

WORKING PAPER 21 - Popular Front of India- Understanding the Propaganda and Agenda

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Abstract

There is an understanding that political views in the world are increasingly polarised - one dominant idea will be considered far right and those who are not on that side of the fence will get attracted towards the far left. The first evident indication of this phenomenon in India came soon after the country announced the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The nation was divided into two factions and opposing forces joined various protests. Some took it to social and print media, and some took it to streets with the support of certain organisations whose preamble is against India's Constitution. One such organisation which is under investigation is the Popular Front of India (PFI). Since the beginning of the year 2020, the PFI has been vocal as concerns its contestation against the various decisions taken by India's judiciary. The PFI has been found to be involved in Anti- Citizenship Amendment Act protests.

The PFI is registered at Delhi under the Societies Registration Act XXI of 1860. The organisation has been using passive methods to attain larger goals and objectives which run against India's social fabric. It was found to be involved in several transnational terror activities and many social and political conflicts in India. A Popular Front of India member was exposed as 'ISIS sympathiser' on Facebook and linked with Harkat Ul Jihad al- Islami, Hizbul Mujahideen, Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and Al Qaeda.

This article aims to elaborate about the structure, aim and activities of the organisation and the ways in which it has managed to become a pan-India movement. The article concludes with a discussion on some recommendations intended to face the challenge regarding how to proscribe groups like the PFI.

Key Words: Radical outfit, Transnational, Anti Democracy, Anti-CAA, Terrorism, Anti-National activity, Communalism, Hate-Speech, Popular Front of India.

Background: The Popular Front of India - A 'Matryoshka' Doll Concept

The Popular Front of India (PFI) – *Naya Caravan Naya Hindustan* is regarded as a reincarnation of the National Development Front (NDF) set up in 1994 in Kerala. In 2006, the NDF was dissolved and re-emerged with the name of PFI, presumably to focus on socio-economic issues ailing minorities - in particular the Kerala-based Muslim community.

Before going further into the structure of these organisations, it is essential to understand a unique feature. The Popular front of India is not just a reincarnation of the NDF - instead there exist multiple shells out of which the PFI has emerged like a '*Matryoshka*' doll, a Russian doll which has various dolls inside each other.

Similarly, the story of such radical outfits starts in 1947 with the division of the All India Muslim League. In the year 1948 the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) came into existence. The IUML is a political party in Kerala, recognised by the Election Commission of India, which later became the leading party as a part of the United Democratic Front (UDF) led by the Indian National Congress in Kerala since the 1970s.

Next came in line was the Islamic Sevak Sangh (ISS) established in the state of Kerala in 1992 so as to counter the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) - which was also a pan-Islamic movement in nature claiming to be superficially working for the welfare of minorities.

However, the ISS came into limelight during the Babri Mosque demolition in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, in the year 1992. It was eventually banned by the government of India. It was discovered that ISS leaders had connections with the ISI in Pakistan.

As the government proscribed the ISS, it made way for another organisation called the National Development Front established in 1994 in Kerala and intending to focus on socio-economic issues of minorities, especially on Muslim communities in Kerala. NDF's modus operandi is *Da'wa* - which means it is missionary in nature, propagating Islam to other communities as well.

The NDF came into limelight only after some among the Student Islamic Movement of

India (SIMI) started getting noticed for their extremist jihadi activities and for their call for the liberation and Islamic conversion of India. One of the members of the SIMI, Prof. P. Koya, began to attend mosque prayers and sponsor post prayer gatherings interactions with the Jamaat-e-Islami in Kerala. He formed another group called the National Democratic Front (NDF).

Introduction - The Popular Front of India (PFI)

After the SIMI was banned in 2001 (after 9/11), the NDF reincarnated itself as the Popular Front of India in 2006. The PFI is registered at Delhi under the Societies Registration Act XXI of 1860 (PFI, About us) with the purpose to establish a classless society in which freedom, justice and security are enjoyed by all. The PFI has its headquarters in New Delhi, is present in almost 23 states and is prominently active in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Assam, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Now, for better understanding of Society's Registration Act, let's have a look at its definition again.

The Societies Registration Act 1860, section 20, states that:

"...charitable societies, the military orphan funds or societies established at the several presidencies of India...to work towards...philosophical inventions, instruments or designs." (Societies Registration Act, 1860).

