An Inconvenient Truth? Fascism and Ethno-Nationalism

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India's modern history has been profoundly shaped by a concern that nationalism can lead to mass violence and atrocity, if not genocide. This preoccupation came from conflicts within India. But it was also shaped by the experience of World War II, and its surrounding ideological context. India was a key player in shaping many of the normative commitments of the international system in the aftermath of World War II. It shaped the emerging human rights regime in 1945. It is a signatory to the Genocide convention. The Holocaust was not prominently mentioned as a specific reference point in these commitments. Interestingly, the most potent political use of the memory of the Holocaust in modern Indian history came in 1971. Indian politicians and thinkers often referred to the experience of Nazism in making the case for India needed to intervene to prevent an impending genocide in what was then East Pakistan. Politicians in India repeatedly compared the State of Pakistan, then an ally of the United States, to the Nazis. But officially, Indira Gandhi used the fate of the Jews in Europe to appeal to the United States to stop supporting a regime that was actively abetting this genocide. According to the Congressional Resolution that eventually recognised this as genocide, more than three million people were killed, two hundred thousand raped, ten million refugees were displaced to India, and half of Bangladesh's population was internally displaced. President Nixon, to whom these appeals were addressed in various letters, was not just dismissive of the analogy. He even downplayed the moral significance of what had transpired during the Holocaust. India, of course, even in the face of threats by the United States, unilaterally intervened in the crisis in East Pakistan. The intervention led to the creation of an independent state of Bangladesh. But it was also a case in which invocation of the Holocaust and "Never Again" was apt.

Nazi analogies

But at another level, this invocation of the comparisons with Nazism and the Holocaust was unusual in Indian history. It was anomalous in terms of India's general stance towards international intervention. India's motives for intervening in the Bangladesh crisis may have been mixed. But it has carried out one of the rare successful examples of intervention to prevent genocide. Yet it remains generally sceptical of international intervention, it is less than enthusiastic for international instruments like the Responsibility to Protect. The recognition of the moral horror of genocide does not translate into a general commitment to prevent all genocide.

But the Bangladesh episode is important in debates over how the memory of the Holocaust is used internationally. What is striking in Indira Gandhi's appeals to Nixon is not just the rhetorical invocation of the fate of Jews in Europe. What was striking was its use of the analogy to remind the West of its own double standards. Nixon was refusing to *see* the moral atrocity unfolding in East Pakistan (see Gary Bass, The Blood Telegram (New Delhi: Random House India, 2013), p. 223). It was a reminder to the West that the construction of the new global order in the aftermath of World War II, the commitment to human rights and prevention of genocide, was still marked by geo-political hierarchies. Some peoples did count as less. It was a way of saying "If the world is serious about "Never Again" is must also be serious about confronting double standards, the ways in which moral demands are immobilised by the partiality of nations, geo-political considerations, or implicit hierarchies of peoples. All nations are guilty of this.

But the invocation of the experience of Nazism and the fate of Jews was unusual for another reason. Indian public discourse is not exactly preoccupied with

either memories of World War II or the Holocaust. The impact of the Holocaust on Indian public discourse, law and politics is marked by a deep paradox. On the one hand, there is relatively little historical engagement with the specificity of the Holocaust. If it is taken seriously at all, it is regarded as just one in a series of mass atrocities that occur in history from time to time. The specificity of the idea that Fascism sought to obliterate a whole community simply for being who they are does not register in public consciousness with quite the full moral force it should.

Diagnosing Fascism

The same is true of India's engagement with Hitler. German Fascism on this view was another, perhaps more deadly, species of geo-politics. But it was no different in kind from the imperialism of Allied Powers. This licences a certain casualness in the treatment of the Holocaust, evidenced most recently in the extraordinarily kitschy treatment of the subject in the recent Bollywood film, *Bawaal*. This view also creates conditions where public admiration of Hitler does not draw censure. India's now mainstream Hindu Nationalists have long been admirers of Hitler. Mein Kampf still has a steady supply of readers in India. It draws people disillusioned by Gandhi. But the casual acceptance of Fascist power politics and anti-Semitic tropes are combined with a deep admiration for Jews, support for Zionism and support for Israel.

But despite this casualness in public culture, it could, on the other hand, be argued, that so much of the debate over modern Indian identity is a debate over the ideological conditions that make an event such as a Holocaust possible. To understand this a brief and selective slice intellectual history might be in order. The rise of Fascism in Germany and the treatment of Jews elicited divergent ideological responses in India. One response was exemplified by Jawaharlal Nehru, who wrote despatches from Europe for the National Herald in 1938. He described the pogroms against Jews in vivid detail. He did much to blunt the fascination for Nazism. And he argued that India should position itself as a place of refuge for the Jews. Nehru was probably the only mainstream nationalist politician whose anti-fascist credentials were impeccably firm and unclouded by the whataboutery of a great deal of anti-imperial thought exemplified by his nationalist colleague Subhash Chandra Bose. But underlying Nehru's response was a fierce resistance to any form of Volkisch nationalism that associated national identity with tropes of blood and ethnicity. For him, and the Congress party he led, any Volkisch nationalism, inevitably would license mass violence and atrocity against minorities.

