

## Religious Wars

The unity and calm that settled over India after the Mumbai attacks appears to have given way to renewed violence.

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India is a nation of extraordinary religious, cultural and linguistic diversity, but sadly it is no stranger to intolerance. Mahatma Gandhi died at the hands of a Hindu fanatic in 1948, and since then religious riots have cast a pall on India's commitment to secularism and religious pluralism. Unfortunately, at a time when India itself has been a victim of religiously inspired terror from abroad, most notably, its deeply troubled neighbor, Pakistan, it faces a growing spate of violent religious and cultural intolerance at home. In the past, promoting sectarian discord and violence was mostly the stock in trade of India's hypernationalist right wing. Lately, however, political parties across the ideological spectrum have shown a disturbing willingness to provoke or cater to religious and cultural bigotry.

Ironically, one effect of the brutal terrorist attacks on Mumbai in late November seems to have been to undercut the divisive political message of the worst of the country's nativist political parties. The Maharashtra Nirman Sena (MNS), a local Mumbai party that last year unleashed its goons on some of the most vulnerable sections of the city's working poor, for a time seemed to have fallen off the scene.

Now it seems as if the sense of common ground that the denizens of this city discovered in the wake the horrific attacks was only temporary. Religious violence and cultural parochialism are on the rise. Much of these forces seem to be fueled by the global economic downturn, which is bringing out the worst political tactics. In such a turbulent economic climate, scapegoating ethnic and religious minorities may well prove to be irresistible for those seeking to divert attention from serious questions of unemployment and growing economic disparities. Matters may become even worse as India's national election approaches in May of this year. In attempts to solidify their political bases, political parties, regardless of their ideological orientation, may well start kowtowing to religious and cultural zealots. Several recent developments underscore the dangers that they pose for the well-being of India's plural polity and society.

In January, in the city of Mangalore, a group of Hindu activists belonging to the Sri Ram Sena (Lord Ram's Army) accosted a group of women and their male escorts at a pub. Their leaders not only claimed responsibility but publicly defended their actions on the grounds that they were upholding the honor of Indian women. In their view, women frequenting pubs contravened the mores of Indian life. Local politicians did little to come to the aid of the beleaguered women. At the national level, only Minister of State for Women and Child Development Renuka Chaudhury of the ruling Congress-led coalition

government roundly criticized the hooligans and stated that the city was being "Talibanized."

Not content with their harassment of the young men and women, the same miscreants threatened to publicly humiliate unmarried couples on Valentine's Day in Mangalore on the grounds that this putatively alien custom was undermining traditional Indian mores. On this occasion, however, these xenophobic zealots met their match. A group of young women professionals dubbed themselves the Consortium of Pubgoing, Loose and Forward Women and took it upon themselves to flood the offices of the Sri Ram Sena with pink underwear. This nonviolent, unorthodox protest caught the xenophobes off guard who saw their crude, vicious tactics backfire.

Once again, within the past month, religious zealots have demonstrated their clout in Calcutta, the capital of West Bengal. After a venerable local English-language newspaper, The Statesman, reproduced an article by Johann Hari, a columnist for the British newspaper The Independent, entitled, "Why Should I Respect Oppressive Religions?" Following its publication, a group of local Muslims sought to intimidate the editors of The Statesmen through a series of menacing rallies in which they barricaded the newspaper employees in their office, which adjoins a major mosque. Seeking to assuage the sentiments of these illiberal critics, the Communist-run state government invoked a statute of the Indian Penal Code, which prohibits "malicious insults to the religions of any class" and arrested the editors. Under duress, the editors published an apology calling the republication of the column "an editorial misjudgment."

Are these waves of intolerance sweeping across India inevitable? There is no clear-cut answer. However, unless the country's vast civil society and elements of its political leadership form a bulwark of opposition to these developments, India will increasingly find itself at risk. Perhaps India's secular political leaders will take a page from the strategy of the young women of New Delhi and Mangalore, who through their novel if offbeat counterprotest left the goons of the Sri Ram Sena flatfooted. Along with the courageous Congress minister who sharply upbraided the display of street thuggery in Mangalore, these young women have shown that feckless cultural and religious intolerance has no place in an inherently plural society..

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