AIDWA perspectives

Secularism Communalism Hindutva

Some questions, some answers

Introduction

The developments in Gujarat signal a new phase in the campaign of the Sangh Parivar to refashion India in line with its sectarian communal agenda. Having led the worst carnage in independent India's history against Muslims, the RSS-led Parivar now wants to legitimize that carnage through the holding of elections in Gujarat. The pre-election bonanzas that were the usual method of buying votes are to be replaced by pre-election communal violence: this appears to be the message to its units all over the country. This has been made possible by the patronage and the all-out support to this plan given by the ruling party through the Central Government. The implications for the democratic process are frightening.

At the same time the divisive and communal campaign around the Ayodhya issue is being stepped up by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), one of the Parivar's constituents. Even as the people of India reject the BJP's record of mis-governance in state after state, the BJP resorts to a desperate campaign to whip up communal sentiments: its only way of retaining power.

The campaign includes the dissemination of lies and distortions about minority communities and about India's history. This is designed to polarize our society communally, at a time when the Indian people, and more particularly the working people, are faced with myriad problems affecting their day-to-day lives.

In 1992, after the pre-planned demolition of the Babri Masjid and the accompanying violence against minority Muslim communities in large parts of the country, a joint fact finding team of women's organizations visited several of the affected centres. It later published its report. The introduction stated, "At no time since Independence has there been such a challenge to the very basis of India's secular polity, its Constitution and its democratic institutions. Communalism is not now just another issue to be discussed and debated in seminars and conferences. It is the central issue in the struggle for women's rights that is linked to every other issue we raise. The women's movement can ignore this reality only at the cost of its own existence."

If communalism as an extra-constitutional power could direct a policy of vicious attacks and pogroms against the Muslim community in the first half of the 1990s, communalism in power poses a far more grave danger as it is fast institutionalizing its agenda through its control over the state apparatus.

It is essential for all those committed to a secular India to vigorously counter the hate propaganda of the RSS and its affiliates as also to dispel the confusion caused by its lies and distortions. This pamphlet attempts to clarify some of these issues.

Starting with an analysis of the situation in Gujarat, we examine the many themes that make up the Hindutva vision and world-view. What was the role played by the purveyors of Hindutva in the freedom movement and what is their understanding of our history? The answer to this question provides us insights into the concept of the Hindu Rashtra, its economic and legal underpinnings, and the specific ways in which a Hindu theocracy will subvert what is enlightened in our Constitution. This pamphlet returns to some of the basic themes that pit Hindutva against democracy and secularism. It re-examines, with examples from recent experience, issues such as Hinduism *vs.* Hindutva, religion *vs.* communalism, communalism *vs.* secularism, the Constitution and its secular-democratic imperative, human rights and Hindutva, and so on. We hope that this will help the struggle against these destructive forces.

Brinda Karat

What is happening in Gujarat?

In Gujarat, the Sangh Parivar, with the backing of the BJP government, has mounted an attack on the Constitution and the guarantees that it gives to all citizens. The message to minorities particularly Muslims in Gujarat is clear: if they want to live in Gujarat it must be as second class subordinate citizens. This is the basis of the Hindu Rashtra slogan. What occurred in Gujarat was *not* a riot but a communal carnage against the Muslim community organized and led by the constituents of the Sangh Parivar, backed by the state government.

The barbaric attack on *kar sevaks* and innocent women and children in the train at Godhra must be condemned in the strongest possible words. Justice must be done and the guilty punished. The most recent report of the forensic investigation into the Godhra atrocity shows that there was inflammable material inside the coach. Yet all these months the Government and Sangh Parivar propagated the lie that mobs stopped the train and threw petrol bombs to set it on fire. Why is the Government taking so long to identify the guilty? After the attack on Parliament on Dec. 13, the criminals were identified in a day. After the attack on the USIS office in Kolkata too, the culprits were caught within a few days. Why have the criminals not been identified in the Godhra case, particularly since the Government says that it was carried out by outside forces? The Government is deliberately delaying the whole process so that it can use it for political purposes. Meanwhile, a wave of violence was unleashed against the minorities in many parts of Gujarat. The State and administration participated in and encouraged this violence. Muslim women and children were targeted in the most vicious manner imaginable, and the loss of life and property has been enormous.

Every person, regardless of his or her religion, condemned the Godhra atrocity. In Parliament, on February 27, all the opposition parties suggested that Parliament pass a unanimous resolution condemning the attack. But it was the NDA Government that refused to do so. Why? Only to falsely propagate that the entire opposition is "pro-Muslim." The Government justifies the killing of thousands of innocent Muslim women, children and men as a "reaction" to Godhra.

The Prime Minister asked a question: "Who started it?" If we accept for a moment the perverted logic that the Gujarat violence was only a response to Godhra, then can we not say that Godhra

itself was a response to the highly provocative communal campaign on the Ayodhya temple by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad? On February 25, two days before the Godhra carnage, Jan Morcha, a respected UP paper reported that *kar sevaks* on the Sabarmati Express had attacked Muslims on the railway stations. One poor Muslim worker had been killed and several injured. Women in burkhas had been harassed and the most abusive language used against them. An AIDWA delegation met one of the victims who had been admitted to a Lucknow hospital. He, along with others living in Barabanki, were on their way to work. They had to cross a railway crossing where a train with *karsevaks* had halted. On identifying them as Muslims, some *karsevaks* got down from the train and attacked them. The victim whom the AIDWA delegation met had his stomach ripped open and his arm broken. On February 27, at the Godhra station, *karsevaks* picked a fight with a poor Muslim tea vendor, refusing to pay for the tea and physically attacking him. He belonged to the nearby Muslim basti. It was from here that the retaliation came. People came out and attacked only that bogey where those responsible were seated.

So what then is the answer to the Prime Minister's question? That the *karsevaks* started it? This we believe is not the way to pose the issue. The PM's perverted logic will destroy the country. Nothing can justify the attack on *karsevaks* on the train in Godhra, just as nothing can justify the terrible carnage sponsored by the Gujarat State Government that continues against the Muslims. AIDWA leaders met many of the family members of those killed in Godhra. They said that they did not want innocent people to be killed. A young woman whose father had been burnt said "I do not want other children to lose their fathers. All Indians must live together and protect each other." Wise words, but unheeded by the Sangh Parivar. It is very clear that this carnage and brutality was designed to increase polarization and communal mobilization with the sole aim of consolidating political power.