Interestingly the PFI's preamble also mentions that it works towards socio-economic, cultural and political empowerment of the deprived. Its goals include working for the welfare of Dalits; tribal peoples; religious, the linguistic and cultural minorities; backward classes and women. With these objectives, the PFI justified its existence under the Societies Registration Act (PFI, Constitution).

The PFI has a monthly magazine called *Thejas*. The membership fee of the PFI is only Rs. 10 per month and people above the age of 15 years can join the organisation. Some of the striking objectives are as given:

1. To mobilise people against the violation of human rights and protect the civil and political rights of the people of India.
2. To protect the cultural, social and religious identity of tribal peoples, Dalits and minorities.

Although the PFI has not been proscribed by the central government of India yet, several states in India have been appealing the Centre to ban the outfit on the grounds of Unlawful acts of terror. The PFI has been under the scanner of several intelligence agencies for its alleged anti-India ideology for ages (PFI, About us). The state government of Jharkhand banned the organisation, and it is now being followed by the government of Uttar Pradesh. But it is high time that the scholars and experts in terrorism and counter violence extremism discuss the group and understand its functioning.

The PFI's Modus Operandi

Even though the organisation came into existence aiming for Muslim empowerment, the PFI's modus-operandi has been to showcase the Muslim agenda as a side show. Instead they keep the issues of vulnerable societies (Women, labours, farmers, Dalits, Adivasi) at the forefront.

This provides them with the cover of a charitable organisation working for the welfare of minorities and the weaker sections of the society. This is meant to fool the government – and the organisation has managed not to be banned yet.

The PFI was formed in 2006 in Kerala as a successor to the National Democratic Front (NDF) (Shreya, 2020). Security agencies have alleged that the SIMI ideology influences its leaders. The PFI's ultimate goal is to replace the democratic system of India with an Islamic State styled government. The Popular Front of India (PFI), which calls India its enemy and asks for 'total Muslim empowerment', is under scanner in Kerala for its alleged anti-India ideology.

The PFI runs projects like '*School Chalo*' to encourage education for all up to the secondary level, as well as the '*Sarva Siksha Gram*' and 'Adopt a students' campaigns. These campaigns and projects not only provide them legitimacy to function openly but also provides them cover over their actual missionary work. The PFI's members believe that India is a democratic country. The doctrine is that slowly they (government of India) are reaching for our necks because of (political and social reasons). PFI members believe that if their rights are breached, then they will be left with no choice but to react - and their holy text provides for a jihad, which they will not be reluctant to utilise and justify their acts.

The writings of Sayed Abu Ala Maududi, Allam Iqbal and Osama Bin Laden influence PFI members. They have maintained the image of a charitable organisation and worked for the ultimate goal establishing an Islamic state by converting and spreading fear through terror acts.

The organisation very ingeniously used one of the features of its preamble on the Dalit and Tribal upliftment and protection of their political rights. This helped the PFI to gain the support of the Bhim Army led by Chandrashekhar Azad, which works for Dalit Welfare and who also joined the anti CAA and NRC protest. Further, in some of the programs and activities organised by the PFI in various parts of Rajasthan, Assam, Uttar Pradesh and Kerala there has been a success in spreading missionary projects and gaining popularity amongst non-Muslims as well, especially amongst the youth and women.

The PFI pursues a strategy aimed at communalising Indian polity (Jain, 2017), enforcing Islam, heightening existing social divisions and maintaining a trained bank of volunteers for carrying out actions in the field. The “PFI had consistently been indulging in actions detrimental to overall national security,” the NIA declared while blaming the outfit for seeking to impose religious orthodoxy on Muslims and using sister outfits like the Sathya Sarani based in Malappuram so as to carry out “forceful conversions” (Jain, 2017).

The outfit seeks the opportunity to enforce religious obscurantism on Muslims and uses its sister organisation Sathya Sarani to perform “forceful conversions” (Gupta, 2020). The PFI has been linked with an alleged case of love jihad in Kerala. In 2017, the NIA, which was then investigating 94 ‘love jihad’ cases registered by the Kerala Police, held four PFI-linked men for forced conversion of Akhila Ashokan in the Hadiya case (Swamy, 2019).

