

Mathura Crisis: Reflection of a Larger Political and Cultural Malaise



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Lead Essay

Mathura crisis: Reflection of a larger political and cultural malaise

Whether it be called a crisis of land-grab or of the rise of cult fanaticism, the Mathura crisis once again draws attention to a distinctive culture of nationalism in India, which builds on conflicts based on group identity, rather than religion, caste or region, and disregards political ideologies in favour of a certain 'way of life'. This is the rationale behind the Mathura crisis and the many such groups that have sought to capture the existing dominant ideologies in the public space.

The Mathura cult: An intelligence failure?

The Mathura crisis started as a crisis of land grab in March 2014, with a group of armed squatters –protesting against the state in the name of Subhash Chandra Bose –illegally occupying the land belonging to the UP state's horticulture department, and quickly transformed into a strong cult living in a commune system, right within the heart of Mathura's prime administrative area. The group calling itself the Swadheen Bharat Subhash Sena (SBSS) and being led by the powerful follower of Jai Gurudev, Ram Vriksha Yadav, managed to mobilize more than 3000 people from various states of North India.

With the police attempts to evacuate the Jawahar Bagh premises in the enforcement of the court orders resulting in several casualties, the central and the state governments are being widely blamed for failing to heed the intelligence reports in the growth of the cult. That is now increasingly being proven true, as a recent undercover media operation and an interview with the head of the Local Intelligence Unit (LIU) revealing that he had informed the higher authorities on March 13, 2014 that the cult followers would arrive two days later. Yet they were allowed to enter and hold a 'dharna', despite the information that they were already equipped with firearms and licensed and illegal weapons. And during elections they were even supplied with medical supplies and water. He sent the intelligence inputs to the Uttar Pradesh government 80 times on a daily basis, with the first report being sent in January 2015.¹

In fact, the local police claim that there was no intelligence failure. They were not given orders to act and many were asked to stand guard outside the Jawahar Bagh premises. They also claim that plans were afoot to lease out the entire Jawahar Bagh – worth billions – to Ram Vriksh Yadav, at the rate of one rupee per acre. The pre-planned lease was stopped only because the lawyers took the matter to the High Court.² And had it not been for the Allahabad HC order ordering the evacuation of the Jawahar Bagh premises, the police would not have acted.

And it is not the state government alone which is culpable in this entire mess. Both LIU and the IB have their presence in every district of a state. So, even the central government should have received intelligence reports on the matter.

That the centre did not regard this as a threatening enough situation to take immediate action reveals an alarming pattern, and raises broader questions, about the increasing legitimization of, and desensitization towards, the culture of cult nationalism in the country.

The cult life

In India's cultural landscape, cults, ashrams and groups professing a common way of life and shared ideals arose as an alternative to the discrimination perpetuated by traditional religious hierarchies. Even as they emerged as an alternative force, seeking to alleviate hierarchies, they acted as a sphere of re-legitimation and reviving force for traditional religion. This is especially so in the case of Hinduism, wherein these new-age cults have promoted a democratisation of traditional religion and retained the seekers. However, from peaceful, equalizing cults –like the 'Hare Krishna' movement –which have created a harmonious space within the public sphere, we are now increasingly witnessing the

¹ (Yahoo News 2016)

² (Yahoo News 2016)

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rise of aggressive cults that prefer to operate in isolation and practise an anti-establishment ideology, attacking both liberal and conservative governments.

Throughout the country, there flourish various common and uncommon sects and cults that co-opt both rationalist and lower-caste followers who would have otherwise deserted the religion. There are various such secular 'gurus' that represent a disregard for entrenched caste and gender roles, and do not subscribe to the traditional orthodox practices even though they may worship the traditional deities, thereby giving rise to speculations about the reform of the Hindu religion which promotes access and inclusion of everyone. Living in a commune-like system, they follow a disciplined pattern of collective life, forging a distinctive common culture among the members equally around daily practices of prayer, meals, and distribution of work. To survive and give a direction to the future, they are invariably motivated by a broad or narrow ideology, which inspires devotion and inspiration among the members. At the same time, the concentration on the individual progress and subtle imposition of modes of self-correction ensures the simultaneous flourishing of both the sense of freedom and self-worth among the members and the microscopic management by the higher heads.

This is precisely the kind of pattern that was being followed in Mathura's SBSS, and that is being followed in numerous such cults across the country. The mode of communal life remains the same in spirit in all these cults. What differs is the ideology and direction of the cult. Thus, what transpired in Mathura has echoes of the numerous cult scandals that have surfaced over the last two years of this government –the most prominent and political ones being the Asaram Bapu case, the Dera Sacha Sauda scandal, the land grabs by Jai Gurudev's ashram and Goa's Sanatan Sanstha's Hindu Janjagruti Samiti whose members were accused in the murder of rationalists Pansare, Dabholkar and various terror plots.