It should not be forgotten that the recent carnage against the Muslims was preceded in 2000 and 2001 by a vicious campaign by the Sangh Parivar against Christians in which churches were attacked, bibles burnt, graves desecrated, nuns and priests attacked, and homes of Christians attacked. At that time, the pretext was the lie of "forcible conversions" made against the Christian community.

These are then the experiments being conducted in Gujarat, the "laboratory" of the Sangh Parivar.

What are the constitutional guarantees for secularism?

The Sangh Parivar sees the Constitution of India as a major obstacle in its path of setting up a Hindu Rashtra. Little wonder that one of the first acts of the BJP led NDA government after assuming power was to set up a Constitution Review Committee.

In 1950, under the able leadership of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar the people of India gave themselves a Constitution that in effect links the liberties of individual citizens to the guarantee of equal rights to all citizens irrespective of class, caste, creed and gender. It was highly appropriate that it was a great legal mind and intellectual of the Scheduled Castes who ensured that the Constitution enshrined democratic and secular values. This was in direct contrast to what was advocated by the Hindu communalists in those very years when the Constitution was being written. They wanted, among other things, special privileges for propertied upper caste Hindu men. Even as recently as the early nineties, the "Dharma Sansad" of so-called sadhus organized by the VHP declared that they wanted to replace the Indian Constitution with the Manu Smriti!

One of the important pillars, if not the basis of the Indian Constitution, is secularism. The Indian freedom movement drew into its fold men and women from all religious denominations, classes, and language groups; the core of the Constitution had to be secularist if it was to address the needs and requirements of this multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-regional grouping. Some of the relevant articles in the Constitution are as follows. In Part III of the Constitution, in the Statement of Fundamental Rights, Article 25 provides for the right to freedom of conscience and the practice and propagation of religion. Article 26 provides for freedom to manage religious affairs. Article 27 enjoins that no person shall be compelled to pay any taxes in payment for expenses for the promotion or maintenance of any religion or religious denomination. Article 28 provides for freedom as to attendance at religious instruction or religious worship in certain educational institutions. Articles 16, 17 and 29 ensure equality of opportunity in matters of employment and protection against discrimination. Article 30 grants to religious and linguistic minorities the right to establish and administer educational institutions. Article 325 abolished separate communal electorates.

In 1976, Part IV of the Constitution was introduced, which listed Fundamental Duties. These include Article 51(a) which states

that it shall be the duty of every citizen to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all people of India; value and preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture; develop and inculcate a scientific temper; etc. In January 1975, the Preamble of the Constitution was amended to include the words 'Secular' and 'Socialist' to the original formulation of India as a sovereign democratic republic.

Is secularism essential for India's existence?

Secularism in the Indian context is linked to both national unity and democracy. Indians constitute people of many faiths. Hindus constitute the majority. Then there are the minority communities. India has a population of around 128 million Muslims, which is more than the populations of Britain and France put together; about 20 million Sikhs; 10 million Christians; 7 million Buddhists and Jains; apart from millions of *adivasis* (tribal peoples) who have their own religious beliefs and customs.

For a strong and united India, the protection of the security and rights of all, as equal citizens with equal rights, duties, and an equal stake in the fate of the nation is essential. All must feel equally secure. Secularism is a necessary condition for this. India will cease to exist if it is to be turned into a theocratic state as desired by the Sangh Parivar. The fascist threat made by RSS to the minorities that they can remain in India only as long as they enjoy the goodwill of the majority is thus both anti-constitutional and anti-national. Reverse the question: Can the majority live in peace without the good will of the minority? The answer is an emphatic 'no'. Clearly, the principles of secularism are essential for national unity as well.

It is important to remember that even if there were no religious minorities in the country, secularism would still be desirable. There can be no real democracy without secularism. Secularism means a separation of religion from public affairs. In a theocracy, interpretations of religious texts, and not a democratic constitution, becomes the basis for defining the rights and duties of citizens. In other words, the basic prerequisite for democracy—equal rights—would be removed. There are many countries governed in the name of religion, in our neighbourhood, and elsewhere. What is the position of women in these countries? Does freedom of speech and of the press exist? Is dissent allowed? Can people agitate for the rights of workers, of the poor, of exploited sections? The answer is no. Therefore, we have to understand how crucial the existence of

a secular and democratic constitution is to our own freedom and equality, and our fight for justice and emancipation. In any case, if large sections of people are denied their rights, what will be its impact on the rights of others? We must understand that the rights of all citizens are inextricably linked. There can be no real freedom and equality for one section of people, if the same legal system condemns others to bondage and inequality.

Does secularism mean uniform laws for all?

Secularism is not an abstract concept and its principles have to be implemented taking into account specific national contexts. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, both non-secular Islamic States, Koranic texts forms the basis for laws that apply to Muslims, while Hindu personal law apply to Hindus. In India, laws established within the framework of the Constitution of India, as for example the Indian Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code, apply to all citizens. There are, however, exceptions. Laws governing marriage, divorce, child custody and so on come under what are called "personal laws", which are still governed by religious codes. At the time of independence, in the aftermath of Partition, all communities were sensitive to the need to protect their own religious identities, substantially expressed in their personal laws. Thus the Constitution only recommends in its Directive Principles (Clause 44) that the "State should move towards a uniform civil code." In the Indian context, the first requirement should be for all communities to introduce reform in their personal laws so as to bring them in tune with minimum constitutional requirements. A simultaneous expansion of secular laws on specific issues would be in accordance with the spirit of the Directive Principles.

In the 1950s there was a big struggle to change Hindu Personal Law as a result of which a legislation known as the Hindu Code Bill was placed before Parliament by the then Law Minister Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. However, because of the opposition of Hindu fundamentalist forces, comprehensive reforms could not be made. Instead, a compromise Bill was brought forward that deprived Hindu women of equal rights in ancestral property, in guardianship and custody laws, etc. Dr. Ambedkar, disgusted by the opposition of Hindu fundamentalist forces to reform in personal law, resigned from his ministership. Till today Hindu women suffer unequal personal laws. This opposition of the Hindu fundamentalists to reform also strengthened the Muslim fundamentalists who refused

to accept any reform on the plea that it represents an attack on their religious beliefs. Indeed, the Parliamentary debates on the Hindu Code Bill brilliantly illustrate the underlying unity in fundamentalist thinking. Fundamentalists of both communities, Hindu and Muslim, used similar arguments to deny equal rights to women within their respective communities.