Even though the PFI does not have faith in the constitution of India or its judicial system, its members do not hesitate to use some constitutional powers for their benefit. The PFI believes that the constitution gives them the right to protest. And if the government of India seizes such rights, they will be left with no choice but to turn to jihad. In truth, the organisation neither has a true understanding of Islam nor respects the Indian democratic system. The “PFI had unswervingly been indulging in actions that are damaging to the national security,” the NIA stated. (Jain, 2017)

PFI members not only stood against policies perceived as anti-Muslim but also indulged in political discussion. The discussion ranged from domestic policies, Hindutva ideology, the Israel-Palestine issue, capitalism, American culture & government and many such similar

problems which undermined the spread and were against the teachings of Islam. The group also sponsors pronouncedly anti-Zionist and pro-Palestine protests in various parts of country. In July 2014, they started a campaign with nationwide solidarity in favour of Palestinians. The campaign was called “ I am Gaza” and was inspired by a series of rallies that took place in several parts of the world (YouTube, 2014) These debates and discussions helped the NDF isolate and polarise the Muslim youth and reinforce the perceived need to respond to the urgency and stand for the cause of Muslim welfare.

Cadres of the banned outfit SIMI are fast regrouping under the banner of the Popular Front of India (PFI). This outfit has expanded its tentacles to the north after carrying out the initial recruitment in South India. The spreading tentacles of the PFI and Social Democratic Party of India (SDPI), the political wing of the PFI, came to light only when its members became influenced by the *taqreer* (speeches) of Zakir Naik. Interestingly, just days after the IRF was banned, the Kerala-based Islamic fundamentalist organisation PFI organised massive rallies in different parts of the country in support of Zakir Naik. Intelligence sources say there is electronic evidence of increasing interaction between members of these two groups, especially since the IRF ban (Sharma, 2017).

What has it been up to so far?

As the world is busy with the pandemic and battling it out trying to discover a vaccine, terror groups advance their endeavours The Popular Front of India has not ceased its agenda and propaganda, in fact it used the opportunity to move forward with its anti-government agenda. The PFI organised an online conference called the 'National Lockdown Fascism- Unmask the Hidden Agenda' on May 10 2020.

It was attended by over ten thousand people from all across India through various social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the locked chatroom Zoom (PFIOfficial, 2020a). This online conference called for a mass protest against the government of India, calling it 'fascist'. Prominent members of the PFI and SDPI - the PFI's political party, along with ex- IAS officer Sasikanth Senthil, Raj Ratan Ambedkar, National President of the Buddhist Society of India, and Islamic Scholar Khalilur Rehman Sajjad Nomani all participated in the conference. Speakers gave inflammatory and provocative speeches against the government and suggested ways to continue the struggle.

The conference aimed to discuss the current situation of national lockdown due to Covid-19. The government was blamed of using Covid-19 as an opportunity to eradicate minority communities and create Islamophobia in the minds of people in India and abroad. Some of the issues discussed in this conference include:

- A) The speakers compared the government of India to Nazi Germany under Hitler's regime and to dictators of the Roman Empire. World affairs were also part of the talk, for example how in America the majority of people dying of corona are black American Muslims who face racism and inadequate medical attention. Giving example of the Al Aqsa mosque, Anis Ahmad General (PFI Secretary) argued that just like Israeli forces stop Muslims from entering the mosque, the Indian government will eventually stop Muslims from attending mosques, a strategy initiated in the name of social distancing under covid-19.
- B) The speakers targeted the RSS and informed people that the land of the Babri Mosque was snatched away from its true heirs (Muslims), while now the government is asking people to donate money for the construction of the Ramjanma Bhoomi in Ayodhya.
- C) Apart from the discussion on the RSS and the ruling government, the media was also targeted and called '*genocide journalists*' sold to big business houses such as Reliance. Those present in the conference unanimously condemned the police investigation on the members of the Tablighi Jamaat and Maulana Saad.
- D) Member speakers asked for all the liberals, Left and PFI members to come together and form a strong opposition against the BJP so as to fight for the rights of Women, Youth, Dalits, Farmers, Labours, Lingayat tribe of Karnataka and Muslims. They called for a continued struggle against the Hindu government so as to defuse their agenda of Islamophobia.
- E) One of the speakers from the Buddhist society urged the people of India who sympathise with the PFI to approach the United Nations' Human Rights Commission and plea for an intervention into the supposed Muslim pogrom. PFI members targeted media houses who help the government in setting an anti-Muslim narrative, which has led to genocide in the nation.
- F) According to Maulana Sajjad Nomani, "the government is using every opportunity to set narrative against the Muslims and holding Muslims responsible for the spread of coronavirus in India. However, the truth remains that the government plans to de-populate the nation by killing people belonging to the weaker sections of society and minorities under the excuse of economic crises."

