



The spectacle of Fascism: A Critique of Anand Patwardhan's *Reason*¹

Rajesh James

Independent documentary filmmaker and Assistant Professor of English Sacred Heart College, Kochi and

Aswin Prasanth

Research scholar in English,

Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Kochi

ISSN 2583-1836

Abstract: *Drawing on Umberto Eco's analysis of fascism in his essay "Ur-Fascism", the article is an attempt to critique Anand Patwardhan's latest documentary Reason in the context of the emergent right-wing Hindutva politics in India. The article enumerates how Reason, as a bold attempt and a daring filmic venture, traverses through the blood-laden right-wing history of India's contemporary polity. By foregrounding Patwardhan's signature style of documentary filmmaking, which is often poignant and optimistic, the article explores how his film registers the rising tide of fascist forces in India that manufacture a Hindu nation.*

Keywords: *Fascism, Hindutva politics, Patwardhan, and Documentary film.*

Introduction

Deemed as the father of independent documentary films in India, Anand Patwardhan is a distinguished voice in postcolonial Indian cinema. *Reason*(2019), his latest documentary, is an eight-part exploration of Hindutva majoritarianism and its disastrous consequences in India. The episodes in the film focus on the political assassinations of the rationalists, the attack on radical

¹This article has been written in consultation with Anand Patwardhan.

intellectuals, the emergence of right-wing extremist organisations like *Sanathan Sanstha* and *Abhinav Bharat*, the lynching of Muslims and Dalits by cow vigilantes, the appropriation and rewriting of history, the attacks on universities and students, saffronisation of education, culture (**Footnotes**) and society, and the making of a Hindu nation. As a searing account of the rise of Hindutva militancy in India, *Reason*, stands out as a true account of India today. Although the incidents mentioned in the film are not new to the viewer, it appears as a prompt response to the impending dangers that the country is going through. India, under the ultra-nationalist right-wing government, has seen the resurgence of social evils, the revival of caste hierarchy, privileging of superstitions and myths over rationality, aggressive coercions of majoritarian thoughts, rising intolerance towards dissenting voices, and a well-schemed assault on the founding principles of the constitution. Patwardhan's *Reason* foregrounds many instances of violence in India which is endemic in fascist regimes. He warns us how the lack of reason in both rulers and their followers has led to a volatile and callous atmosphere in India. Most of the incidents filmed in *Reason* point to the emergence of a fascist government in India, one of the most formidable representative democracies in the world.

Fascism in the Contemporary Indian Context

A fascist regime is conventionally seen/read as a dictatorial state in which the government is oriented towards/by hyper-nationalism. A fascist government often succeeds in bringing the civilians under a singular unifying ideology. It covertly supports and even engineers violence to repress the opposing ideologies

and dissenting voices. Fascism mystifies and exploits the concepts of nationalism, patriotism, culture and language to deceive the gullible masses. Demagoguery is the hallmark of every fascist regime. Every dictatorial system of governance like fascism requires a dictator for idolatry by the masses. Umberto Eco, in his essay “Ur-Fascism,” identifies some common characteristics of every fascist regime such as the cult of tradition, the rejection of modernism, fear of difference, contempt for the weak, hero-worship, and selective populism. According to Eco, all fascist regimes celebrate an assumed golden past and use it to manipulate people’s power of reason. It is evident in how fascist regimes endorse superstitions as scientific truths and connect them emotionally with the place, culture, and language. For instance, the promotion of *panchagavya* research in India is a blatant rejection of rational consciousness favouring superstitious beliefs as scientific facts. As Eco argues every fascist regime has different priorities and plans of action. That is why the Indian government endorses the building of statues rather than hospitals in the states like Gujarat and Maharashtra. The space for dissent is the distinctive feature of any representative democracy. To deny this space, a fascist government appeals against real or imagined intruders. In this process, the government presents any opposition to its policies as treason. It is precisely for the same reason that the activists and leaders of *Sangh Parivar* organizations ask the people who articulate dissent or difference to go to Pakistan. Very often supporters of fascist governments create suitable plots to distract the people from the blatant negation of democratic norms. Recent tragic incidents related to cow vigilantism and mob lynchings are

plots organized by the supporters of the Modi government as a manifestation of their intolerance.