The Congress party bowed to the pressure of Muslim fundamentalists in 1986 in the Shah Bano case, and passed a law depriving Muslim women of the right to maintenance under Sec. 125, which had applied to them all these years. This surrender to Muslim fundamentalism meant the withdrawal of a secular right enjoyed by Muslim women under Sec. 125 of the CrPC, thus moving in the opposite direction of the Directive Principles. It also sent the message that the Government recognized fundamentalist leaders as representatives of the community. This weakened pro-reform sections within the Muslim community.

The unfinished task of reform in the personal laws of all communities is therefore equally if not more relevant today than it was when India became independent. Hindu women must demand equal rights in ancestral property, land ownership, child custody, guardianship etc. Rights sanctioned by Muslim personal law like the arbitrary '*teen talaq*' and the right to have four wives have to be abolished. Going back on its declared agenda of reform, the Muslim Personal Law Board recently made the most outrageous and objectionable proposal. It announced its intention to appeal to the Supreme Court to exempt the community from the Child Marriages Restraint Act on the plea that it interferes with religion. The inhumanity of such proposals apart, they also add grist to the mill of Muslim baiters.

Secular forces, including those within the Muslim community, can never compromise with Muslim fundamentalists using the argument of religious protection and security. They strongly oppose the fundamentalist platform. But this struggle is hampered mainly because the entire Muslim community has been under an all-out attack since the advent to power of the BJP, and the access to the levers of State power by the Sangh Parivar. Muslim places of worship have been demolished and desecrated, and their religious rights sought to be circumscribed, as has happened in Gujarat. In such circumstances the issue of reform in personal laws tends to get sidelined. The gamut of personal laws gets equated with the identity of the community as a whole.

In India's history there have been many religious leaders who have worked for reform in the religion and against the caste system. However, the present crop of so-called leaders of the Sangh Parivar have never advocated religious reform. Instead of fighting the caste system, Hindutva forces raise the bogey of conversions as "conspiracies" by other religions to "weaken" Hinduism. One of the striking features of Hindutva is its opposition to any reform within the religion and its efforts to homogenize Hindu religion and straitjacket it within the framework set by the VHP sants and mahants.

Why do conversions take place?

There are many reasons for conversions. The Constitution grants the right to all citizens not only to practice their religion but also propagate it. People may want to convert from one religion to another through a matter of personal choice or as a protest against injustices within a particular religion. There are also examples of coercion. In the Indian context, the injustices of the caste system within Hindu religion has been one of the main reason for conversions, mainly from amongst the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. There have been great reformers within the Hindu religion who have rebelled against the caste system and have worked for its abolition. One of the greatest proponents of Hinduism, Swami Vivekananda termed the caste system as the greatest blot on the Hindu religion which should be obliterated. As if in answer to the poisonous propaganda of the Sangh Parivar, he wrote, "Why among the poor of India are there so many Mohammedans? It is nonsensical to say that they were converted by the sword. It was to gain their liberty from zamindars and priests." (*Collected Works*, Vol. VIII, p. 330). Other great reformers like Babasaheb Ambedkar felt that there was no space for reform of the caste structure and therefore he converted to Buddhism, which he felt was more egalitarian. Since then lakhs of Scheduled Caste men and women have converted to Buddhism. Contrary to the motivated propaganda of the RSS on so-called forcible conversions to Christianity, in fact, the largest numbers of conversions in India are to Buddhism. Indeed, the actual population of the Christian community has remained the same for several decades, i.e., between 2 and 2.5 per cent. Between 1981 and 1991, it actually declined from 2.45 per cent of the total population to 2.32 per cent.

Has Hindutva got anything to do with religion?

It was V.D. Savarkar and not Swami Vivekananda (as the RSS would like people to believe), who first coined the term Hindutva. Hindutva is a world-view of extreme bigotry with a fascist approach towards minorities, exemplified in recent times by the policies of the Nazis towards the Jews. According to the theory of Hindutva, only they are Indian whose birthplace or fatherland (*pitra bhumi*) is also their 'holy land' (*punya bhumi*). According to this theory, Mecca is the *punya bhumi* for Muslims, and the Vatican for the Christians. Since India is the *punya bhumi* for Hindus, only Hindus can be called Indians. This absurd notion stands the theory of citizenship on its head. There may be places of pilgrimage for people of different religions situated in different countries for historical reasons. For example, the majority of people in Sri Lanka are Buddhists. The place of Lord Buddha's birth and all that Buddhists revere are in India. For Hindutva ideologues this fact makes Sri Lankans foreigners in their own country, since the *punya bhumi* of all Sri Lankan's is in India! Should the substantial Buddhist community in Japan, Indonesia, Thailand and elsewhere be declared foreigners by their Governments? Should all Hindus who are citizens in Bangladesh and Pakistan be considered foreigners since their *punya bhumi* is in India? Clearly this is utter nonsense. We must be able to clearly demarcate Hindutva from the religion it claims to represent.

It is not easy to define religion. There are as many definitions as there are believers. Many people feel that the observance of rituals like fasts and pujas, haj and pilgrimages, festivals, etc., are part of religion. Others feel that rituals are unnecessary to prove one's faith in God, and that God lives in human beings not in temples. All religions, including Hinduism, have myriad forms and practices. In any case, religion is a private and personal affair.

While a majority of Hindus see their religion as another path to God, for the Hindutva-vadi, religion is the path to political power. This is the basic difference between Hinduism as a religious belief and the slogan of Hindutva of the Sangh Parivar. If the Bhagvat Gita says that God is one, but like different streams going to the ocean, the paths to find him are many, Hindutva says there is only one stream, its colour is saffron, and all those who traverse other streams are enemies of Hindus. When ordinary women perform pujas or go to temples or keep fasts, they have the love of God in their hearts, and prayers for the well being of their loved ones on their lips. But those who preach Hindutva speak of hatred, not love. In their

'*pravachans*' there is only hatred for those who practice other religions. They abuse others and lie about them; they mobilize people in the name of Hinduism against others; and they undermine many of the finer aspects of a religion that encourages pluralism and tolerance. At the same time they do not have a word of criticism against some of the most oppressive structures in our society, such as the *varna* (caste) system which is rooted in Hindu belief and practice.

