-economically motivated
violence associated with class oppression, resistance and struggle; 6) eth-
no-national, i.e., secessionist violence; 7) communal violence; 8) officially-
sponsored and directed violence, executed by the apparatuses of the state at
the central, provincial, district, city and lower administrative levels, arising
from declared or undeclared policy and simultaneously reinforcing caste,
class, gender, and ethno-national oppressions.

These categories are ideal types, and in real life the forms of violence are
invariably mixed. Secessionist trends characterise movements and groups in
Kashmir and in the northeastern region, currently divided into seven states.
These tensions are partly the legacy of the artificial administrative boundaries
created by colonial expansion and rule, connecting a northeastern region
with no strong historical or cultural ties to ‘plains India’. But post-inde-
pendence central government behaviour is also to blame. Of the various
ethnically-based insurgency movements that once demanded independence
all have been tamed or marginalised barring the Naga resistance which has
persisted for several decades. But here a combined policy of bribery (provi-
sion of substantial financial largesse to be controlled by select local elites, and
the incorporation of educated youth into central bureaucracies) and ruth-
less repression (by Indian armed forces enjoying special powers violative of
basic democratic norms) has succeeded in creating a stalemate. The result is
that a war-weary Naga leadership now seems prepared to settle for greater
autonomy within the Indian Union, though mutual suspicions continue to
bedevil early prospects of a negotiated settlement.

The Kashmir issue has from its inception remained hostage to relations
between India and Pakistan, with both sides insisting that any resolution
of the issue must exclude the possibility of a fully independent and secular
Kashmir. In the Indian-occupied part, which was pressured to formally ac-
cede to the Union in 1948, its autonomy was to be constitutionally guar-
anteed by Article 370. In reality this commitment to maximum autonomy
has been systematically eroded over time. Indeed, no state has been more
frequently subjected to President’s Rule, i.e., the temporary suspension of
provincial rights and powers as well as of a range of civil liberties. By the
late 1980s for the first time genuine indigenous movements emerged in the
Kashmir Valley. A secular trend demanded complete independence for all of
occupied Kashmir and an Islamist trend demanded either a separate Islamic
state or merger with Pakistan. Ever since, sections of the Pakistan establish-
ment have supported cross-border militant Islamist groups to fish in these
troubled waters. This has understandably been condemned by India but it is
necessary to recognise that the troubled waters were created by the Indian
government. By New Delhi’s own reckoning these Islamist groups have
never numbered more than 4,000 militants, yet India stations around half
a million army and para-military personnel to control a population that has
now become substantially alienated from the brutalities of both the Islamist groups and the Indian armed forces. The soldier-civilian ratio at 1 to around 13 makes the Valley one of the most militarised regions anywhere in the world.³

While caste and class relations are essentially vertical, gender relations are both horizontal and vertical. Violence against women has a scale, depth and frequency that is simply unmatched by any other kind of violence. While caste and class violence also have a normalised and quotidian character, gender violence is uniquely pervasive. It is not just episodic and collective but has a distinctive familial, individualised and privatised character. It also traverses all boundaries, and all other forms of political violence also express themselves in specifically gendered ways – rape, beating and humiliation of women being part of the process of establishing the authority/dominance of class, caste, ethnic group or government. What is more, violence against women is intimately connected to the more collective forms of periodic violence. The human emotions that lead to such ‘sudden extremes’ simmer in the cauldron of everyday social relations and practices.⁴ Yet the very universality, pervasiveness and constancy of female oppression in and across all social relations tends to deprive it of the more specific charge and power whose accumulating force in particular historical circumstances can significantly alter the political trajectory of a state and society. The gravamen of this essay is that this is precisely what the accumulating forces of Hindutva since the early 1980s have been able to accomplish.

What of caste and class violence? The strong overlap between lower caste and lower class occupations in town and country means that often the motivations and purposes behind the perpetration of violence by upper layers is not neatly separable along straightforwardly class or caste lines. The same can be said of resistances from below. This is not to say that distinctively caste-motivated violence against Dalits (‘outcastes’), or specifically anti-tribal violence, is not widely prevalent. It most certainly is. Atrocities (including murder, rape, arson, injury, etc.) against Dalits are routine, as also are gender-related crimes like dowry deaths and rape. Figures for violence against these social groups outstrip those for communal violence and are certainly underestimates of the actual scale. For example, the average annual figure for atrocities against Dalits between 1997 and 2001 was 25,587. For tribals in the same period it was 4,285. Recorded dowry deaths in 1991 were 5,077 and for rape the figure was 9,793; by 1998 recorded dowry deaths were 6,917 and rape cases had risen to 15,031.⁵ These figures testify to the caste and patriarchal nature of Indian state and society.