Maulana Sajjad further created fear amongst Muslim citizens that the government will soon send army boots on the ground and so as to control Muslims and keep them under surveillance.

Maulana Nomani further stated that "the people are being tortured in Xingjian, Palestine and in India because they belong to the Muslim community." He further told the audience that people from other religions such as Christians, Sikhs and Buddhists are also unsafe in India while the BJP government is in power".

- G) Tasleem Rehmani, National Secretary of the SDPI who also contested elections from the Okhla constituency in the Delhi Assembly, asked all Muslims in India to boycott big factories and business houses. He suggested that one way to fight back against an anti- Muslim government is by quitting jobs and refusing to return to work because according to the government, Muslims are responsible for Covid-19. Rehmani stated that when Muslims refuse to work all the big industries will have an economic fall down and eventually understand the importance of their exploited Muslim workforce. He further asked people to not be frightened of death because it is inevitable, and thus there will be no loss – and one must be ready to sacrifice oneself for larger goals.
- H) Anis Ahmad, PFI's General Secretary, asked the audiences to refuse the use of the Arogya Setu App. They informed the audience that through this application identities, securities and privacy would be sacrificed, so much so that 'witch-hunting' will continue even after Covid-19. He believed that such apps are created to keep surveillance on the country's citizens and that all these government policies will continue even after the Covid-19 pandemic is over.
- I) Members and activists involved with the PFI have been actively working on identifying and filling cases against those individuals who are shaming Muslims on public forums and appealed on conference participants to actively report such individuals and their hate speeches. So far the PFI has registered 1256 cases, out of which 34 people have been arrested (PFI Official, 2020b).

Previously, the members of Kerala-based PFI were arrested on charges of instigating violence in UP, Assam. It's also accused of fanning flames in Karnataka (Swamy, 2019) against North-Eastern peoples, resulting in a mass exodus.

The Popular Front of India has been protesting across the country against the CAA, NRC, and NPR. Its epicentre is located in Shaheen Bagh, New Delhi. It has successfully exploited the sense of insecurity created within the Muslim community through various policies and mislead the people massively through distorted narratives. This time it was the Citizenship

Amendment Act 2019, which talks about the persecution of minority communities in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The fear over the NRC and CAA amongst Muslims gave them a plausible excuse to grab the opportunity to spread threats about the violation of human rights and to protect the civil and political rights of the people of India. It constitutes an example of how the PFI has been twisting the facts and remoulding specific government policies to implicitly suit their organisational and ideological purposes.

Soon after a few members of the PFI were arrested in connection to the Jafarabad riots, it was found by the Enforcement Directorate that the PFI was receiving funding from various sources. Around 73 bank accounts revealed a sum of approximately Rs—120 crore. About 10 of these accounts were linked to PFI members, and 5 to 7 accounts were related to the Rehab India Foundation (RIF) (Business Today, 2020). These transfers were done in such a calculated manner that every day there was deposit and withdrawal of cash, and the payments were kept less than Rs. 50,000 so that they do not have to provide their PAN card details.

In the year 2012 PFI members organised a march to parliament, demanding 10 per cent reserved seats for Muslims (Staff Reporter, 2012). The reasons given in favour of the reservation were as follows: 1) the Constitutional Right of the individual to seek equal opportunity for self-growth and 2) the fight against the backwardness of the Muslim community (confirmed through a quoted minute of a high-level government committee meeting). In the year 2012, the PFI launched a promotional campaign ‘why the Popular Front of India?’ where it reiterated upon its mission to restore the rights of the depressed and marginalised sections of the Indian society (Staff Reporter, 2012).