What then is Hindu Rashtra?

If India is the *punya bhumi* of the Hindu, then India must become a Hindu Rashtra. This is what the Sangh Parivar believes and would like to see happen. The Hindu Rashtra would have to be a theocratic state, i.e., a state governed by religious texts. The very first step to be taken for establishing a Hindu Rashtra would be scrapping the Constitution of India. If the Constitution of India guarantees Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, the pillars of Hindu Rashtra as propagated by the Sangh Parivar are *Varna Vyavastha*, *Pati Vratha*, and Hindu Shastras. The Manu Smriti and other texts, decided by the so-called '*sants*' (spiritual leaders), would form the basis of governance. Interpretations of Hindu tradition and practice could become the basis for public life. Anybody who does not practice religion as laid down by the rulers and their appointed *dharma sansad* would be punished, and so on.

What will be the position of women in such a dispensation?

The Sangh Parivar propagates a subordinate, domestic role for women. Women have to "adjust" to all manner of violence against them. It will be recalled how at the time of the murder of a young woman, Roop Kanwar, in Deorala, Rajasthan in the name of sati, BJP leaders including the late Vije Raje Scindhia and the present Vice President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, defended the practice of sati and its glorification. In UP, after the first BJP Government was formed, the following sentence was added to the Social Sciences text book: "Ever since women were given legal rights, domestic discord has increased." In Rajasthan, under the BJP Government, a textbook was introduced which justified child marriage as being necessary to protect female chastity. The Prohibition of Domestic Violence Bill, 2002, introduced by the BJP Government at the Centre,

actually justifies that violence. It must be the only such draft legislation in the world that allows the perpetrator of domestic violence to seek protection on the grounds of "self-defence". In power, the Sangh Parivar is already trying to translate its retrograde ideology into Government policy and practice. These are the worrying pointers of what could happen in a so-called Hindu Rashtra.

What will be the position of dalits and *adivasis* (tribals) under a Hindu Rashtra?

The Sangh Parivar upholds the caste system and caste segregation. It says that the mixing of castes is bad for society. It glorifies Manu and Manu Smriti. Even today the Sangh Parivar has started a campaign demanding that *adivasis* should henceforth be called *vanvasis*. This is to deny them their identity of being among the original inhabitants of India. The attempt here is to subsume adivasi identity under the Hindu label by the proponents of Hindutva. At the same time, these forces in the name of tradition encourage practices like bigamy that exists within *adivasi* communities. Such patriarchal traditions are after all similar to both communities. But other traditions of the *adivasi* communities, which for example give women a certain degree of freedom and rights both within the family and the wider social sphere, are undermined by State-backed campaigns of the Sangh Parivar. If *adivasis*, as the Sangh Parivar claims, are part of the Hindu community, which caste do they belong to? All Hindu's have a caste according to the Sangh Parivar. Are they Brahmins? Or Thakurs? Which tier do they belong in the *varna vyavastha* (caste heirarchy)?

What will be the condition of workers in a Hindu Rashtra?

The Sangh Parivar believes that class differences cannot be eradicated. It has already shed its opposition to MNCs and imperialist loot. It has turned a blind eye to industrial closures, selling of the public sector, and the worst forms of corruption and scandals that have ruined millions of homes.

Let the proponents of Hindu Rashtra answer the workers, the employees, the kisans, the women, and the Dalits: Will Hindu capitalists give up exploiting Hindu workers in a Hindu Rashtra? Will Hindu men give Hindu women equal rights in property and

stop violence against them? Will they stop burning young Hindu women in the name of dowry? Will they put an end to untouchability and ensure Dalits equal rights and opportunities? Will they allow inter caste marriage amongst Hindus? What prevents all this happening now? The conceptual basis of the Hindu Rashtra is drawn from reactionary texts: such a state, if it ever comes into existence, will be one that is anti-poor, anti-Dalit, anti-women, *and* anti-minority.

What is the Sangh Parivar's economic vision?

The BJP and the Sangh Parivar have the backing of an important section of India's elite classes, apart from their traditional base among the trading community. The Congress party was once the main vehicle for promoting the interests of big business and the rural rich. Following the debacle of the Congress, these sections have found in the BJP a viable alternative in class terms. The BJP's firm commitment to liberalization, privatization and globalization in policy matters has further stabilized its support base among the rich. It has also ensured support from the United States government through its policies and politics of subservience. Both in its pro-US economic policies, as well as its foreign policy, it has helped to greatly increase the role and influence of the United States in this region.

This pro-imperialist, pro-globalization platform of the Sangh Parivar is an essential component of its political ascendancy. The so-called nationalistic platforms of the Sangh Parivar like the Swadeshi Jagran Manch for example are not anti-imperialist in any sense. On the contrary, they promote the interests of Indian big business and the increasingly close links between Indian industrial houses and multi-national companies. They are also fully supportive of the dismantling of the public sector and its sale below the value prices.

The alliance between globalization and communalism in the Indian context also takes place at another level. The process of globalization has brought with it a huge mafia in urban areas dealing with land sales that has developed tremendous political clout. Communal violence has been shown to be linked to the efforts of the land mafia to gain control of land occupied by minority communities. The current violence in Gujarat, for example, is also linked to the activities of the real estate lobby. Here the Sangh Parivar has close links with rival business and industrial lobbies

among Hindus who utilize communal tensions to establish their hold in the industries concerned. In the rural areas also, the development of capitalist relations and the growth of the class of capitalist farmers also provides a base for the Sangh Parivar.

The wealthy and powerful lobbies of Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) have also a role to play. In the past, India has benefited but little from the wealthy NRIs settled in the United States or other countries. Indeed, it has been poor workers whose regular remittances in foreign exchange have helped India's economy. It is the BJP Government that has allowed the rich NRIs dual citizenship because they are mainly upper caste Hindus who can be conscripted into the Hindutva cause. If the community had been Muslim, it is unlikely that such benefits would have been extended to them. The Hindutva platform appeals to affluent NRIs, who find in the Sangh Parivar's equation of Indian with Hindu, a convenient ruse. They can wear a 'nationalist' badge without having to make too many personal sacrifices. Identifying with Hindu religious rituals and traditions, and making regular contributions to the Sangh Parivar's kitty, is a small price for 'nationalist' NRIs to pay, as they can do so and yet remain servile and subordinate to imperialist governments of the countries they live in.