But one of the brighter aspects of the evolution of Indian society over the
last several decades has been the political and electoral upsurge of Dalits and lower castes. Overall the impact has been positive, if mixed. The ideological foundations for legitimising caste hierarchies have been weakened. For the purposes of political mobilisation and putting effective pressure on policy-making authorities, newer and larger agglomerations of lower and middle castes and of Dalits (cutting across their own respective caste sub-divisions) have emerged. But non-Dalit lower castes have not so far established an independent political presence. They have provided a large constituency of support for forces representing more the interests of the upper sections of the middle or ‘backward’ castes. Reservation policies for Dalits in government jobs and educational institutions have created a significant middle class which has not only provided leadership and resources for further mobilisation but also shaped its general direction. This is reformist rather than radical or revolutionary, both in the goals sought – raising the social status and power of Dalits through accession by their own elites to the higher echelons of governmental structures – and in the means used – seeking electoral alliances with various political parties and forces even if some of these represent the upper castes and classes.

As a result the material conditions of rural Dalits (the majority) remains much the same. The contemporary paradox is this: the majority of Dalits belong to the agricultural proletariat but the majority of agricultural proletarians are not Dalits. It is the unification of this rural proletarian layer behind appropriate demands for land reform, liveable wages and assured employment that has the potential to revolutionise Indian society. The current Dalit leadership and the politics they are pursuing have no such perspective of forging a rural cross-caste class alliance from below. The dominant upper layers of the ‘backward castes’ are themselves landowners highly resistant to any such demands. Unsurprisingly, despite the rise of the ‘backward castes’ and Dalits there has been little positive impact on the scope and scale of episodic and quotidian violence inflicted on Dalits and lower castes.

The segment of the population whose condition has improved the least are the ‘tribals’ of central India. It is in these forested regions that the influence of armed Naxalite groups (above all the Communist Party of India-Maoist), as the foremost expression of rural class struggle from below, is strongest, although it is also expanding elsewhere. Indian Maoism has strong roots in some 76 districts (out of a total of slightly over 600 districts in the whole country) spread over the nine states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh; and it has a meaningful presence in some 50 other districts. Indian Maoism has become more Indian and less Maoist, and has therefore not only
survived but grown. But it is nowhere as strong as made out by the Indian government, whose officials sometimes claim that Naxalism has spread to nearly 200 districts. Naxalites are being deliberately demonised. It is notable that the only other form of demonisation is of Muslim militants. Both are being defined as terrorists who must be wiped out.

Terrorism is properly understood as a technique, a tactic, and a method, and a working definition suitable for most cases is that it is any act causing or threatening to cause physical injury to innocent unarmed civilians. It can be and is used by a host of agents, ranging from individuals and non-state combat groups to the apparatuses of the state. This is not to deny that Naxalite groups resort on occasions to unacceptable forms of terrorist violence. But in India by far the greatest number of civilian fatalities and injuries are caused by the terrorist actions of official bodies controlled by and answerable to either the state governments or the Central government.

The demonisation of the Naxalites has been ramped up by the Congress-led government elected in 2004. In 2006 Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared them to be the single biggest national security threat; and soon followed that up by calling them a ‘virus’ needing to be ‘eliminated’. Such demonisation serves multiple purposes. It aims to justify the retention of repressive ‘anti-terrorist’ and ‘security’ laws which rationalise arbitrary arrests and prolonged detentions/incarcerations without legal access or adjudication. It allows many state governments to obtain greater resources from the Centre in the name of fighting Naxalism, which can then be used for other purposes. It shifts the focus away from police brutalities and from the political collusion that allows armed gangs hired by richer landowners and forest contractors to assault and subdue the landless and tribals who constitute the main social base of Naxalism. It also aims to justify the setting up by some state governments of the Salwa Judum or ‘Peace Campaign’, which are armed groups comprising Maoist defectors, volunteers and ‘lumpens’ who are paid a salary and have been given special policing powers. They, in effect, act as an ‘outsourced’ vigilante arm of the state, which does not wish to control their atrocities and criminal activities so long as they help fight and weaken the ‘higher’ danger posed by the Naxalites.

Yet despite the clear evidence of how structurally rooted are the causes of such multiple forms of violence, the conventional political discourse continues to celebrate Indian democracy and insists quite wrongly on seeing violence as an abnormality or disease, the antidote for which is supposed to lie in ‘improving’ the existing democratic structures, processes and spaces in state and civil society. The rule of law, proper monitoring of electoral behaviour, the judiciary, parliament, governmental bureaucracies, the press,
lively civic associations, etc., are perceived as the mechanisms whose healthy functioning is supposed to determine the overall health of the liberal democratic order. Alongside this effort at improvement, conventional wisdom adds that it is necessary to purge the main sources of the disease of violence – Naxalites, Muslim terrorists, secessionist militants, communal elements. By succeeding in these endeavours the body politic can be expected to be well on the way towards full recovery.

Absent from this conventional diagnostic and prescriptive discourse is the sense that capitalist modernisation in its uneven and combined character of development necessarily creates its own (though variable) sources, conditions, stimuli and forms of violence. Missing also is the realisation that there is, as a consequence, in very many societies including India’s, a culture of violence, a kind of low-intensity violence taking routinised, ritualised, normalised and accepted forms in everyday life, which under specific circumstances are highly conducive to the eruption of more congealed and denser forms of episodic violence. Nor is such a conventional discourse capable of recognising how the changing neoliberal character of India’s political economy is associated with a changing landscape of political violence. Certain kinds of periodic violence become more prominent. New definitions of what constitutes violence appear. New notions of what is acceptable or unacceptable emerge. New priorities on what kinds of violence to deal with – or not deal with – are set.

