

# The Saffron Wave

Editor: Thomas Blom Nansen

Publisher: Princeton University Press, Princeton: New Jersey U.S.A

Price: US\$ 17.95

During my childhood (1940s) in India. I went to a few rallies of RSS (Rashtria Swyamsewak Sangh in Delhi with my uncle who was a devout RSS follower. Every morning, clad in RSS uniform of Khaki shorts, a shirt and holding a staff, he used to take part in the morning drill, practice in the Akhara (young men meeting in wrestling pits) and listen to the spiced up lecture on the greatness of Hindu culture religion and paramilitary schemes of reclaiming India for the Hindus. The hatred of other cultures especially Muslims, was the main basis of its philosophy and the reason for its popularity. Although based in Pune Maharashtra (near Bombay) its branches were mushrooming rapidly into all parts of India.

However after the assassination of Gandhi by RSS, the Right wing movement was banned and was forced to go underground. With Congress in power for a good part of the next forty years the goal of RSS as a meaningful national organisation never became a reality.

In the 1990s the disintegration of the Congress Party the general disillusionment of the public because of, rampant corruption, the long-standing oppression of the poor masses by the elitist ruling class provided a godsend opportunity for the right wing nationalist BJP (Bhartia Janata Party) the political Side of RSS to nourish and come into prominence The preceding decades spent in wilderness - organising rallies, planning strategies. Propagating of Hindutva (Hinduness), started to touch the nerves of the poor and in middle classes alike.

According to RSS Hindus are the only people who have a legitimate right to rule India- a country, which is predominantly Hindu. A systematic campaign to discredit other religions and cultures especially Muslims was initiated in an organised way, culminating in the attack on the Babri Masjid (Babri Mosque).

Thomas Blom Hansen's book is about the process that moved Hindu nationalism from the margins of Indian society to centre stage. It tries to incorporate the process and the academic work on "Hindu nationalism", the idea of a Hindu nation with a superior ancient past, a sort of a conservative revolution in the fields of political and public culture which prompted millions of Hindus at the polls to respond to the call of BJP's promises of order, discipline and the collective strength of a Hindu state

After coming to power in the 1998 elections BJP tested five nuclear bombs in Pokharan in Rajasthan. The followers of RSS were overjoyed at the enhancement of national pride and global recognition of India's place among the leading nations of the world. The idea of Hindutva (Hinduness) secured to gain new meaning which ordinary Indians can be proud of. It also raised concerns and worries in the western world as the nuclear capabilities of India were fully exposed, Because of that, hostilities with Pakistan came to boiling point, and imminent danger of a war with its neighbouring country could not be ruled out.

Thomas's book has skilfully recorded the structure of RSS organisation and its rise from a

small grass root activist organisation to become the ruling party in India today. The most remarkable achievement is its adherence to all democratic processes. It has not resorted to vile path of ruling by force or violence. It is to adopt, uphold and obey democratic institutions of the country and work its way up through the electoral process.

The name of the book "Saffron Wave" refers to the demolition of Babri Masjid (Babri Mosque) an act of organised communalism against the Muslim minority. It violated secularism and 'equal rights of' communities and enshrined' within the constitution. But for the majority of' the Hindu masses it was an act of bravery and heroism. Muslim culture and Muslims were accused of brutality and menace. The whole Muslim community was threatened. The task of the BJP is to get as much mileage as possible from the Saffron Wave. They want to translate the poisonous atmosphere of hate into a new strength of what they call "voting blocks" to remain in power It is the dark side of nationalism i.e. looting, raping, killing and other activities, which have gained acceptance, and refused to go away

The question today is whether democracy with its freedom of speech and right to protest will survive the tide of the present BJP government? Will its heavy-handed line, which for decades has been called the "fascism of the RSS", continue? If the BJP is allowed to be controlled by party hardliners it will make democracy unworkable in the long run- The increasing pluralisation of Indian society, the prospects of imposing cultural homogeneity and political unity on a country so diverse as India. are the paradoxical challenges which threaten democracy and rule of BJP today.

When I left India in the 60's to settle in the UK, I assumed that the RSS would always remain a small voice with concerns about the diminishing status of Hinduism and lack of nationalist fervour. Little did I imagine that one day it would outwit the mighty Congress to become the ruling party of the country Perhaps my uncle had a crystal ball in which he visualised the future more clearly than myself.

Reviewed by: Vijay Mehta

To order this book, email: [vijay@vmpeace.org](mailto:vijay@vmpeace.org)

**Vijay Mehta** is an author of several books, Chair of Uniting for Peace, President of Mehta Centre and Founding Trustee of Fortune Forum Charity. The Sunday Times described him as a 'longstanding activist for peace, development, human rights and the environment', who along with his daughter, Renu Mehta, has set a precedent for striving to change the world. (The Sunday Times, 1 February 2009). Vijay Mehta's new book **"The Economics of Killing: How the West Fuels Wars and Poverty in the Developing World"** will be published by Pluto Press in spring 2012.