The Sangh Parivar organizations and the Modi government have been indulging in several actions which are overtly fascist in nature. Most of the characteristics of fascism which Eco classifies in his essay are manifest in their words and deeds. While the Congress governments invoked nationalism as rhetoric whenever they wanted popular support, the BJP government has stirred up nationalism as hysteria. The Modi government has made national symbols, images and leaders hyperreal. The government has been guided by a massive indifference to truth or reality and has adopted a tendency to accept popular opinions of frenzied followers as truth. According to Eco “fascism is a fuzzy totalitarianism, a collage of different philosophical and political ideas, a beehive of contradictions” (1995). The Maoist conspiracy and the branding of radical intellectuals as “Urban Naxals” are attempts from the ruling regimes in India to cover up the inherent contradictions in their discourses and the violence they propagate through communal riots, Dalit lynchings and other killings. When governments face popular threats and lose their legitimacy, they lose their power over the citizens. As an immediate response to the loss of power, they promote violence to distract people. Violence fills in the void created by the loss of power. In this context, Hannah Arendt remarks: “Politically speaking, the point is that loss of power becomes a temptation to substitute violence for power” (153). The fascist regime presents everyone who disagrees with it as enemies. Generally, opposition parties, neighbouring nations, social thinkers, philosophers and writers are considered enemies of the republic.

Since the greatest opposition of every fascist regime originates from educational institutions, the supporters of the fascist governments try to disrupt the peace of the campuses. Recent cases of unrest in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Hyderabad Central University (HCU) and Jamia Milia Islamia point to this fact. Student leaders from Dalit and working-class communities have been particularly targeted in India. Thus, Rohit Vemula of HCU was driven to suicide and Kanhaiya Kumar of JNU was booked for sedition charges. It is here in this problematic sociopolitical and cultural period of ours that a documentary like *Reason* becomes quite relevant. What Eco imagined as the characteristics of every fascist government get exemplified in the incidents Patwardhan discusses in *Reason*. The cases of brutal murders and the ideological manipulations filmed in *Reason* shed light on the looming danger awaiting India.

***Reason* as Spectacle of Fascism**

Anand Patwardhan's *Reason* is a bold attempt and a daring filmic venture that traverses through the blood-laden right-wing history of India's contemporary polity. Through his signature style of filmmaking, which is often poignant and optimistic, Patwardhan addresses the rising tide of fascist forces in India and the attempt of manufacturing a Hindu nation. As a documentary in eight chapters, *Reason* begins with the life (and death) of Narendra Dabholkar and Govind Pansare who were killed for being rational. Both of them spoke for equality and justice. Narendra Dabholkar was a rationalist who did not believe in the finality of religious truth and embraced science as a pathway to reason and truth. The documentary, in the first chapter, explores Dabholkar's life-long

campaign against superstition and his engagement with the *Maharashtra AnhashraddhaNirmoolan Samiti*, an organization dedicated to fighting superstition in India, particularly in Maharashtra. He was shot down during a walk-in in Pune in 2013 by Hindu fundamentalists. Unlike the objective reportages in the conventional documentaries, *Reason* engages with the indomitable rational spirit of Dabholkar and his murder through newspaper reports, testimonies and the filmmaker's own affective and rational deliberations on the issue. The film even recurses to Dabholkar's wife, Shaila to give an account of the murder and the perseverance of Dabholkar's family members against religious fundamentalism: "For hours I did not know what happened... I decided at once that we should raise our voices of conscience." Patwardhan in *Reason* has consciously evoked murderous motives of the ruling regimes using the diverse possibilities of the medium and its vocabularies like the recurring animated images of the motorbike on the move that culminates in the gunshots, cinema verité images of the protest movements captured in hand-held camera and rare archival footages. The film uses the animated images of the motorbike on the move that culminates in the gunshots as a leitmotif to suggest the imminent fascist gunshots India awaits if the country does not awake rationally.

The documentary begins with references to the political assassination of Dabholkar, progresses through the assassinations of Pansare and Kalburgi and concludes with the most tragic assassination of Lankesh. In the second chapter which focuses on Govind Pansare who was shot to death, the film uses footage from the public speech of Pansare regarding the killing of Dabholkar

which clearly states that “it is the very ideology which assassinated Mahatma Gandhi killed Dabholkar as well.” The political assassinations constitute a series of cyclic movements in the documentary which begins with violence, presents the tragic dimension of violence, and concludes with a condemnation of violence. *Reason* could be seen as a tribute to the martyrdom of these rationalists who spoke for justice and equality. Like the other documentaries of Patwardhan, *Reason* foregrounds the spirit of resistance and the need for resistance in a dark period where enemies come on a ‘motor bike’ with pistols in hand. Patwardhan in the documentary makes references to the involvement of organizations like *Sanatan Sanstha* in these killings. In an encounter with *Sanatan Sanstha*, Patwardhan reveals the true nature of the organization. Though the organization may not be directly engaged in violence, its supporters often engage in violence in the presence of passive or castrated state apparatuses. It is in this context that Zizek envisions violence becomes relevant. According to Zizek, there are two types of violence: subjective and objective. Subjective violence is easily perceptible. The violence perpetrated by an angry mob is an example of subjective violence. On the other hand, objective violence manifests in two forms: symbolic and systemic. Symbolic violence is manifested in discourses like cultural productions, mass media, art and literature. It is also related to the use of language or the use of particular registers, symbols or images to express certain concepts or ideologies. Systemic violence is inherent in the control of the government, and it is subjectively invisible (11). A fascist regime exercises all these forms of violence using its apparatus. The assassinations of Pansare and Dabholkar

