

SOME years ago, in the city of Bombay, a young Muslim playwright wrote and staged a play that had gods — Hindu gods and goddesses — as major characters. Such plays are not uncommon in India; some would say that they are all too common. This one also included gods and goddesses who were heroic, grand, scheming and comical. This provoked not the audience but Hindu nationalists, particularly the Hindu Mahasabha, a spent political force for a long time, in Bombay. This city is now being dominated by a more powerful Hindu nationalist formation, the Shiv Sena.

It is doubtful if those who claimed they had been provoked were really provoked. It is more likely that they pretended to be offended and precipitated an incident to make their political presence felt. After all, such plays have been written in India since time immemorial. Vikram Savarkar of Hindu Mahasabha — a grandson of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966), the non-believing father of Hindu nationalism who thoughtfully gifted South Asia the concept of Hindutva — organised a demonstration in front of the theatre where the play was being staged, caught hold of the playwright, and threatened to lynch him. Ultimately Savarkar's gang forced the writer to bow down and touch Savarkar's feet, to apologise for writing the play. The humiliation of the young playwright was complete; it was duly photographed and published in newspapers and news magazines.

Though Savarkar later claimed that Hinduism had won, for he had not allowed a Muslim to do what Muslims had not allowed Hindus to do with Islam's symbols of the sacred,

Facing Extermination

A Report on the Present State of the Gods and Goddesses in South Asia

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at least some Hindus felt that on that day Hindutva might have won, but Hinduism had certainly lost. It had lost because a tradition at least fifteen hundred years old (things might have been different in the pre-epic days) was sought to be dismantled. During these fifteen hundred years, a crucial identifier of Hinduism — as a religion, a culture and a way of life — has been

the particular style of interaction humans have with gods and goddesses. Deities in everyday Hinduism, from the heavily Brahminic to the aggressively non-Brahminic, are not entities outside everyday life, nor do they preside over life from outside, but are a constituent of life. Their presence is telescoped not only into one's transcendental self but, to

use Alan Roland's tripartite division, also into one's familial and individualised selves and even into one's most light-hearted, comical, naughty moments.² Gods are above and beyond humans but are, paradoxically, not outside the human fraternity.³ You can adore or love them, you can disown or attack them, you can make them butts of your wit and sarcasm. Savarkar, not being literate in matters of faith and pitifully picking up ideas from the culture of Anglo-India to turn Hinduism into a 'proper' religion from an inchoate pagan faith, was only ensuring the humiliating defeat of Hinduism as it is known to most Hindus.

Since about the middle of the last century, perhaps beginning from the 1820s, there has been a deep embarrassment and discontent with the lived experience of Hinduism, the experience which paradoxically the young Muslim playwright,



Makhanchor: Krishna's mischievous pranks, such as stealing butter reenacted by this child on Janmashtami

Savarkar's victim, represented. Vikram Savarkar is only the last in a galaxy of people — Hindus, non-Hindus, Indians, non-Indians — who have felt uncomfortable with the overpopulated Indian pantheon, its richly textured, pagan personalities, their unpredictability, variety and all too human foibles. For nearly 150 years, we have been seeing a concerted, systematic effort to either eliminate these gods and goddesses from Indian life or to tame them and make them behave. I am saying 'Indian' and not 'Hindu' life self-consciously, for these gods and goddesses not only populate the Hindu world but regularly visit and occasionally poach on territories outside it. They are not strangers outside India, either.⁴ By indirectly participating in the effort to retool or gentrify them that has been going on for over one hundred years, Savarkar was only following the tradition of Baptist evangelists like William Carey and Joshua Marshman and the rationalist religious and social reformers such as Rammohun Roy and Dayanand Saraswati in nineteenth century India, who felt that the country's main problem was its idolatry and the rather poor personal quality of its gods and goddesses. These reformers wanted Indians to get rid of their superfluous deities and either live in a fully secularised, sanitised world in which rationality and scientific truth would prevail or, alternatively, set up a proper monotheistic God like the 'proper' Christians and Muslims had. Vikram Savarkar was attacking in the playwright a part of his self no longer acceptable, but not easy to disown either.

The early attacks on the gods and goddesses by the various Hindu



Bharat Mata: the imperialist goddess of Hindu nationalists being used to exterminate the vast pantheon of gods and goddess

reform movements, from Brahma Samaj to Arya Samaj, have been dutifully picked up by formations till recently at the periphery of politics in India, such as the ones centering around Hindutva. Today, overwhelmed by the experience of the Ramjanmabhumi movement and the destruction of the Babri mosque at Ayodhya, we no longer care to read the entire Hindutva literature produced over the last seventy five years. We think we know what they have to say. If all nationalist thought

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is the same, as Ernest Gellner believes, Hindu nationalist thought cannot be any different, we are sure.⁵ If you, however, read the Hindutva literature, you will find in it a systematic, consistent, often direct attack on Hindu gods and goddesses. Most stalwarts of Hindutva have not been interested in Hindu religion and have said so openly. Their tolerance for the rituals and myths of their faith has been even less. Many of them have come to Hindutva as a reaction to everyday, vernacular Hinduism. This rejection is a direct product of nineteenth century Indian modernity and its models of the ideal Hindu as a Vedantic European or, for that matter, Vedantic Muslim. That is why until recently in no *shakha* of the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh or RSS, the voluntary force that constitutes the steel frame of Hindu nationalism, there could be, by the conventions of the RSS, any icon of any deity except

Bharatmata, Mother India. The Ramjanmabhumi temple is the first temple for which the RSS has shed any tear or shown any concern and that concern, to judge by their participation in worship or rituals at the temple, seems skin-deep.

In 1990-91 I had interviewed at great length the chief priest of the Ramjanmabhumi temple itself, Baba Lal Das, a remarkably courageous, ecumenical man of religion who was murdered soon after the mosque was demolished. He told me that during the previous seven years of the movement in support of the temple, no major political leader of the movement had cared to worship at the temple, except one who had got a *puja* done through a third party without herself visiting the temple. I may tell at this point my favourite story about the devotion to Ram of the Hindu