HINDUTVA: THE KEY FACTOR

Since the early seventies Indian politics has been in deep flux, reflecting an endemic crisis of bourgeois political leadership. The Emergency was a failed attempt at resolving this dilemma through an authoritarian stabilisation. But over the last two decades a significant acceleration has taken place in the dynamics of uncertain socio-political contestation. This accelerated phase broadly overlaps with the neoliberal economic turn and the dramatic surfacing of an ugly religious nationalism. Democracy is redefined as Hindu majoritarianism, and secularism as a false and anti-Hindu, minority-favoursing construct – ideas that have secured substantial and growing resonance in Indian society.

This endemic crisis of bourgeois political leadership has been reflected in a political instability (encased within a framework of considerable systemic durability) that has gone through two phases. From 1971 to 1989 general elections had a referendum-like character. Major swings in electoral behaviour were actually testimony to the fact that no serious contender for Central rule could rely on sufficiently stable electoral support. Ironically, during this
phase large parliamentary majorities in wave-like elections were not an indication of overall political stability but of the very opposite. It was in this period that the Congress won its greatest ever number of seats (in 1984), only to fail dismally the next time around. This was the period when two elected non-Congress centrist alternatives – the Janata Party of 1977–80 and the V.P. Singh government of 1989–91 – achieved power, yet neither was able to last a full term. From 1989 onwards a new phase appeared, first of minority governments and then of coalition rule. Increasingly, the overall uncertainties of the polity had come to be reflected in parliamentary instability.

The landmark political event after the Emergency was the implementation by the V.P. Singh minority government in 1989 of the Mandal Committee’s recommendation to reserve 27 per cent of jobs in Central government for the ‘other backward castes’ or OBCs. Since less than 50,000 jobs overall were affected, the significance of the step was symbolic, but nonetheless politically powerful, expressing as it did the new assertion of the middle castes or OBCs who make up the majority of caste Hindus and comprise a wide spectrum of their own, from the poorest MBCs (‘most backward castes’) to the upper ranks of OBCs that are still demarcated from the ‘forward castes’ and Brahmins at the top. This sparked large-scale demonstrations in Western and Northern India, led by middle class–upper caste students, and even self-immolations by some individual students.

This was soon followed, moreover, by an even more dramatic landmark event, the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign carried out by the Sangh Parivar, aiming to unite Hindus against the ‘Muslim Other’ – faced with the Mandalisation of Indian politics which threatened to institutionalise caste divisions among Hindus. The Sangh Parivar is a ‘family’ of organisations that make up the organised Hindu right. The ‘father’ organisation is the RSS or Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Corps), a cadre-based force of over a million whose spinal cord is made up of ascetic full-timers who are supposed to remain unmarried as a mark of total devotion to the cause. The Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP is the electoral wing. The VHP or Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) is the substantially autonomous cultural front, while the members of the Bajrang Dal (Lord Hanuman’s Army) are the lumpenised storm-troopers. The Sangh also controls a major trade union federation and has its own students’ and women’s wings. The Ram Janmabhoomi campaign culminated in the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque on December 6, 1992 – a calculated act of defiance of the Supreme Court as well as a deliberate assault on the Indian Constitution’s commitment to secularism. The month-long campaign had itself aroused
communal sentiments and hatreds on a massive scale, and it led to widespread communal violence that took over a thousand Muslim lives.

The next landmark event was not so much the formation of the BJP-led coalition government in 1998 as the manner in which its decision to conduct nuclear tests was taken — and received. While the unelected and publicly unaccountable RSS was privy to the decision, the coalition partners were kept in the dark — a fait accompli that was soon enough accepted by all parties (including the Congress) except for those of the left. The shadowy but powerful role played by the RSS in Indian politics reached its climax with the pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat in February-March 2002 in which at least 2,000 Muslims were killed and tens of thousands displaced from their homes and businesses. This was easily the worst communal pogrom since the Partition holocaust. Not only did the then Prime Minister, A.B. Vajpayee, subsequently rationalise this, but the pogrom could not have taken place without the private sanction of the Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi (who had served in the RSS for about a decade-and-a-half, before being made General Secretary of the BJP’s Gujarat unit in 1988). Far from Modi and his senior political, bureaucratic, judicial and police cohorts being held criminally responsible, he actually profited politically. His re-election with an increased majority in the December 2002 state elections testified to the normalisation of communalism in Gujarat. Modi was then re-elected for an unprecedented third time in December 2007. Frighteningly, he is now widely tipped to eventually become the leader of the BJP and thus a possible Prime Minister in a future BJP-led coalition government at the Centre.