The government is unsuccessful in persecuting the members of such powerful organizations since they manage to amass a strong network of followers among the business community, politicians and households, even though the aims of many of these groups verges on potential sedition. Surprisingly, even though they claim to follow a spiritual path and are overtly religious in their ideologies – such as the SBSS's objectives to dismantle the office of the executive and using an alternative currency within the commune, and the Goan Sanstha's criticism of the 'moderate' RSS and the BJP and its aims to establish a Hindu Rashtra by 2023 –they flourish through material incentives and allowances that go against the grain of conventional religious life, such as allowing married life within the commune, leveraging the use of modern technology and education system, holding international and national conferences, and establishing global networks, and most importantly, invariably leveraging the growing organic market in the country, to manufacture and push their products.

The leading publications of some of these organizations show that they –despite their overt opposition to rationalists – paradoxically, profess deep faith in the sanctity of Science –a way in which they manage to retain a number of NRIs and foreigners. Handpicking practical, ancient practices from religious scriptures, they justify them through scientific argument and hefty numerical data. Through this kind of an inclusive legitimation, their claims to political power forces even the state to accept and co-opt their militant resistance against institutions. This is regardless of which government is in power. For, prominent organizations like, Hindu Janjagruti Samiti, was most active during the time of Congress Chief Minister, Digambar Kamat, and the SBSS was similarly active during the government of Samajwadi Party. Similarly, the Sati Pati cult in Gujarat, with over 6000 followers, has not faced any action from the state government, due to fears of antagonizing the powerful local cults.³ The prosecution of Sant Rampal in Haryana revealed how the ashram, like the Mathura cult, kept its own cache of arms and weapons and trained personal staff, instead of simply practising a way of life. The political clout of several of these cults cuts across the secular-religious divide.

The current intensification

³ (Porecha 2016)

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Yet, what stands out at present is the intensification of conflicts arising out of cult dominance, during the last two years.. Even though the government is using the sedition law all too easily to arrest people on charges of being anti-national – such as in the JNU row –it is failing to rein in such powerful cults that openly propagate an anti-state and anti-institution agenda.

What is the difference between an Arundhati Roy and an SAR Geelani critiquing the Indian state, and the religious SBSS and the HJS attacking the same state and not even sparing the mainstream right-wing politics? With reports of SBSS receiving funding from Naxalites, the selective cultural and legal attacks by the state through charges of sedition becomes even more damning, with a need to call out the government on how is it that the ‘national’ is constructed and defined.

However, this selective prosecution of some and not others is not a paradox, with the current government in power. For, the sphere of the ‘national’ –as conflicts such as various incidents of religious intolerance and the debate over *Bharat Mata ki Jai* show – is already assumed to be based on a political ideology of religious majoritarianism, which spans both conventional religion as well as the new-age materialistic cults.

The way forward

The compatibility of such conventional religious majoritarianism with new-age cult culture is captured by a dual rationale:

One, the ability of these cults to feed on disillusionment with the system in failing to plug the socio-economic gaps, such as discrimination and inequality, and the search for a self-justifying anchor in religion.

Two, the cults have become a form that mirror the decadence of populism and personality-driven Indian politics, as even the results of the recent assembly elections show, where popular preferences were guided by the choice of a strong, albeit authoritarian leader, promising material benefits, supporting convention in cultural life and exhibiting a strong and entrenched personal appeal. This is similar to the manner in which political parties allow many of these cults to flourish in the hopes of garnering potential vote-banks, as seen in states like UP, Gujarat, Goa and Haryana, and the upcoming elections in UP and Punjab could well see some of these cults increasingly being used by some political parties.

What is needed is strong institutional reform to ensure that the state is held accountable for the manner in which it selectively prosecutes ‘anti-national’ offenders, as well as, a reclaiming of the secular space in the Indian constitutional practice, since it has become far too simple to appropriate a secular and inclusive identity and escape crackdown by the authorities.

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Yahoo News. *Yahoo News*. June 10, 2016. <https://in.news.yahoo.com/80-reports-were-sentto-u-000000206.html> (accessed June 10, 2016).

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Headlines

SBI Begins Working on Framework for Merger of Subsidiaries

(Livemint, June 13, 2016)

The State Bank of India (SBI) has set up a crack team to prepare a framework for amalgamation of five associate banks with itself, even as the political opposition to the proposed move is gaining ground and the government approval is still awaited. SBI has five associate banks—State Bank of Bikaner and Jaipur, State Bank of Travancore, State Bank of Patiala, State Bank of Mysore and State Bank of Hyderabad. “The idea is to merge all the five associate banks at the same time. They are on the same technology platform, which SBI has... it will not be a difficult process,”

Read more: <http://www.livemint.com/Industry/OpvpSVSE6vpkd6ygQU93UL/SBI-begins-working-on-framework-for-subsidiaries-merger.html>

Date accessed: 13.06.16

Governance & Development

EDUCATION

Teaching at the Right Level

(Gautum Patel, *The Caravan*, May 27, 2016)

The visibility of low learning levels across India has driven a range of experiments and innovations by governments and NGOs. Now, the urgency is not to devise new ways to teach well, but to recognise what has worked from the plethora of approaches. The TaRL model to ensure children learn is as simple as these sentences lay out. It doesn't require an intensive training, or a costly tool kit. Nor does it mandate a high-level qualification for the master trainers. The programme gives students what they need first: the basics. The government's New Education Policy will make a lasting difference only if it is able to include such simple, cost-effective solutions, which can be scaled up to make an impact on the millions of children at the primary level who are ready for a better way to learn the basics.