NRIs are the main funding agencies of the Sangh Parivar. They have through their organizations given millions of dollars to Sangh Parivar outfits in India for which there are no accounts. For example, on February 27, 2002, one million pounds sterling was handed over to Narendra Modi personally in the name of earthquake relief, one year after the earthquake. Sewa International, the organization that gave the money, has close links with the RSS, according to its own website. A 'dissident' group of VHP sadhus in Ayodhya have accused the VHP of receiving huge amounts of money in foreign exchange has not been accounted for. It will be recalled that in 1988-89 when the Income-Tax authorities were inquiring into the VHP accounts, the file containing their financial statements mysteriously disappeared. V.B. Gupta, the officer conducting the investigation, was transferred to Tamil Nadu.

What is communalism?

There are basic and fundamental differences between religion and communalism. Communalism is mobilization in the name of religion against other religions. Communal violence may take the form of rioting, looting, burning of houses, attacks on a particular

community, rape and sexual assaults on women. It can also take other less overt but hostile forms. Harbouring irrational suspicions, rumour-mongering and socially ostracising a community are forms of communal violence. So is practicing discrimination, creating threat perceptions and fanning insecurities.

In India, the vast majority of women are religiously inclined. They go to religious functions and observe any number of rituals. Are these communal activities? Definitely not. But communal forces mis-utilise these religious sentiments, common religious symbols, language and imagery for their own ends. They want to create and impose a homogenous religious identity based on suspicion and hatred for people belonging to other faiths, for their own non-religious political purposes.

For example, take the Ram temple movement in Ayodhya. Nobody has opposed a Ram temple in Ayodhya. There are already over 500 temples there, another one can also be built. Those who believe that Ram was born in Ayodhya also know that no one can say where the exact spot was. But to create hatred against the Muslims, the VHP says that it was where the Babri Masjid stood. Violating the law of the land and defying the Supreme Court, they destroyed the *masjid*. Now, ten years later, just prior to the UP elections, they started the movement once again, spreading communal hatred as they did in 1992. But this time the people did not respond, and they were defeated in the elections. VHP General Secretary Pravin Tagodia announced that now even if Ram asked them to stop their campaign they would not listen, confirming to us that their movement has nothing to do with Ram or the temple.

Another example: while '*bhoomi pujan*' is a ritual of temple construction, where is there any mention of '*shila pujan*' (brick consecration) and '*shila dan*' (brick offerings) in any Shastras? Yet the VHP defied all the laws and court orders in the name of performing *shila pujan*. How could the *shila dan* be made to an IAS officer? The casteist VHP leader Shri Ramchandra Paramhans announced that he would not give the *shila* to one particular IAS officer because he was a '*bania*' by caste, which is why another caste officer was sent. There is endless infighting and jockeying for power amongst religious leaders. One important section has said that the VHP has appropriated hundreds of crores of rupees collected in the name of the temple. Another 'Mahant' whose temple was used without his permission to place the so-called holy '*shila*' said that he would throw it in the drain because the VHP was out to capture his temple!

It is clear from all this that *sants* and *mahants* have nothing to do with religion and everything to do with the politics of power and money. The people of this country do not want bloodshed in the name of a temple or masjid. Both can be built. But the present VHP led Ram temple movement is a dangerous and communally fraught political game. The VHP has declared that such movements would be started in Kashi and Mathura too where the temples stand cheek-by-jowl with masjids. For centuries local people have been going both to the temple or the masjid in peace in these cities. However, the VHP wants to disturb that peace for its own narrow agendas.

Communalists lay stress upon common religious identity and practice to conceal the highly unequal relations that actually exist within the religion they seek to promote. They never address the issue of exploitation within the community. For example, the Sangh Parivar will never condemn anti-women or anti-Dalit practices within the Hindu community as it will weaken the overarching Hindu unity they try so much to achieve. On the contrary, the attempt to inculcate the idea of a homogenous religious identity is accompanied by strengthening religious practices and rituals that are anti-women and anti-Dalit. An example of this is the introduction in universities of the teaching of *Karmakand,* Brahmanical rituals and practices based on the fatalistic theory of karma, which teaches that a human being can never change his or her preordained karma or fate in this life, but if sufficiently dutiful can hope to do so in the life after. Such a theory effectively keeps subordinate groups, like Dalits and women "in their place". Yet another example is provided by the clutch of son-preference rituals now being advocated in an aggressive way. Communalism thus destroys the possibilities for reform of retrograde rituals and practices within religions.

What is the impact of communalism on women?

Communalism impacts on women at least three different levels: as victims, as perpetrators, and as saviours. Women are the special targets of savage attacks during periods of communal violence. There is ample documentary evidence to prove this. Often, when the aim is to humiliate a whole community, the central target becomes the woman. She is seen as the property of the community, the repository of its self-respect and purity. Thus, women become hostages in times of communal violence, and it is the women of the minority community women who bear the brunt of the violence. In Gujarat, this violence has taken bestial forms. There have been

numerous cases of Muslim women and girls being stripped, sexually assaulted, and then burnt. Shockingly, the rapists and murderers are today scot free, thus adding to the insecurity of Muslim women.

The other aspect of women's vulnerability in times of communal rioting is in the aftermath of the violence. In families where the male members have been killed, the widow is left with the responsibility of family care on her shoulders. This is but one aspect of communal violence.

There is a popular perception that women are always the helpless victims of social forces over which they have no control. This is perhaps on account of the many women's organisations that are working amongst riot-affected families. Women's organizations must recognise another important dimension of how communalism impacts on women. This is the reality of the Sangh Parivar's success in bringing sections of women into their fold as active participants in communal mobilisations. We can ignore this phenomenon only at our own peril. With the wide reach of the electronic media, the world was witness to the complicity of groups of women as part of the Sangh brigade on the streets of Ahmedabad, inciting violence, participating in the looting, and later justifying the actions of the criminals. We need to investigate in greater depth instances of BJP elected women members leading mobs. A woman BJP MLA is an accused in the Narodia Patia massacre in Ahmedabad. Women's increased political participation can strongly militate against women's interests if they subscribe to communal politics. Women's active role in communal violence has been in evidence from the late eighties, beginning with the gruesome riots in Bhagalpur in 1989, in the bloody Sangh Parivar campaign for a temple at Ayodhya, in the mobilisation of women by the Shiv Sena during the Bombay violence in the nineties, and in several other communal movements. Large sections of Hindu women have stood forth as active and willing agents of hate campaigns and murderous riots fully sharing the ideologies of their extremist brethren.