Each of these landmark events since 1989 is associated practically and/or symbolically with violence. One should not interpret the BJP’s possible electoral plateauing over the last two general elections as reflecting a political-ideological decline of the Sangh Parivar. The violence and repression carried out by the Sangh Parivar in most of the landmark political events discussed above caused no lasting damage to its political credibility, its ability to forge alliances with other regional parties, or to its cultural, ideological and institutional influence in civil society. The Hindutva train — in reality it is several trains, on multiple tracks — has already covered enormous ground and continues to move forward, albeit at varying speeds and with stops, occasional reverses, and restarts. Of course, the forward march of Hindutva is a socio-political process which interacts with other important socio-political processes, not only the ongoing forward march of the OBCs, the unprecedented assertiveness of Dalits (outcastes), and ongoing Muslim ferment, but also the regionalisation of the Indian polity and the rise of a massive Indian ‘middle class’ (not actually a median category, but the top 15 per cent-20
per cent of the Indian population) that provides the social foundation for the stabilisation and growth of right-wing reactionary politics, both secular and communal. The highly complex way in which all these processes interweave establishes the contours within which Indian politics today and tomorrow are playing themselves out.

COMMUNAL VIOLENCE IN INDIA

In terms of sheer numbers Hindutva is the biggest religious nationalist movement in the world. For nearly three decades after independence, Hindutva’s salience remained low. The horrific legacy of the Partition genocide, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by a Hindutva devotee, the political and ideological dominance of the Congress party (claiming to uphold the principles of socialism, secularism, democracy and nonalignment), the defeat and dismemberment of Pakistan in 1971, all contributed to this reality. From the 1970s onwards the process of Congress decline and growing disillusionment with the principles that the first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, had done so much to establish became unmistakably obvious. There did emerge new forces, which failed however to re-establish a stable non-Congress form of centrist rule. All this began to pave the way for the rise of Hindutva. It is not a coincidence that parallel to this emergence that (a) there was a fairly dramatic escalation in Hindu-Muslim riots; (b) the overwhelming majority of victims (deaths and injuries) were Muslims; and (c) the police and paramilitaries were among the principal perpetrators of the violence.

The officially-recorded figures speak for themselves. Between 1954 and 1963 the average annual number of Hindu-Muslim riots was 60.6 and the average annual number of deaths was 34.4 persons. Between 1964 and 1979 the respective figures were 319.2 riots and 260.2 persons. Between 1980 and 1988 the figures were 534.1 riots and 416.6 persons. In the six years after 1988 for which figures are available (1989–93, plus 2002) we still get an annual average of 528 deaths. The emergence of lower caste and women’s movements have at least made the high recorded figures of atrocities against them something of an embarrassment for higher political authorities and forced some kind of acknowledgement of failure on their part. But when it comes to the predominantly Muslim victims of communal violence there is no such acknowledgement from the culpable state authorities or parties (i.e. the Sangh).

Paul Brass’s argument that ‘riots are dramatic productions, creations of specific persons, groups and parties operating through institutionalised riots networks within a discursive framework of Hindu-Muslim communal opposition and antagonism that in turn produces specific forms of politi-
cal practice that makes riots’ is entirely correct.\textsuperscript{12} In other words, whatever the triggers, communal riots are organised and not spontaneous phenomena. Moreover, the most developed and organised perpetrators are the Sangh Parivar and other militant Hindu organisations. Brass outlines the three phases through which the organisation of communal violence passes: preparation/rehearsal, marked by the presence of ‘fire-tenders’ who keep inter-group tensions stoked; activation/enactment undertaken by ‘conversion specialists’ who are the on-the-ground mob mobilisers and leaders; and finally, the aftermath of communal violence events, whereby the ‘blame displacers’ – comprising politicians, intellectuals and media people – help shift the discourse away from the suffering of victims to ‘problems of governance’, and who implicitly or explicitly justify the violence. Little wonder then that the perpetrators invariably avoid prosecution even when they are identified. Deaths in such riots/pogroms are caused by mob frenzy and police killings as well as by individuals carrying out cold-blooded brutalities independently of collective action.

The spur for much of this communal violence, as Steve Wilkinson has shown, is electoral competition.\textsuperscript{13} His empirical work on state and town variations in the incidence and duration of ethnic and communal riots comes to the conclusion that minorities will be protected only when it suits ruling or aspiring political parties at the state level to woo the Muslim vote. In the south of India where there have been strong backward caste movements and therefore greater intra-Hindu competition, the Muslim vote becomes more important and they are safer. But Wilkinson’s belief that intra-Hindu competition will increase, as a result of the Dalit and OBC upsurges in the north, and that this will lead to an eventual decline of Hindu-Muslim riots, is over-optimistic to say the least. Current statistical trends on communal violence belie this, while the growing communalisation of the general political-ideological environment in the north has created popular expectations that such violence will repeatedly occur and should occasion no great alarm or surprise. This is apparently because there is to some degree or other a ‘pampering’ of minorities, especially Muslims, in the search for their ‘vote banks’. So, it is claimed, there is no fundamental flaw in Indian democracy but an understandable ‘Hindu resentment’ that basically reacts against this alleged pampering, even if the reactions are sometimes ‘excessive’. In other words, as both Brass and Wilkinson understand so well, it is the political dimension that is decisive, namely the role played by the Sangh Parivar and the success it has had in making its ideological constructs a spreading public ‘common sense’.