by the Hindutva outfits are cases of subjective violence by the fascist regimes. Patwardhan exposes this necropolitical dimension of the Hindutva outfits in one of the documentary's sublime moments/scenes by confronting the spokesperson of *Sanatan Sanstha* who made a clarion call for violence during his press conference by emerging from behind the camera and foregrounding his identity as someone who comes in the tradition of Dabholkar and Pansare.

The documentary also foregrounds the rising Dalit resistance movements in India against the atrocities they face. Patwardhan locates this query in the resistance that emerges from the brutal thrashings of Dalit cow skimmers in Una. By focusing on the mass Dalit movements and emerging Dalit leaders like Jignesh Mevani, the documentary gives something hope for the peace lovers and the exploited, irrespective of the looming fascist regimes in the country. Patwardhan also critiques "celebrated" visionaries and oft-quoted names in contemporary politics like Chanakya by calling him a "Machiavellian Brahmin," thereby decrypting the autocratic and fascist dimensions in leaders like him and those who use his name. Patwardhan also contextualizes the infamous episode of the 2016 student unrest which spread like wildfire in universities following the suicide of Rohith Vemula, a research scholar at the University of Hyderabad. Since Vemula was a critic of casteism and a member of the Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA), he was targeted and denied his monthly stipend by the university administration. The film shows how the fascist forces have revived a parallel system of justice based on the institutes of Manu which was part of the colonial jurisprudence. *Reason* shows how Dalits,

minorities and women become victims of violence under Modi's regime. Under Modi's governance, the Dalits, minorities and women have suffered the most. The fascist supporters' intervention in the university campuses is part of an attempt to deny education to the marginalized of the marginalized. There have been attempts to prevent certain persons or groups from accessing knowledge. Until the advent of modernity, this was done by creating mystery around knowledge or by employing social taboos based on race, class, and gender about the persons to whom knowledge could be shared. Thus, certain persons and groups have been driven to the margins of knowledge systems. The construction of new knowledge is an inclusive process wherein the marginalized persons or groups previously excluded from the power structures and hence from society, culture and history can be brought to the centre of the power structures. The fascist forces have disrupted the production of knowledge on campuses to retard the emancipatory politics of the marginalized.

Patwardhan foresees deliberate attempts to change the mindset of the people to favour a theocratic state through the saffronisation of education that begins with the school curriculum. Though knowledge has remained as an "informational commodity," the fascist state has moved from its position as "a factor of opacity in the commercialization of knowledge" to an active regulator in the commodification of knowledge (Lyotard 5). The excessive stress on university-industry collaboration points to this change. The untoward incidents that have recently occurred on campuses point to a virtual enactment of the *varna* (caste) system wherein the Sudras (Dalits) who occupy the lowest point on the caste hierarchy are denied education and subsequent emancipation.

Reason also details the incidents of the racial politics of meat constituting cow vigilantism and mob lynching of persons who allegedly possessed/ate beef. The film shows how these incidents are direct consequences of cultural elitism promoted by the fascist forces. By exposing the prosperous leather business, the film shows the duplicity of the ideology of cow vigilantism. Many exporters of leather and its value-added products are the sponsors of Sangh Parivar organizations. They engage the Muslim minorities and Dalits to separate, clean and tan the skin of cows and buffaloes. The film shows how Mohammad Akhlaq, a Muslim man, becomes a victim of cow vigilantism in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh. He was killed by a mob on the suspicion of possessing cow meat. The film takes the viewers into the brutality of the incident by recounting the memories of Akhlaq's relatives. Though cow vigilantes harass/kill minorities for alleged eating of beef, the film evinces how they hardly care to protect the starving, emaciated cows in the goshalas of Uttar Pradesh and other such places.

Patwardhan emphasizes the tendency in India to overlook majority extremism and highlight minority extremism. There are terrorist groups associated with both communities whose actions are detrimental to national interests and therefore condemnable. But the fascist forces condemn only minority terrorism. Patwardhan refers to certain dubious cases of deaths or implications of officers related to the investigation of majority terrorism. For example, Hemant Karkare, the chief of the Mumbai Anti-Terrorist Squad, who investigated the role of Hindu extremists in bomb blasts, was killed during the 2008 Mumbai attacks. He was also heading the investigation of the 2006 Malegaon blasts,

alleged to have been carried out by the Hindu radical group *Akhand Bharat*, in which the BJP MP Pragya Singh Thakur is a prime accused. Patwardhan speculates whether Karkare's death had any connection with the investigation of the Malegaon blasts.