On March 10, 2020, a couple was arrested from Trilokpuri area in Delhi under suspicion of involvement in assisting Popular Front of India (PFI) members in organising an attack similar to that of Christ Church, Sri Lanka. Many more PFI members were arrested by the Delhi Police and Uttar Pradesh Police. The Lucknow police reported that "Three PFI members - Shakilur Rehman, Shabi Khan and Arshad - have been arrested for their involvement in the violent anti-CAA protest that took place in the old city area of Lucknow and Parivartan Chowk in December last year." (Shukla & Srivastava, 2020).

Lucknow Police arrested around 108 PFI members from various districts of Uttar Pradesh in connection to the CAA NRC protest. It included PFI State President Waseem Ahmad, Nadeem, and Divisional President Ashfaq (Shukla & Srivastava, 2020).

The IB has found that some radical organisations, including the Kerala-based PFI, are making efforts to send messages to countries in West Asia about the ongoing updating of the NRC (Ranjan, 2017). Sources said the agency had intercepted a few messages sent to West Asian countries linked to a campaign launched by some radical organisations against the ongoing updating of the NRC (Ranjan, 2017).

One significant case which the PFI has been suspected to carry out is the case of 'Love Jihad'. India Today TV released a sting operation on Zainab A.S., head of the PFI's women's wing, reporting that the organisation's sister concern Sathya Sarani has carried out massive conversions. '(In) That institute of ours... around 5,000 people have converted to Islam over the past ten years now,' Zainab revealed. They, she admitted, included both Hindus and Christians. Given the frequent forced religious conversion and marriages cases, the Jharkhand's Assembly also passed an anti-conversion bill.

Linkages with Terror Outfits and Transnational Activities

Since its inception, PFI's linkages have been found in numerous cases under various sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), the Arms Act and the Explosives Act. While it has a strong foothold in Kerala, the PFI has expanded across the country and included similar-minded groups into their fold such as the Tamil Nadu-based Manitha Neethu Pasarai and the Karnataka Forum for Dignity, among others. In India, the PFI has been suspected of being involved in several political killings and religious conversions. A Popular Front of India member was exposed as 'ISIS sympathiser' on Facebook and in touch with Harkat Ul Jihad al- Islami, Hizbul Mujahideen, Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and Al Qaeda (Press Trust of India, 2010). The investigation agency also claimed that the PFI and its members had been involved in sending the youth of Kerala to Afghanistan, Syria, and Turkey so as to join Daesh and ISIS.

On March 25, 2020, in Gurudwara Har Rai Sahib in Kabul, Afghanistan, an attack took place, killing 25 people and injuring approximately 80 more. One of the suicide bombers in the Gurudwara attack was a 29-year-old man called Muhammad Mushin - alias 'Abu Khalid Al- Hindi'. He was from Kerala, and an active member of the PFI. It was with the PFI's support that Mushin was able to travel to Dubai. From there he went to the Nangarhar province of Afghanistan and joined the Islamic State - Khorasan Province (ISKP) in the year 2016. In May 2019, the Islamic State announced through its *Amaq* News Agency that it had established its first province in India (Wani, 2020).

After the attack on Gurudwara in Kabul, the ISKP took the responsibility and shared the image of the Kerala boy in their magazine *Al Naba* – whose caption stated that 'he avenged the atrocities on the Muslims in India'. In a statement issued through its *Amaq* News Agency, the organisation said that the attack was carried out as an act of revenge for Kashmiri Muslims without elaborating further (Wani, 2020). Even though it is not entirely established that the Indian youth involved in the Gurudwara Har Rai Sahib attack was a member of the PFI, the investigation is still going.

The PFI's role has been established in the Easter bombing case. Two PFI members, Riyaz Aboobacker and Azharuddin provided support to the mastermind of the blast Zaharan Hashmi - who was found to be linked with an ISIS module in India. Azharuddin, another PFI member, started a Facebook page called 'KhilafahGFX' through which he propagated IS ideology (Tiwary, 2019). Further investigations exposed that Zaharan Hashmi's organisation National Thowheed Jamaat (NTJ) had links with the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Indian Unit of the parent organisation Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB).