But the second response was precisely the embrace of Volkisch nationalism that enabled the Holocaust. The early exponent of this view was the Bengali nationalist and polymath Benoy Kumar Sarkar. In a series of articles "The Hitler State" published in 1933, Sarkar saw the Hitler State as the perfection of European Nationalism. For him the four pillars of a perfected nationalism were popular sovereignty, a unitary and organicist conception of ethnic identity, the cult of state violence, and the unremitting pursuit of national power without constraint. He saw in Hitler, the perfect apotheosis of Hobbes and Rousseau, a unitary popular will embodied in a sovereign, combined with the communal ideals of Fichte. In a chilling sentence he wrote "It is interesting to recall that Young Germany under Bismarck had likewise to undergo a *Kultur Kampf*. It consisted in the cultural struggle bearing on the Protestants v/s Catholics. But nobody hears of it today. The Jewish question bids fair in the same manner to be liquidated in Nazi Germany in a few years" (Benoy Kumar Sarkar, The Hitler State: A Landmark in the Political Economic and Social Remaking of the German People, Insurance and Finance Review, November 1933, p. 525). Sarkar probably did not have the literal liquidation of Jews in mind. But the logic of the argument is quite apparent: organicist conceptions of the nation are incompatible with recognition of minorities. This is the logic that Hindu Nationalism, and its founders like M.S. Golwalkar, embraced in its totality.

Tale of two nationalisms

Modern India than has been, in part, shaped by a contest over these two nationalist visions. Nehru

steadfastly refused any Volkisch conception of the nation that tied its identity to an ethnic group. Even after the partition of India on religious lines, independent India steadfastly refused to define its identity in ethnic terms. The mass atrocity that weighed on India's public culture profoundly and deeply was of course the Partition of India, and the catastrophic violence and displacement it produced. But independent India still refused ethno-nationalism as its founding principle; the experience of Partition violence only reinforced Nehru's convictions that only a liberal constitution, and a national identity that did no rely on ethnic identification could prevent more violence.

Hindu nationalism, on the other hand seeks to complete the work of partition. It argues that since the country was divided on religious lines, India should act as if it is a Hindu State. Hindu Nationalism has a dual commitment. It seeks to redefine Hinduism into an ethnic identity, and then redefine India as a Hindu nation, and enshrine legal privileges for Hindus. In recent protests over India's Citizenship Amendment Act, which for the first time introduced religious categories as a basis of granting refugees as path to citizenship, comparisons with Nazi ethnic laws were frequently invoked. But this brief debate is instructive for the question: How can we ensure that something like genocide, or at least a mass atrocity targeting a particular ethnic group does not occur? In some ways for people like Nehru the answer was crystal clear: any form of ethnic nationalism that aligns the nation with an ethnic identity, runs at some point the risk of producing mass atrocity. It relies on a psychologically dehumanising other groups, or at least regarding their claims as being of lesser moral importance. It often requires institutionalization of ethnic privilege. For the Nehruvian way of thinking, mass violence, if not genocide, was a product of a specifically European way of thinking about nationalism. The legitimization of the ethno-nationalism, in circumstances where populations were inherently diverse, was a recipe for violent exclusion, if not genocide. In this sense he understood that genocide could be enabled by the alignment of modern democracy with nationalism. If the Indian state were to try to emulate that path: create an organic, volkisch nation, under conditions that were even more diverse, the result would be even more catastrophic for minorities. India would be different in not repeating the mistakes of Europe, whose legitimization of nationalism produced wars and ethnic cleansing. In that sense the weight of European history as it culminates in the bloody denouement of the nineteen forties is on Nehru's mind.

But it is worth reflecting on another paradox. After independence the most ardent embrace of the State of Israel came from Hindu Nationalists, who miraculously combined admiration for both Nazism and Zionism. It was Nehru who, of all Indian leaders, had most deeply internalised the horrendous predicament of the Jews, who initially was ambivalent about Israeli statehood in Palestine. He expressed this in a poignant exchange of letters with Einstein, who had been enlisted to convince Nehru, in part because Einstein was also a reluctant nationalist. Part of Nehru's resistance was driven by his own practical political predicament. By 1947, Nehru the thinker and emancipator, had become a national leader. He needed to assuage India's Muslim minority, after the violence of Partition, and that minority was significantly anti-Zionist. He understood, unlike many other Indian critics of Zionism that Jews had a connection to Palestine. But he was convinced that the rights of Jews will need to be protected in a way that does not infringe the rights of Arabs. This conviction came in part from his thinking about India. Any situation which became a competition between two ethnic groups: Arabs or Jews, Hindus or Muslims, would in the end produce only injustice, not peace. The truest way of being faithful to the moral horrors of Holocaust was not to valorise the rights of groups, especially if it meant privileging one group over another. It was to find justice based on the individual rights of all.

Rejecting ethno-nationalism

While Benoy Kumar Sarkar's normative admiration for Nazism may be dubious, his analysis had one singular virtue. He did not want to single out Fascism as a distinct ideology. Rather he wanted to locate, its roots in a broader history of a European form of nationalism

(Benoy Kumar Sarkar, The Hitler State: A Landmark in the Political Economic and Social Remaking of the German People, Insurance and Finance Review, November 1933, p. 523). His analysis raises an uncomfortable question: Are all ethno-nationalisms potential fascisms in the waiting? If the answer to that question is yes, then the answer to the question "Never Again" will have to involve delegitimising all ethno-nationalisms. Is that a truth we dare confront? This is the question India, like the rest of the world, is wrestling with, not very reassuringly.

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