
Right-wing movements are today witnessing a frightening resurgence all over the world, boding ill for the poor, women, minority communities and other marginalized groups. This collection of three essays on the rapid march of Hindutva, India’s home-grown brand of fascism, provides a careful critique of the extreme right-wing in India as well as a passionate plea to counter it if India is at all to be saved from descending into the throes of interminable chaos.

In the first essay in the volume, titled “A Field Guide to Rough Beasts”, Desai outlines the emergence of right-wing movements across the world which, although displaying considerable variety among themselves, share much in common. Fascism, she points out, comes in various guises today, as movements that claim to champion the interests of a religious or ethnic group or a nation, these being typically pitted against other competing groups that are branded as inveterate foes. Desai links the rise of contemporary fascism to the decline of radical left-wing movements and the collapse of the Soviet Union, which laid the way open to the untrammelled global sway of American imperialism and its local allies in the rest of the world. She stresses how the rapid expansion of fascist formations must also be seen as inextricably linked to the neo-liberal economic policies advocated by imperialist economic institutions like the World Bank and the IMF, and willingly adopted by local elites. As such, then, Western economic imperialists, local capitalists, feudal lords and right wing movements are all part of a complex nexus.

Turning to the Indian situation, Desai argues that the rapid rise of Hindutva must be seen in the broader context of the decline of the dominance of the Congress Party, which had, from 1947 to the late 1970s, represented the interests of the Indian ruling classes, comprising mainly the ‘upper’ castes. With the rise of ‘lower’ caste assertion, she suggests, the ‘upper’ castes are increasingly turning to Hindutva in order to protect and promote their interests. Based on the construction of an imagined unified ‘Hindu’ community pitted against Muslim and Christian ‘others’, Hindutva, Brahminism in a modern garb, seeks to incorporate the ‘lower’ caste majority into the ‘Hindu’ fold, and preserve the hegemony of the ‘upper’ castes, while keeping the marginalized victims of ‘upper’ caste hegemony — the ‘lower’ castes and the vast majority of the Muslims and Christians—divided among themselves.
In her second essay, on the politics of culture, Desai discusses the political implications of post-modernism in the academia, arguing that its opposition to reason, secularism, democracy, science and other cherished values of the Enlightenment plays directly into the hands of the proponents of Hindutva. Defence of tradition, therefore, becomes a convenient excuse for legitimizing the politics of Brahminical fascism. In a spirited critique of one of the foremost Indian post-modernist scholars, the psychoanalyst Ashis Nandy, Desai points out how a blind opposition to the Enlightenment project in the name of defending Indian ‘tradition’ results in the defence of such barbaric practices as sati or widow immolation, while exonerating Brahminism for all its evils.

The onward march of the Hindutva brigade, as exemplified by what it regards as its most successful laboratory, Gujarat, is inextricably linked with violence, for violence is inherent in its ideology and overall ethos.

Desai’s third essay, “Hindutva’s Gujarat: The Image of India’s Future?”, sets out to explain the Hindutva phenomenon in that state, suggesting that the murder and mayhem that Gujarat has been witness to might soon be repeated all over the country if things continue to drift the way they have been. She locates the rise of Hindutva in Gujarat to a complex web of local, national and international factors. Among these are the weak Dalit movement in the state, the rise of a new class of ‘low’ caste Shudra rich peasants and capitalists who have taken to an aggressive Hindu identity in order to climb the caste ladder and claim a higher social status, and the role of the Gujarati diaspora in funding Hindutva outfits.

Desai’s overall analysis of the rise of Hindutva is well-argued and persuasive, but not quite so her suggestions as to how Hindutva might be stopped in its tracks. She sees the Indian left as the only force capable of countering the might of Hindutva. While the left undoubtedly has such a role to play, Desai provides no critique of the left at all and of its abysmal failure to challenge the politics of Hindutva. She overlooks the sharp and, in many respects, valuable critique of the left articulated by Dalit activists, who see the Indian left as dominated by ‘upper’ caste interests, who, for that very reason, are reluctant to challenge the ‘upper’ caste hegemony that Hindutva so effectively represents. This aside, the book makes a valuable contribution to the debate on the politics of religious jingoism which is playing such a havoc in India today.

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