PFI's actions were also found in the Pune German Bakery case – support was provided to the Indian unit of the LeT. Himayat Baig, the alleged mastermind of the German Bakery blast case (February 13, 2010) in Pune, received training from a LeT operative in Sri Lanka. His primary job was to recruit and send youths for training in Pakistan. He even became a member of the Popular Front of India (PFI) for the same purpose (Deshpande, 2016). The PFI has also been found to be linked with the terrorists involved in the Mumbai 26/11 terror attacks.

The LeT plotted the 'Karachi Project' with the help of ISIS, and the project was to execute the attack by using LeT's local network support in India and make it appear like a 'home-grown' terror act.

The NIA busted an Islamic State (IS) module in Kerala and Tamil Nadu which was allegedly planning to carry out major strikes in several parts of south India; the probe revealed that one of the module's senior members — Mujeeb *alias* Omar Al Hindi— was associated with the PFI and inclined towards the ideology of the so-called 'caliphate' led by Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi.

According to reports, Omar Al Hindi was an important cog in this IS module, which was collecting explosives for its activities. He was working in Qatar and came to India a few months before the attack. Security agencies have stumbled upon a large amount of money

transacted into the bank account of Mohammad Tausif Ahmed, a PFI activist from Qatar. It was believed that *hawala* (illegal money transaction) money was sent to Bihar so as to support anti-nationals. The module headed by him was plotting Nice [France]-like attacks on community events, particularly on an all-religion gathering in Kochi [Kerala].

Financing of the PFI

The financing of the PFI is mostly achieved through its membership schemes and also through a donation from individuals in the name of *Zakat*, which is one of the five main pillars of Islam.

PFI members travel to the Gulf and Saudi Arabia for fundraising. Also, people living in the Southern part of India and enjoying Gulf connections due to their family working in that region also come back for festivals and make large donations. Several people in Iran and the Middle East also send donations.

These donations mostly come in the name of social welfare - sometimes for girl child education, mosque construction or madrasa (religious school) establishments. However, it doesn't reach the actual organisation – instead it is used for unethical activities. Several such organisations and societies had their licence cancelled under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) after being found to be involved in certain illegal activities.

According to a dossier put together by the ministry of home affairs, in the wake of anti-CAA protests the PFI has been receiving significant funding from multiple sources in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman (Jain, 2017).

PFI members have been functioning vigorously in the UAE through front organisations such as the Rehab Foundation, the Indian Social Forum, and the Indian Fraternity Forum in Bahrain and Kuwait. PFI leaders maintain an office at Muraba, behind the Lulu hypermarket in Al Ain in Dubai, and are focused in propagating Islamic fundamentalism and raising funds to be used for the pan-Islamic cause. PFI members travel to such nations so as to raise funds and expand their activities (Jain, 2017).

Therefore, most of the money comes through Hawala channels via foreign countries. In fact, on the issue of hawala transactions in Kerala, former Union Home Secretary of India G.K. Pillai stated that that "the funding (for Muslim organisations) seems to be more from outside than from locals". He further stated that:

The Muslim Relief Network (MRN), an NGO started by the PFI, is another entity through which it organises funds - particularly from West Asia - in return for raising voices for the Palestine cause and pressure Indian government. The MRN receives donations from the Islamic Development Bank in Jeddah under the mandate of the Organisation of Islamic Countries. The PFI also receives funds from the Jeddah-based World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), which is linked with Al Qaeda and has been working in Africa as well. It also assists the Muslim World League's (MWL) local representatives organising religious propagation, relief activities and education.

Assessment

The Popular Front of India is found to be spreading its wings in all directions and seen to be gaining the support of several sections of society. It has gained popularity amongst the youth, Dalits and the intelligentsia class through clever arguments and a sober game which makes it difficult for law enforcement agencies to catch them in action. Nonetheless, it constitutes a serious threat still not completely unravelled but which seems to have links beyond Indian boundaries.

From early this year the PFI has been covering media headlines for its support to Maulana Saad, an anti-CAA protest, and for calling all Muslims to join hands against the government. It managed to gain some sort of support from the international media and certain Gulf countries.