Very often women's participation is fuelled by the rumour mills of the Sangh Parivar. For example, during the Gujarat violence, a story was concocted and published in the front pages of some Gujarati dailies of 80 Hindu women being raped and their breasts cut off. This story circulated throughout the State, and was used to incite "revenge" against poor Muslim women.

Thus, women can be both victims who are lacking in agency, and perpetrators who share a complicitous relationship with communalism. Stereotypes of women as passive, peace loving and

nurturing, necessarily have to be abandoned as we are forced to reckon with the harsh reality of women's complicity in rightwing communal mobilisations.

At the same time, women from all communities can also be bulwarks against communalism, saving each other and fighting against the violence of men of their own community or even family. There have been many such instances when women have emerged as key representatives of secular values in word and deed.

Communal mobilizations have a direct and deep effect on all women's struggles for justice by destroying the unity so essential for our movements. It also directly strengthens those forces that are inimical to struggles for equality and emancipation. By subsuming the many secular identities of women to a religious identity based on hatred, the very basis of democratic mobilization on basic issues affecting our livelihood is weakened.

The striving of women's organisations has been to build women's unity. This hard-won unity has nothing in common with the notion "sisterhood" which assumes an automatic, spontaneous female bonding on the basis of biological affinity. Women's organisations in India have no such illusions, working as they are in a polity acutely divided on class, caste or religious grounds, and which deeply influence gender identities.

Crucial to the struggle against poverty and social injustice, and for alternative policies, are the united struggles of the people. Communalism has divided the poor and the working people. It has pitted Dalit against Muslim. Who has benefited? Not the Dalit, who continues to be at the bottom of the *savarna* order, nor other oppressed castes who still require affirmative action to break the stranglehold of the upper castes. Not the working people, who are victims of price rise and unemployment no matter what their religious affiliation. Not women, who face a steady devaluation of their status in all spheres. For poor women in particular, the defence of secularism and democracy is central to their struggle for survival.

How is fundamentalism different from communalism?

Fundamentalism and communalism are not the same thing. Religious fundamentalism represents the tendency that seeks a return to a "pure" textual interpretation of religion, which it considers never changing and absolute, and which it regards as the basis for public life and social interaction. In social terms fundamentalism imposes a rigid religious and moral code *within* the community,

whereas communalism seeks to direct this bigoted and narrow vision against other religious communities. There are fundamentalists within all religious communities. All fundamentalists need not be communalists, but all communalists are usually fundamentalists, and they often dovetail into each other. Fundamentalism operates *within* the religious community, communalism targets *other* communities. Religious fundamentalism of all shades is inimical for women's struggles for equality and must be strongly opposed.

What are majority and minority communalism?

We have seen how various religions have been exploited for communal mobilization, and how inimical this is to our secular fabric. The greatest danger to our democracy, however, is from communal and political mobilization by the religious majority, i.e., from the campaign of the Sangh Parivar for the establishment of a Hindu Rashtra. This is not because minority communalism is not harmful. However, only majoritarian communalism can actually seize and use state power for its ends. It is only majority communalism that can masquerade as nationalism, a nationalism that condemns all its opponents as anti-national traitors. And it must be remembered that these opponents are not only the minorities, but also those from the majority community who oppose the policies of the Sangh Parivar.

What is communal propaganda?

Communalism propagates hatred towards other religions by playing on prejudices based on stereotypes about those who practice other religions. This is done to further divisions and prejudices between communities. Culturally speaking, there would be much more in common, for example, between a Muslim and Hindu living in Bengal then between a Bengali Muslim and a Tamilian Muslim. It is this cultural affinity that the Sangh Parivar wants to break.

The number of myths that have been spun by the Sangh Parivar and its ideologues to denigrate minorities are many, but they can be easily countered by commonsense and rational argument. For example, there is the myth that Muslims start riots. The truth, as contained in all the government-appointed inquiry commissions set up post-riots is that almost all the major communal conflagrations in India have been provoked by RSS affiliated organizations. This is so in the case of the post Babri Masjid

demolition riots of 1992-93, the Bhagalpur riots of 1989, the Bombay riots of 1992 etc. It is estimated that 80 per cent of those killed in acts of communal violence have been Muslims. That violence against minority communities is an essential part of the fascist activities of the Sangh Parivar is proven by the violence they have shown against the Christian community, and in particular, the terrible burning to death of Graham Staines and his two sons. The violence against Christians, the attacks, including those of a sexual nature, on helpless nuns is evidence enough of who is responsible for communal violence.

Another example of communal myth-making is the lie that all Muslim men have four wives. The truth, shown in census figures, is that the highest numbers of bigamous marriages are of upper caste Hindu men.

Another lie: minorities never practice family planning. Kerala has the highest minority community population in India at 45 per cent of the state's total population. It also has the best record of family planning. Clearly it is not religion but issues of development that determine family size. This is the reason why the worst family planning record is in the State of Uttar Pradesh among the poor of all sections.

The propaganda that Muslims are more violent is equally absurd. Every year thousands of Hindu women are burnt to death within their homes by Hindu men. Even so, we do not jump to conclusion that all Hindu men are violent!

The Sangh Parivar's propaganda that the minorities in India have been "appeased" is a lie and conceals a very important reality. Muslims are not a homogenous community, and a very large percentage of them are among the poor and exploited. Muslims form a substantial number of bidi workers, handloom weavers, construction workers, agricultural workers, daily wage workers, poor artisans, tailors, barbers, the landless and the homeless. To assert that these sections have been "appeased" or pampered is a mockery of the reality of their daily struggle for existence. In the organized sector, the numbers of Muslims are as negligible as in Government service. Statistics from 150 Central Government organizations in 14 States shows that out of 75,943 employees, only 3346 or four per cent are Muslims. In the Indian Police Service, the percentage of Muslims is a meager 2.7 per cent; in the Indian Administrative Service they constitute just 3.27 percent; and in the Indian Foreign Service they account for 3.3 percent. Is this an indication of appeasement or discrimination? The only appeasement has been

toward fundamentalist leaders of the community who seek to speak for the community. This appeasement has not been with the interests of the Muslim community in mind, but rather in the interests of political parties who want to win seats.