The police and para-military forces are invested with all necessary legal
powers to prevent riots from taking place through pre-emptive action, and when riots start, to bring them swiftly to an end. If despite this there are frequent and sustained communal riots, it is because the police, at the behest of the political leadership in the states concerned, have either remained silent spectators or even participated in the riots. While many a prominent spokesperson from the Muslim community has called for a more religiously mixed police force, this is really of very limited value. At most a more diverse police force can create a somewhat less prejudiced atmosphere in police ranks, but widespread and strong biases reflecting the existing prejudices and stereotypes among the general population remain. No wonder then that despite low Muslim representation in the army, Muslim leaders have much greater trust in it and repeatedly call for army deployment during riot situations. The structure of the police is like that of Indian society – a tiny national ruling elite, a comfortable regional middle class, and a mass of the poor – 90 per cent of all police are constables or head constables.

Having a more religiously mixed police force is not the answer. In Andhra Pradesh, the Muslim percentage among the police is 16 per cent or about double the percentage of Muslims in the state. Yet in every major riot since 1978 the police have exhibited partisan behaviour against Muslims. In Kerala and West Bengal, where the proportion of Muslims in the police is far below their proportions in their respective state populations, the frequency of riots is low and police behaviour impartial. In West Bengal, this is because the Communist Party (Marxist) or CPM-led Left Front (which also includes the other big mainstream left party, the Communist Party of India or CPI) has been in power for the last 30 years. In Kerala it is because these two Left parties and the Muslim League factions feature in coalition governments. In Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, where the police are notoriously communal, they have behaved impartially when the highest civilian authorities like Chief Ministers Lalu Prasad Yadav and Mulayam Singh Yadav have demanded it.14

THE GUJARAT POGROM
On February 27, 2002 the Sabarmati Express, jam-packed with Hindutva activists and supporters returning from Ayodhya had one of its passenger cars burnt by Muslim locals just as it pulled out of Godhra station in Gujarat. Fifty-eight people, including women and children, died. Days earlier, on their onward journey to Ayodhya – the site of periodic agitations calling for the construction of a Ram temple to begin – Hindutva activists had already raised the communal temperature by their anti-Muslim sloganeering and generally hooliganish and intimidatory behaviour. Similar behaviour on
their return journey had raised tensions to a high pitch among local Muslims along the train route. According to eyewitnesses at Godhra station, the molestation of a Muslim girl on the platform and the terrorisation of a Muslim tea-vendor lit the spark that led to the torching of the car. But while this was a spontaneous event by unidentified locals, what followed was the most awful – and politically serious – pogrom in post-independence India.

Over the next few days and weeks the Gujarat state government headed by Chief Minister Narendra Modi, a rabid Hindutva ideologue belonging to the RSS and the ruling BJP, carried out a massive pogrom and reign of terror. Mobs numbering in the thousands were unleashed while the police were told to remain aloof. At least 2,000 Muslims were butchered. Muslim-populated localities in cities, towns and villages throughout much of the state as well as Muslim-owned shops and businesses were torched and destroyed. Over 150,000 people were displaced and had to take refuge in makeshift camps set up by a few Muslim and non-Muslim civic associations. Pregnant women were skewered, others gang-raped and then burnt to death. The scale of violence was enormous, but always selective and carried out with remarkable speed. This was only possible because of several months of prior preparation and planning. Muslim homes and businesses had been geographically identified. Transport had been made ready and gas cylinders and other combustible materials stocked. Distribution of venomous and hate-spewing pamphlets had long been taking place.15

And several years later, rehabilitation and compensation remains incomplete and inadequate. The Gujarat police, judiciary and government have shown more alacrity in arresting ‘suspects’ and charging them for the Godhra ‘conspiracy’ than in pursuing those involved in the pogrom that followed. The higher echelons of the police and bureaucracy are unpunished, while the top leaders of the Sangh Parivar responsible for the carnage have never been touched. The Congress, the main opposition party in Gujarat, played a negligible role in providing succour to the victims when most needed. Neither at the state or national level has the Congress since 2002 dared to carry out a genuine and serious campaign highlighting this horror or vigorously declaring its opposition to Hindu communalism, or warning how Gujarat has become a laboratory for the kind of violence that can be unleashed elsewhere. Leaving to one side the debate about whether or not the Sangh Parivar constitutes a fascist force, and whether or not India has been facing or will face the danger of a fascist takeover and transformation, there is no dispute within the left about the fact that the Sangh has fascist characteristics. This is most evident in the way it organises mass violence as a spectacle, and how for its devoted cadres and supporters such ethnic cleans-
ing is experienced as cathartic and celebratory. But the Sangh also speaks in different voices to different audiences, often skilfully using the language of democracy.

The Sangh’s exercise of periodic communal violence has played an important part in the expansion of its popularity and influence. But it also has its down-side. Its greatest gains socially have been upwards, among the Indian ‘middle class’, especially among professionals and those with college credentials. This section is comfortable with the Sangh’s anti-Muslim sentiments but it is also worried by the ‘disturbances’ created by riots and the possibility of ‘retaliatory’ violence. Future violence by the Sangh must be contextually sensitive, that is, calibrated to best achieve anticipated gains in social terrains that have been carefully surveyed and properly prepared for. Such violence must be occasional, controllable and as far as possible presented as reactive to some issue or event, and therefore more easily justifiable.