Of late there have been all kinds of reactions from various corners of the world over the event of Tablighi Jamaat and the government's reaction to it. Muslim-majority countries in no time came out to speak about discrimination and violence against Muslims. The 57 member countries of the OIC came out in support of India's Muslim community. Unfortunately, people in the opposition prefer to pick what pricks the most.

Surprisingly, no international media bothered to cover the efforts made by several other civil societies and by the government since the first stage of the lockdown. India's Prime Minister has been urging citizens to embrace peace and harmony and think on the lines of Universalism, brotherhood and humankind (Modi, 2020). On another occasion, the Indian PM wrote on his website about the non-discriminatory nature of COVID-19 and about how India should also be united and non-discriminatory against any caste, class or religion. (Modi, 2020). Even in the ongoing holy month of Ramzan, several prominent Indian

leaders such as Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi and Owaisi requested Indian Muslims to follow WHO guidelines in times of COVID-19 (Awasthi, 2020).

The probable reason behind the Gulf's and certain western countries criticising India for becoming an Islamophobic nation (Kuchay, 2020) could be the demographics of these regions. Around 8.5 million Indians work in the Gulf and form an essential source of income generation in these countries (Priyansha & Ameen, 2019). They are the pillars of the construction, oil and other sectors of the economy. As a result of the region's economic dependence on Indians, the leadership of Qatar, Kuwait and other Gulf Countries had to make statements so as to keep their internal domestic politics stable.

Another hypothesis could be that Gulf countries are commenting on the Indian system because many of these countries donate large amounts towards Muslims welfare organisations in India. Some of them also back the PFI and other NGOs, which can be a plausible reason for the government of Kuwait and Qatar and rest to show solidarity with the community.

These international voices enabled extremist forces within India to take an anti-India stance. And the PFI took advantage of the Covid-19 situation so as to mobilise people towards a strong opposition against the government.

The Centre is mulling a crackdown on the 'radical' outfit Popular Front of India (PFI), including banning it under the UAPA over the alleged involvement of its cadres in terror activities, sources in the Union Ministry of Home Affairs said. "We have enough material on PFI's terror links. The time has come to act and carry out a crackdown on it," an unnamed senior official stated after the NIA submitted a dossier to the ministry detailing four terror cases in which PFI cadres have been charge-sheeted or convicted under the UAPA. Sources in the Union Ministry of Home Affairs have concluded that it is sufficiently linked with cases of *jihadi* terror and promoting Islamic fundamentalism.

There are numerous cases registered to the State Police, the National Investigation Agency and other Intelligence units of India. The charge of instigating violence in India over the CAA, the Lockdown protests under Covid-19, and the police investigation of Maulana Saad and his communalising the issue of coronavirus have all been cited by Uttar Pradesh authorities – who have written to the home ministry seeking a ban on the PFI. There are reports that Karnataka and Assam have followed suit (Wani, 2020).

According to an Intelligence official, IS-related content on social media is highly accessed in southern states such as Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, including Maharashtra - although the J&K youth is also drawn to the ISIS ideology at various phases of the radicalisation. As the indigenous outfit – the Popular Front of India (PFI) - is 'systematically' radicalising some youths, the government is working on a proposal to declare the PFI an 'unlawful association'.

Recommendations

Looking at the history of the group and the role it has played at the grassroots level, it becomes clear why there are so many hurdles in proscribing the outfit. The organisation is registered under the Societies Registration Act 1860, and on the forefront it claims to be working for the improvement of the weaker sections of the society. But behind the curtains it is working as an anti-establishment organisation and executing jihadi activities.

Under such circumstances there are three options that the government of India can consider - depending upon the criticality of the situation. They are: Banning the outfit, Negotiations, or revisiting the age-old Societies Registration Act 1860 under which the PFI is registered as a Non-Profit Organisation.

The first solution is banning the organisation - as the ministry of home affairs is considering to do based on the dossier submitted by investigative agencies. However, reflecting back on the 'Matryoshka' doll concept, it is conceivable that the PFI, like its predecessors, will mutate into another organisation - perhaps even more dangerous conceptually and lethal in its implementation.