The film also shows how the *Sangh Parivar* organizations have appropriated the history of the Indian nation through saffronisation. For this, they have selectively used the genealogical critique of the national history of India from the perspective of the RSS. In Michel Foucault's view, genealogy is at once a critique and a resistance (142). The Sangh Parivar has applied a genealogical critique of the national history of India from the perspective of the RSS. Patwardhan points to the recent attempts to glorify V.D. Savarkar, the pioneer of Hindu national philosophy, was a hero of national struggle by directly confronting *bhaktis* and making them speak their adoration for Savarkar. Although Savarkar was apologetic about his participation in the freedom struggle and was released from prison after submitting a written apology, the film shows the attempts of *Sangh Parivar* to rehabilitate Savarkar with the halo of a nationalist leader. The BJP leaders have frequently made disparaging remarks about Jawaharlal Nehru, who is widely considered the architect of modern India. In the process of revisioning national history, the *Sangh Parivar* has reimaged many historical figures, glorifying some of them while demeaning others. Patwardhan meticulously discusses the well-planned scheme to establish a nation based on Hindutva ideology. Every fascist regime operates on the principle of hypernationalism where symbols, images, places, figures and events connected to the making of a nation are overemphasized. According to A.D. Smith, nationalism

is the “process of formation, or growth of nations, a sentiment or consciousness of belonging to the nation” (5). Nationalism is constructed through narratives or discourses. In this context, history becomes a hegemonic discourse appropriated by the rulers to the detriment of the subjects. The narratives of the nation create both space and identity to represent the histories and subjectivities of the rulers as well as the subjects. But nationalism is often cultivated indirectly through the imposition of the views of the rulers on the subjects. It is in this context that Ernest Gellner regards nationalism as a phenomenon which “invents nations where they do not exist” (48). The frequent invocation of the gendered metaphor of India, Bharat Mata, and the unnecessary euphoria created by the excessive use of national symbols substantiate this fact.

The film in its last episodes focuses on Gauri Lankesh’s assassination as a case of intrusion into the freedom of the press guaranteed by the constitution. Gauri Lankesh was a journalist and political activist who viewed Hinduism not as a religion but as a system of hierarchy and hegemony. Today, journalists and social activists have been intimidated in their work. Their fundamental rights have been threatened by the fascist forces groomed by the ruling political party. There is a method in their threat to freedom of speech and action. They consistently challenge the horizontal resistance offered by the Dalits, students, minorities and women. Social thinkers and media, who do not conform to the Hindu national ideology, have been particularly targeted. Despite their consistent threats, the resistance to majoritarian Hindu nationalism is on the rise. Patwardhan seems to convey the optimistic note that despite the tragic sacrifice of the rationalist intellectuals, social

thinkers, Dalit activists and students, the unchecked fascist efforts to transform into a Hindu nation are not yet successful. He calls upon Indians to exercise reason in political choices and cultivate social harmony, embracing the true spirit of the constitution and upholding the great tradition of India.

Conclusion

Patwardhan introduces multiple episodes of fascist scheming and violence in *Reason*. These episodes portray explicit violations of basic human rights. Fascism is a type of internal colonialism maintained by physical violence, which is justified by epistemic violence. The planning and execution of fascist violence constitute a paradigm shift in Indian politics. Even the founding principles of the constitution are under threat. The independence of the judiciary is under a cloud. The opposition parties are ignored even in the parliament. The title *Reason* suggests thus the immediate necessity to cultivate reason and rationality at a moment in Indian history when the word “intellectual” is used as an abuse. As a practitioner of the documentary form, Patwardhan emphasizes the Levinasian concept of the human guided by reason in his latest documentary. *Reason* is thus Patwardhan’s desperate warning to the Indian people against the immanence of fascism: ‘fascism is at our doorsteps. It is a do or die situation. We have to resist and fight fascism or yield and perish’.

Filmography

Reason [Vivek]. Directed by Anand Patwardhan, Documentary, 2018. 240 mts.

Works Consulted

Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970.

—. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Schocken Books, 1951.

Eco, Umberto. "Ur-Fascism." *The New York Review of Books*, 1995, pp. 1-9 www.nybooks.com/articles/1856

Foucault, Michel. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, edited by D.F. Bouchard, Basil Blackwell, 1977.

—, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Routledge, 1970.

Gellner, Ernest. *Nations and Nationalism*. 2nd edition, Blackwell, 2006.

Jenkins, Keith and Alan Munslow. *Rethinking History*. Routledge, 1991.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Entre nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, Columbia University Press, 1998.

Smith, A.D. *Nationalism: Key Concepts*. Polity Press, 2001.

Zizek, Slavoj. *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. Picador, 2008.