The Sangh Parivar describes all Muslims as terrorists and a threat to the country, particularly after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Indian Parliament. We strongly oppose terrorist acts committed in the name of religion, for example, the savage killings of innocent people including Hindu women and children by ISI backed terrorist groups operating in the name of Islam in Kashmir. It is shameful that a whole community of Kashmiri Pandits have been forced to leave the Kashmir valley because of the insecurity they face. They have become refugees in their own country. Young girls have grown up far away from their homes in the appalling conditions in camps in Delhi and elsewhere. Although the Government has provided some facilities for these families, they are inadequate. At the same time, the so-called Kashmiri militants have also killed a large number of Muslims in the Valley who opposed them. However, today the plight of the Kashmiri Pandits is cynically used by the Sangh Parivar to damn the entire Muslim community as terrorist.

No religion gives sanction for terrorist acts. In India, cold-blooded acts of terrorism that took the lives of Mahatma Gandhi, followed by two Prime Ministers of independent India, were committed by an upper caste Hindu Brahmin, a Sikh, and a Sri Lankan Tamil. The crimes were all committed in the name of religion. This does not make Hindus collectively responsible for Mahatma Gandhi's murder, nor Sikhs for the killing of Indira Gandhi, nor indeed Sri Lankan Tamils for the brutal assassination of Rajiv Gandhi.

Terrorism in Punjab by Sikh terrorist took a heavy toll. Terrorism in the North-East by different groups has been a scourge in that region for more than 50 years. There are social and economic conditions that give birth to terrorism, and foreign imperialist forces regularly utilise separatist and terrorists movements for their own purposes.

To label an entire community in a negative light is a well used tactic of communalists to sow differences amongst people. This method was perfected by the British colonialists to keep the colonised people oppressed and fragmented. They frequently classified tribes as "criminal", and in describing tribal cultures would use the term "uncivilised".

Communal organizations from minority communities also use

such methods. Democratic organizations like AIDWA have to equally fight against the communal and fundamentalist forces working within Muslim, Christian or other minority communities. It is essential that women's organizations like AIDWA effectively counter such prejudices, regardless of which direction it emanates from: whether by Hindu fundamentalist forces against Muslims or Christians, or by Muslim fundamentalist forces against Hindus. Prejudices are created and fed by ignorance. They can be removed by a) recognising that they exist, b) learning more about other communities by social interaction and common struggles, c) acknowledging the dangerous potential of prejudices.

How do communalists seek to re-write history?

Communalism attempts to distort our history to serve the purpose of Hindu Rashtra. The Sangh Parivar has been particularly active in the task of re-writing history. They have tried to spread the notion that Hindus are the original inhabitants of India, which is why India is called Hindustan. In fact, the history of Indian society and religion does not begin with the Rig Veda, the earliest text of the Vedic Aryans. The Rig Veda is associated with their advent into India and is believed to have been composed between the mid-second and early first millenium BC. The Vedic Age was preceded by the ancient Harappan that existed for around a thousand years before it declined, and which stretched across regions in the modern States of India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The cause of its decline is still not known, and historians believe that it is only when the Harappan script is deciphered that the mystery will be finally solved. What is known is that it was an advanced urban civilization, with a sophisticated knowledge of town planning. The idols and motifs found suggest that the Harappans held animist beliefs, ie, the worship of natural objects and phenomena, similar to what is found amongst many tribal communities today. It was a civilisation and culture that was very different in origin and geographical setting from the Vedic culture. Sangh Parivar 'historians' have renamed the Harappan Civilisation the Sindhu Civilisation, and assert, without a shred of evidence, that the Harappans were the Vedic people, and that the Harappan writing was infact early Sanskrit.

The very word 'Hindu' originally denoted a geographical area and not a religion. All the people who lived in the valley of the river Sindhu (Indus) or beyond came to be described as Sindhus by travelers coming from Persia and Arabia. In the old Pharsi language

'S' was pronounced as 'H' and therefore Sindhu became Hindu. Therefore Hindu actually represented all people, of all faiths and groups who lived in a particular geographical area.

In India's history the issue of religious identity was not the driving force in the rise and fall of dynasties. Local chieftains made and unmade alliances according to their own political and economic interests. Marauding armies came to India with the aim of loot, conquest and the expansion of power, often aided by local chieftains. The Turks, Pathans, Iranis, Afghanis, Arabs and Mughals came to India as invaders and made India their home. Although they all followed Islam, they were often pitted against each other in war. Similiarly, Hindu kings also waged war against each other. In fact, the history of India has innumerable examples to show that religious identity was not the motive for conquest. For example, Delhi's Mughal emperors had permanent political enmity with the five southern kingdoms ruled by Muslims kings of Ahmadnagar, Bidar, Bijapur, Golconda, and Khandesh. In the fight for extension of their kingdoms, Hindu rulers fought each other. Two thirds of the wars fought by Shivaji to establish his Maratha kingdom and assert the rights of revenue collection were against Hindu rulers not the Mughals. Hindus were appointed as military generals, advisors, and important administrators in the Mughal court. Shivaji's naval chief was Daulat Khan, and his two most trusted commanders were Siddi Halal and Hakim Khan Suri. They were all Muslims. Aurengzeb appointed Raja Jaswant Singh as the commander-in-chief of his army. Raja Jai Singh led military operations in the Deccan. If some Muslim rulers destroyed temples, others built them. History is also witness to a period when temples belonging to different Hindu sects were destroyed by riva groups, as happened between the Shaivites and the Vaishnavites. The places of worship of the heterodox religions of Buddhism and Jainism were destroyed by Hindu kings during a period of our history. To depict our history, as the Sangh Parivar has done, only in terms of wars between "foreign" Muslim invaders and "patriotic" Hindus is as unhistorical as it is absurd.

Where was the RSS during the Freedom Struggle?

The RSS also wants the nation to forget its own history. Today there is documentary proof that the Prime Minister, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, as a young man gave evidence against those accused in the Quit India movement in Bateshwar, Madhya Pradesh. The Deputy

Prime Minister L.K.Advani, joined the RSS at 14, at a time when true patriotic fervour was driving young people his age into the thick of student struggles against the British. He, needless to say, did not participate in a single such struggle. Recently it was under his direction that the Port Blair airport in the Andamans was renamed as Veer Sakarkar airport. The Cellular Jail in the Andamans is where hundreds of freedom fighters were jailed by the British.