Also, the constitution of the Popular Front of India mentions under section 24 titled Dissolution of the Organisation that "in any uncalled for a situation if the organisation is to be dissolved, then:

1. The organisation may be dissolved only by resolution of the National General Assembly (NGA) taken by 2/3(two-thirds) majority of the total members of the NGA.
2. The movable and immovable property and cash shall be transferred to any duly constituted organisation/ society/ trust working on similar objectives.

The point number two of section 24 of the PFI's constitution authorises the establishment of another organisation that works on similar objectives and to which properties and funds will be transferred. So, it is like a catch 22 situation where the problem will be repackaged with the same old elements.

Therefore, it is necessary to look for a permanent solution to contain the growth of such miry and anti-national elements in society. Two options that come immediately on the table for consideration are:

1. Cancelling the license of the Popular Front of India under the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2002 - as per the POTA definition of 'terror act' and 'terrorism' as violence "with intent to threaten the unity, integrity, security or sovereignty of India or to strike terror in the people or any section of the people".

This charge can be applied to the PFI as well given the recent involvement of its members and supporters in anti-CAA protests and in the planning and plotting of the Jafarabad riots in Delhi.

2. The second option, which is more feasible and practical, is to repeal the entire Societies Registration Act 1860, Delhi. It may be a time-consuming exercise, but one that favours the Indian system.

Despite socio-economic and technological developments on the ground, not-for-profit entities in India continue to be regulated by pre-independence era statutes like the Societies Registration Act, 1860. This particular act has been subjected to multiple state amendments and mixed state-level implementation mechanisms over the years, which are inappropriate to meet the practical needs of such entities in the light of changed economic realities. From a governance viewpoint as well, it is imperative to bring transparency and accountability by adopting new technologies and advanced mechanisms.

For the same purpose, in the year 2012 a Report of the Expert Group on Societies Registration Act, 1860 was submitted to the Ministry of Corporate Affairs, Government of India (Ministry of Corporate Affairs [MoCA], 2012). The report highlighted the reasons for the review of the Societies Registration Act, 1860. It proposed a new Model Law to replace the existing act and suggested ways to create an environment that enables accountability and transparency amongst the societies.

Chapter 3, section 3.2 of the Expert Group recognises (MoCA, 2012) the need for a new and comprehensive regulatory framework for registered societies in the light of the following developments:

1. The activities undertaken by organisations have acquired economic significance and more substantial public interest;
2. These activities have become multi-jurisdictional in some cases, also involving foreign jurisdictions;
3. The present regulatory framework does not contain a centralised oversight or reporting mechanism for societies operating in multiple domains;
4. There is an urgent need to align societies to the governance requirements akin to Companies and societies, including consequent reporting and disclosure.
5. The present regulatory framework does not ensure transparency and accountability in the governance of societies; and
6. The current regulatory framework does not provide for universally acceptable, self-regulatory standards which are critical for the management of societies operating in the new economic environment.

Similarly, chapter 5, section 5.3, discusses the 'receipt of foreign contributions', as defined under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, 2010 (FCRA). The Expert Group elaborates in great depth, and it is pertinent to point out that approving foreign grants under the FCRA is purely in the domain of the Central Government. The Ministry of Home Affairs under Section 11 of the FCRA grants a 'certificate of registration' (Ranjan, 2017). Subsequently, it gives 'prior permission' for receiving foreign grants. In light of these facts, it is submitted that the societies receiving international grants can be subject to a 'Central Law' such as the Multi-state Societies Registration Act.

Therefore, along with referring to the Expert Group Report of 2012, and the fast-tracking of the ongoing investigations to confirm PFI involvement in illegal domestic and transnational acts of terror, the Government of India can take some steps to curb the popularity of the Popular Front of India so as to put a brake on its influence and notorious activities.

Apart from banning the outfit, another option that the Government of India must initiate is a dialogue with the PFI's leadership so as to understand the points of contention. Conflict resolution and reconciliation strategies have been a successful mode to resolve several conflicts and disputes.

At last, it is essential for the government to prioritise the issue and take the necessary steps - keeping in mind the delicacy of the situation. It is vital to expedite the process before such organisation tears down the social fabric of India.

When the enemy is on the back foot, a sudden attack on one's pillars of strength can have the desired result. In order to address these pertinent, clear and present threats, we need to seize the opportunity and ambush the enemy at the right moment so as to annihilate it.

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