THE CLASS PROFILE

So what is the social background of the Sangh activists and cadres, of those who willingly participate in such collective brutalities? And what of the general social profile of those who support the Sangh? The Sangh is a flexible constellation whose organisational components enjoy variable measures of autonomy, but with the RSS as the overall guardian at the hub. The RSS provides trained and experienced activists and full-timers to the other affiliates and makes sure that the BJP in particular does not go too far in the direction of programmatic compromises because of electoral or administrative compulsions. The cadres of the RSS, men who usually first make contact with the organisation as adolescent youths, come overwhelmingly from urban Hindu upper castes and middle and lower-middle class backgrounds. That this is the main recruiting ground of the RSS is overdetermined by the fundamental nature of the Hindutva credo. This claims that India is a Hindu nation that needs to overcome its historical weakness caused above all by earlier Muslim rule and by the persisting ‘unfairness’ and ‘danger from within’ represented by today’s ‘pampered’ and ‘unbending’ Muslim minority. Therefore a new militarised Hindu unity must be created.

There is an external principle for forging unity – hostility to the ‘threatening Muslim Other’ – which has the advantage of more easily transcending caste and class divisions among Hindus. But there must also be an ideological principle of unification internal to Hindus and Hinduism, for which the only viable candidate is a loose and accommodating Brahminism. But by being a Brahminism nonetheless, it has much more difficulty in transcending caste, class and regional cleavages. Hence Hindutva’s much stronger attrac-
tion for the upper castes, especially those sections that for various reasons also feel more vulnerable and insecure.

But right-wing Hindu communal violence also finds other class supporters because such riots all too often have a real economic functionality. Indeed, one of the more important background conditions that are conducive to many such riots breaking out where they do is the existence of economic competition between entrenched Hindu entrepreneurs, traders and contractors and a rising layer of Muslim entrepreneurs, small proprietors and investors. Many such Muslims are beneficiaries of steady remittances from abroad or are returnees who have accumulated savings from work in the Gulf States and elsewhere. Time and again, the consequences of communal riots have been the economic devastation of such Muslim competitors. There is a Hindu propertied class that benefits from such violence and has every reason to give solid political as well as financial-material support to Hindutva forces. Asghar Ali Engineer, perhaps the single most diligent observer, chronicler, analyst and commentator on communal riots in India, has repeatedly pointed out that such riots take place in towns where there is a substantial percentage of Muslims, well above the national average of 13 per cent but also well below a majority or near-majority of the local population. Such violence hardly ever takes place where Muslims constitute such a small proportion that they cannot pose any kind of economic or political challenge.17

However, the greatest class advantage for the Sangh is undoubtedly the new acceptability and legitimacy it has gained in the eyes of big capital. The BJP governing at the Centre is seen as no different from the Congress in being committed to promoting the interests of big capital in the name of creating a strong India. True, the Sangh’s willingness to carry out anti-Muslim violence is a matter of unease, but only that. Protection of profit-making is far more important than protection of Muslims. Little wonder, then, that even after the Gujarat pogrom one of the premier bodies representing the collective interests of the Indian capitalist class – the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) – had no hesitation in inviting Narendra Modi to address the chieftains of Indian capital, while Gujarat remains a favoured destination for investment by Indian and foreign capital.

As for the BJP, it has overtaken the Congress as the most favoured repository of votes for the upper castes and upper classes. In the last 2004 general elections, 43 per cent of the upper castes voted for the BJP compared to 21 per cent for the Congress. Among peasant proprietors 25 per cent voted for the BJP compared to 23 per cent for the Congress. Among OBCs the vote share was approximately the same, while among Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims,
Sikhs and Christians, the Congress did consistently and significantly better. Among the upper middle class the BJP secured 31 per cent of votes compared to 26 per cent for the Congress; among the lower middle class the Congress secured 28 per cent to the BJP’s 25 per cent, while among the poor and very poor the Congress did considerably better.\textsuperscript{18}

COMBATING HINDUTVA

The Indian state defines as its principal enemies the Naxalites, the secessionist currents and the internal terrorists who are presumed to be influenced by or connected with al-Qaeda-like transnational bodies, or with Pakistan-based Islamist groups with a focus on Kashmir. Hindutva is not seen as anywhere near as serious a threat. No doubt one reason for this is that whereas secessionism threatens the territorial ‘sovereignty of the state’, and Naxalism the ‘authority’ that goes along with such a notion of sovereignty, communal violence in the name of the religious majority does not. Indeed Hindu communalism disguises itself as a form of national unity, expressing the ‘popular’ sovereignty that the state is supposed to represent and embody. The demonisation of Islam and Muslims also neatly fits into the wider global effort to use the ideological banner of the ‘global war on terror’ as the way to win greater acceptance of US imperial behaviour.\textsuperscript{19}