V.D. Savarkar was among those jailed for his activities against the British. He had gained immense popularity because of his daring escape as a prisoner from a British ship, off the coast of France. He was later captured and sent to the Andamans. However, unlike all the other great freedom fighters who refused to petition or apologise to the British authorities, in 1911, within a year of being jailed, Savarkar had signed his first clemency petition to the British. He pledged that he would not participate in any political activities. In one of his many letters to the Government he wrote " I am ready to serve the Government in any capacity they like..." There were numerous other brave freedom fighters who served out their full sentences They included men like Ganesh Ghosh, Satish Pakrashi, Phani Nandi, Haripada Bhattacharya, Ananda Gupta. Many of these great heroes joined the Communist party. Perhaps that is why Advani would prefer that their names be obliterated from history rather than acknowledged for their deep commitment to India's independence. Heroes like Bhagat Singh who had declared himself a communist preferred to die on the gallows than surrender to the British.

It is not surprising that the RSS-BJP leaders should hero-worship Savarkar. After his release, he adopted a rabid Hindu communal position, joined the Hindu Mahasabha and became its first ideologue. It is in his book "Hindutva" that the concept of Hindutva was defined and the call given for a 'Hindu Rashtra' or Hindu Nation. It is surely in recognition of this that Advani named an airport after him.

The theories of Jinnah, the father of Pakistan and Savarkar are like the two sides of the same coin. Both were committed to a state based on religion, the only difference being that whereas one wanted an Islamic state, the other wanted a Hindu Rashtra. However, the vast majority of the people of India rejected the concept of a theocratic state, i.e. a state based on religion. Among Hindus there was no support for the Hindu Rashtra slogan of the RSS. Jinnah failed to carry the majority of the Muslim population with him. What the RSS leaders deliberately conceal is that when the country

was divided, a large section of the Muslim population in pre-Partition India stayed on in India out of choice and refused to go to Pakistan. This is why India has the largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia.

The biggest historical blemish however, which the Sangh Parivar despite all its efforts has not been able to obliterate, is their complicity in the murder of one of the greatest Indians of our time, Mahatma Gandhi. Nathuram Godse, a Hindutva-vadi and one time member of the RSS, assassinated Gandhiji because of his hatred of Gandhiji's unwavering commitment to secularism and non-violence in the midst of the communal holocaust that accompanied Partition. The Sangh Parivar today claims that Godse was not a member of the RSS, a lie exposed in a magazine interview given by Godse's own brother Gopal Godse, who was a co-accused in the assassination case. In a recent CDRom brought out by the Central Government on Gandhi, which contains his collected works as well as highlights from his life, the political affiliation of Nathuram Godse has been quietly dropped. Indeed, the reasons for why Gandhiji was murdered is not mentioned. History will never forgive or forget the treacherous role played by the Sangh Parivar, however much they may try to doctor it.

Why should we defend our pluralistic traditions?

All around us we see the interaction and merger of so many different cultural streams. Our splendid pluralistic traditions are our greatest strength. Men and women of all communities fought together so that India could be free from British rule. Can we think of Rani Laxmibai without thinking of Begum Hazarat Mahal and Bahadur Shah? Can we think of Ram Prasad 'Bismil' without remembering Sardar Bhagat Singh and Ashfaqullah Khan? Can we think of Nehru and Gandhi without remembering Maulana Azad who opposed Jinnah and his two-nation theory tooth and nail? In the historic INA trial, the three imprisoned leaders, a Hindu, Sikh and Muslim symbolised the all-inclusive character of the freedom movement.

We see evidence of this tradition in our architecture and monuments, in music, art, literature, dance, language and philosophy, and everything that m^kes life richer and more beautiful. It is the pluralist ethos that makes India what it is. Indeed ours is one of the few countries in the world to be home to so many different cultures. Consider our religious diversity. Islam traveled to India

soon after its origin in Arabia. Christianity reached India in 52 A.D, almost a hundred years before it reached Europe. Zoarashtrians sought and were granted undisturbed asylum on the western coast of India as far back as the eighth century, and Judaism was given a place on Indian soil even earlier. None of this happened by military conquest or force. These religions were given a place in the true spirit of accommodation by local authorities. The rise of Buddhism and Jainism signified the spirit of rebellion that militated against the ossified Hindu religious structure; the great Bhakti and Sufi traditions represented a break with Hindu ritualism. These great religious and spiritual movements further strengthened pluralist traditions and practices within religions while exerting theirs influence over society at large.

The evidence of intermingling is all around us. Take the popular Sabarimala pilgrimage in Kerala as an example. Thousands and thousands of devotees follow a difficult and arduous path to the top of a mountain to worship Ayappa. On the way, obeisance to the *mazaar* of Waavar, believed to be a Muslim saint, is obligatory for pilgrims. Perhaps the truly religious know that bringing people together, making them respect each other's faiths, helping them to participate in each other's devotional activities, strengthens human bonds. Think about your own village or neighbourhood, and you will find so many similar examples. Contrast this with what religious fundamentalists with a political agenda do. They destroy composite cultures instead of preserving and strengthening them.

What can you do?

It is essential for all of us as citizens to actively counter propaganda directed against particular religious communities. To do this you do not have to belong to any political party or social organization. For example, if in a public place you hear someone making a derogatory comment about minority communities, or spreading lies and disinformation, you must immediately react in defence of unity and against such propaganda. If you come across inflammatory leaflets being distributed, you must raise your voice. It is against the law to arouse communal hatred. If you come across people spreading rumours, you must challenge them. If you find that your child is being fed propaganda and unreason through a communally biased textbook, then you must gather other parents and protest to the school authorities, and to the Education Department asking for the offending section to be deleted and

rewritten. By keeping silent, you are not only strengthening communalists, you are allowing them to influence others. It is necessary to actively mobilize in defence of secularism and women's unity. It is also necessary to defend that unity in demonstrations on common demands in which women of all communities participate.

Join our struggle! Strengthen our quest for justice and equality!

Long live women's unity! Down with communalism! Down with varna vyavastha!

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