Read more: <http://www.caravanmagazine.in/vantage/teaching-right-level-new-education-policy-include-basics>

Date Accessed: 13.6.2016

TRANSPORT

The Air India Mess: Is There a Way Out?

(*The Asian Age*, June 12, 2016)

That Air India, once the country's pride, is an unwanted baby is nothing new. The crucial issue is what to do with the national carrier? How much more money should be pumped into this hapless airline just to ensure its day-to-day survival? Rs 30,000 crores was pledged as a bailout package, and more than half has been paid, so that the jobs of 30,000-plus employees are protected. There is a sordid history behind its fall from grace, where the airline was sought to be deliberately wounded, if not killed, so that private airlines could grow.

Read more: <http://www.asianage.com/editorial/air-india-mess-there-way-out-955>

Date Accessed: 13.6.2016

TECHNOLOGY

India Needs Resolute Action Against Cyber Attacks

(*The Economic Times*, June 12, 2016)

India has a demographic edge over many nations. But our future depends on how well policy addresses the needs of young people, how well we educate them and show them the way forward to address the prospects, and challenges, of the immediate future. Tackling cyber attacks might be a starting point. Boasting about Vedic mathematics misses the point.

Read more: <http://blogs.economictimes.indiatimes.com/et-editorials/india-needs-resolute-action-against-cyber-attacks/>

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ENVIRONMENT

Simply put: Why culling is not a 'lust for killing', it is conservation

(*The Indian Express*, June 13, 2016)

What is culling? Selection, says the dictionary. In the wild, it is the process of weeding out of the weak — through starvation, disease and predation. It is nature's way of controlling population and maintaining the robustness of a stock.

A population boom makes individuals compete for food and safety, and the weaker ones lose out, leaving a smaller population of more able individuals. As a result, no forest supports more herbivores than can possibly forage adequately, and more carnivores than those herbivores can provide for.

Read more: <http://indianexpress.com/article/explained/maneka-gandhi-prakash-javadekar-culling-of-wild-animals-animal-culling-2849544/>

Date accessed: 13.06.16

Society

SOCIAL JUSTICE

5,616 Indians Turned Slaves Every Day Over 2 Years

(*India Spend*, June 8, 2016)

On an average, 51 out of every 100 people are vulnerable to modern slavery—bonded labour, forced begging, forced marriage, domestic services and commercial sex work—in India, according to the Global Slavery Index 2016 compiled by the Walk Free Foundation, an advocacy based in Australia. India has the fourth-highest proportion of people living under enslaved conditions, after North Korea, Uzbekistan and Cambodia. India was at fifth position in modern slavery in 2014, changing place with Qatar, the report said.

Read more: <http://www.indiaspend.com/cover-story/5616-indians-turned-slaves-every-day-over-2-years-73912>

Date Accessed: 13.6.2016

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Don't Find Udda Punjab Questions India's 'Sovereignty Or Integrity': Bombay High Court

(*NDTV*, June 13, 2016)

Udda Punjab does not question the "sovereignty or integrity" of India, the Bombay High Court said today ahead of a likely verdict this afternoon on a series of controversial cuts imposed on the film by the Censor Board. "We have read script in entirety to see if film encourages drugs. We do not find the film questions sovereignty or integrity of India by the names of cities, reference to state or by a signpost," the court said, referring to the Censor Board ordering the deletion of "Punjab" and names of other places in the state in the film.

Read more: <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/dont-find-udta-punjab-questions-indias-sovereignty-or-integrity-bombay-high-court-1418439>

Date accessed: 13.06.16

India and World

SOUTH ASIA

Over 8,000 Arrested In Bangladesh Anti-Terrorist Drive

(*NDTV, June 13, 2016*)

Bangladesh police said on Monday they have arrested more than 8,000 people in a nationwide crackdown on terrorists launched after a series of murders targeting minorities and secular activists.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina vowed on Saturday to catch "each and every killer" as Bangladesh reels from a wave of murders of religious minorities and secular and liberal activists that have spiked in recent weeks.

Read more: <http://www.ndtv.com/world-news/arrests-in-bangladesh-anti-terrorist-drive-top-8-000-1418459>

Date accessed: 13.06.16

EUROPE

Why Should India Care About Brexit?

(*Aayush Ailawadi, The Quint, June 13, 2016*)

The UK has always been touted as an attractive investment destination because of the access that it provides to European market, of more than 500 million people. This is especially because the UK offers a robust legal system, a favourable tax regime and ranks high in the World Bank's ease of doing business rankings. The fact that English is the most widely spoken language in Britain doesn't hurt, either. UK is the third largest source of foreign direct investment in India. Indian companies are the third-largest source of foreign direct investment for the UK, the British government says. FICCI, one of India's top industry groups, worries that Brexit could create a lot of uncertainty for India Inc.

Read more: <http://www.thequint.com/business/2016/06/13/david-cameron-brexit-campaign-european-union-tata-motors-tata-steel-indian-companies-uk-eu-trade-ties>

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