Hindutva also operates quite comfortably within the parameters of Indian democracy. The first-past-the-post electoral system benefits it once a threshold of popular support is surpassed. The privatised associations of civil society, much celebrated by a certain strand of democracy theorists, present no barrier to Hindutva. More than any other political force the Sangh straddles and connects the domains of civil society and the apparatuses of the state. More than any other force it is rooted in the pores of civil society and possesses a density of structures that should be the envy of every other political force in the country – schools, recreational bodies, religious and cultural institutions, a plethora of associations catering to different groups from retired armed forces personnel to housewives – with some 40,000 RSS shakas or cadre-led branches in cities and small-town India providing support mechanisms for addressing the problems of everyday life.\textsuperscript{20}

One of the most important aspects of the Sangh’s success over the last two-and-a-half decades has been not merely its own expansion but also its contribution to the transformation of the character of the main opposition party, the Congress. The longer-term stabilisation of what can be called ‘authoritarian democracy’ is ensured when the programmatic differences between two main contending forces for electoral supremacy in a bourgeois system have so greatly narrowed that the political centre of gravity
remains firmly on the right, no matter who wins. This is clearly the case in
the US between the Republicans and the ‘New Democrats’; between the
Conservatives and ‘New Labour’ in the UK; and between the strong saffron
of the BJP and the pale saffron of the Congress in India. What has occurred
over the last 25 years is not so much the Congress-isation of the BJP as the
BJP-isation of the Congress. The latter should no longer be seen as some
kind of bourgeois centrist party, but as a clearly right-wing party.

Regardless of whether there is a Congress-led or BJP-led coalition gov-
ernment at the Centre, the essential direction of Indian economic policy
(neoliberalism) and of its foreign policy (strategic partnership with the US)
will, apart from minor qualifications, remain the same. Nevertheless, it also
remains the case that the distance between the Congress and BJP is signifi-
cantly greater than that between the major contending parties in any liberal
democracy anywhere in the world. The BJP is not the equivalent of the
Republicans or of West European Christian Democracy. It is a consider-
ably more dangerous political phenomenon and will remain so as long as its
umbilical cord to the RSS and the other organisations of the Sangh remains
intact, which there is every indication it will.

Clearly, the struggle to defeat this pernicious force can only be a long-term
project. To overcome communalism and its concomitant forms of violence
(quotidian and periodic) we need to fight against more than communalism.
Given the powerful connections between neoliberal globalisation, imperial
aggrandisement, cultural exclusivisms, ecological despoliation and social and
economic inequalities of various kinds, this struggle must be waged at all
these levels. This task is made all the more difficult because no country is as
crisscrossed by different lines of cleavage as India – regional, urban-rural, lin-
guistic, tribal, caste, class, religious, and all of these are further crisscrossed by
differences of gender, skill, income and wealth. Despite sectoral movements
of sometimes remarkable scale and scope, these have never coalesced to the
point where the Indian state has been unable to somehow manage these
multiple yet separated pressures. The task for Indian progressives is thus
clear: to find a way of generating a politics of the universal that can appeal to
and incorporate the politics of the singular – to make that coalescence.

With only some 7 per cent of the workforce in the ‘organised’ sector of
the economy, which is bound by regulations and rules governing employ-
ment practices, and only around 3 per cent unionised, it is hardly surpris-
ing that progressive politics is dominated by a range of single-issue groups
(including the best of the NGOs) taking up basic developmental concerns,
and by sectoral social movements taking up the causes of women, tribals,
lower castes, displaced persons, slum-dwellers, etc. But there is also a diverse
set of left forces and parties that are well organised and enjoy considerable regional influence. Maoism has come to power in Nepal and has sustained itself, even grown, in India. Admittedly, the mainstream left parties – the CPI and CPM – are, for all their rhetoric, essentially social-democratic in nature. But they still remain, like the Maoists, among the more intransigent opponents of communalism.

Insofar as Hindutva is rooted in the pores of Indian civil society, the building of secular, democratic, welfarist and justice-seeking counter-institutions on the same terrain is absolutely vital. To some extent this does take place through the actions of the multiplicity of broadly progressive groups, movements and parties that exist. But unlike in the case of the Sangh, here there exists no organisational mechanism or any overarching (even if minimal) form of ideological agreement that can, however loosely, unify their actions and orientations against Hindutva. In other words, what is most needed is some kind of counter-constellation of all these progressive forces, a ‘Left and Democratic Front’ whose coordinating structures will of course have to be internally far more democratic than that of the Sangh. This is most likely to emerge from the very experience of sustained collective struggle and joint actions; while also central to the construction of such a Front would have to be the preparation of a holistic and common political programme. This would encompass specific concerns and demands but would above all convincingly express an inspiring alternative vision of a far more humane, ecologically viable and socially just order beyond the barrenness of today’s capitalism.

NOTES


2 It is in this context that studies of mass psychology, of crowd behaviour and mob frenzy typical of communal riots or pogroms are most illuminating. Useful and important studies of this type include those by Elias Canetti, Crowds and Power, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1984; Gustave Le Bon, The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind, New York: Viking Press, 1960; and for ethnic violence in South Asia, S.J. Tambiah, Levelling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia, New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1997.

4 See the fine compilation by Amrita Basu and Srirupa Roy, *Violence and Democracy in India*, Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2007. For an important study that explores the relationship between women and Hindutva, either as victims or allies, see Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia, eds., *Women and the Hindu Right*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1995. The very low female to male sex ratio in India is testimony to the extraordinarily institutionalised character of women’s oppression. Barbara Harriss-White devotes a specific study for this volume.


6 See my *The Painful Transition: Bourgeois Democracy in India*, London: Verso, 1990. While in a macro-political sense the Emergency was not comparable to many dictatorships, it must not be forgotten that the government carried out a terrible campaign of forced sterilisations that was the single greatest reason for creating deep unpopularity in north India with Emergency Rule.

7 Some empirical evidence for this is given in a post-2004 election survey which showed how Hindutva through over two decades of sustained communal propaganda and practice has gained substantial adherence from the middle and upper sections of society to a ‘new common sense’ characterised by ‘a) a majoritarian viewpoint, b) high expression of religiosity, c) insistence on maintaining group boundaries, d) lack of sharp awareness or knowledge about blatantly communal events, e) mild approval of minority interests, and f) a weak association between these and partisanship as far as support to the BJP is concerned’. According to this survey, more Hindus vote for the BJP than for the Congress (in 2004, 40 per cent as compared to 35 per cent) and this support is stable, i.e., the BJP does not require communal campaigns to sustain it. See Suhas Palshikar, ‘Majoritarian Middle Ground?’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18–24 December 2004.

8 These are the intermediate or backward castes which, according to the last census of 1931 that enumerated castes, constitute 52 per cent of the Indian population. The Mandal Committee (named after B.P. Mandal, who chaired the Committee) came out with its report in 1978 recommending such reservations in Central government jobs and educational institutions. It was only partly implemented (education was excluded) in 1989. In April 2008, the Supreme Court ruled that 27 per cent reservations must now be given to OBCs in central government educational institutions but excluding the ‘creamy layer’. This is an upper layer among OBCs whose income and educational status presumably
disqualifies it from getting reservations. But the criterion for identifying this creamy layer has still to be clarified. Since the southern states had historically witnessed strong anti-Brahmin caste movements even before independence, OBC gains there had already taken place with some states having significantly more than 27 per cent reservations in state government and educational institutions. The 27 per cent figure was arrived at because approximately 23 per cent reservations already exist at the central level for Dalits (untouchables) and for indigenous peoples (referred to as tribals or Adivasis) at 15 per cent and 8 per cent respectively. To obviate legal challenges total reservations at the Central level were to be kept at 50 per cent.

While the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom in the wake of the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards took some 3,000 lives there remains a profound political difference between the two. That took place in a context of secessionist (the movement for Khalistan or separate Sikh homeland) tensions where the killing of Mrs. Gandhi was an act of vengeance for the prior assault by the Indian army on the holiest of Sikh shrines – the Golden Temple in Amritsar – where the leader of the Khalistan agitation, Sant Bhindranwala had taken final refuge. The assassination in turn triggered the pogrom. That this was a one-off event has been confirmed by the relative ease with which harmonious Hindu-Sikh relations have been re-established. The Khalistan movement has completely faded away and never at any time enjoyed more than a small minority support from Sikhs. Hindu-Sikh relations are simply not comparable to that of Hindus and Muslims, while the Hindu right is more prone to seeing the Sikh community as the historical sword-arm against Muslims and as a natural ally than as any kind of hostile opponent.


Compiled from the Table of ‘Hindu-Muslim Riots and Resulting Victims’ given on page 556 in Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*. I have changed the 1993 figure of 558 to 874 to include victims in the March riots of that year in Mumbai and added the rough estimate of 2,000 for deaths in the Gujarat pogrom of February 2002 before taking the annual average.

See P. Brass, *Forms of Collective Violence*, New Delhi: Three Essays


16 In the last couple of years there is some evidence that for the first time Indian Muslims may have become involved in public bomb blasts as well as becoming recruits to transnational terrorist groups.

17 See A.A. Engineer, ed., *Communal Riots in Post-Independence India*, Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1984. For an acute analysis of the material background to the Gujarat pogrom of 2002, see Barbara Harriss-White, *India’s Market Society*, New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2005. She points out that in eastern Gujarat villages, poor tribals attacked Muslim moneylenders on behalf of the Sangh. Economic exploitation alone does not explain this since elsewhere it is Hindu middlemen who exploit tribals. But local implantation of Hindutva activists and sustained communal propaganda against Muslims could combine with economic resentments to create such brutalised tribal behaviour.


19 In this regard Europe, with an anti-Muslim/anti-Islam racism on the rise, as well as Russia (Chechnya), China (Xinjiang) and India (Kashmir) all facing insurgencies in Muslim populated regions, are to some extent willing accomplices in this demonisation and lend unwarranted legitimacy to this fraudulent ‘global war on terror’. For a critique of the ‘software’ of the US imperial project and its use of variant ideological banners, see A. Vanaik, ed., *Selling US Wars*, Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2007.