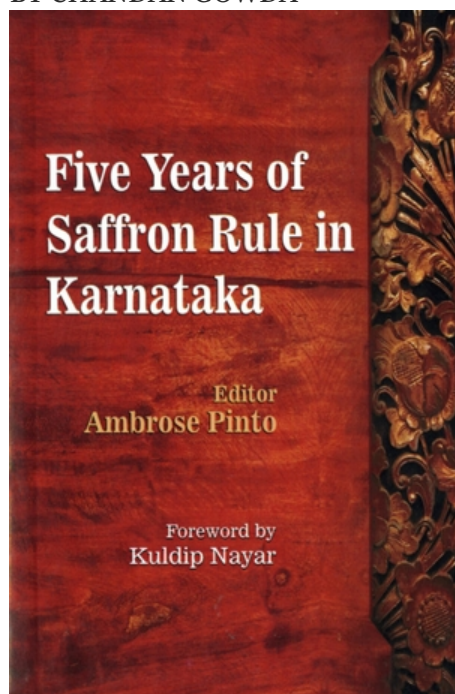


FRONTLINE

BOOKS

Archiving damage

BY CHANDAN GOWDA



- **Author:** Edited by Ambrose Pinto
- **Publisher:** Manak Publications, New Delhi, 2013
- **Pages:** v-xiii + 347
- **Price:** Not stated

The book documents the major features of the BJP's misrule in Karnataka and its use of government machinery to promote its ideological goals. By CHANDAN GOWDA

IN a classic essay, the sociologist Charles Tilly argued that the modern state, for most of its existence, was an institution of organised crime and worked like a protection racket. Viewing it as an institution rooted in a social contract was mostly regulative fiction, he observed. *Five Years of Saffron Rule in Karnataka*, which chronicles the numerous misdeeds of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in Karnataka between 2008 and 2013, is a graphic confirmation of Tilly's thesis. The no-holds-barred corruption indulged in by this government was of unparalleled scale and scope and open to see. The depths of its corrosive effects on the institutions of democratic governance are yet to be fully ascertained. Further, the BJP's relentless effort to secure an institutional base for its Hindutva ideology continues to vitiate the cultural life in the State.

Fr Ambrose Pinto, the editor of the book, provides a historical overview of the Sangh Parivar, the features of its ideology, and the contingent factors that enabled the BJP to come to power in Karnataka. The book consists of essays that document the major features of the BJP's misrule: the communalisation of the media and the education system, the blatant violation of human rights, the attacks on religious minorities, the increase in crime rates, the underperformance of the economy, and the consolidation of electoral casteism, among others.

The contributors are from diverse backgrounds: journalists, lawyers, academics and human rights activists. The essays, all of which are animated by ethical urgency and concern for the well-being of democratic institutions, describe in detail how the BJP, in running a government for the first time in south India, indulged in rampant macro- and micro-corruption and how it propagated its Hindutva ideology both within and outside the State administration. Vikhar Ahmed Sayeed's essay provides a useful analysis of the historical and political factors underlying the electoral rise of the BJP in the State.

The BJP's ideological onslaught in Karnataka reveals a mixture of old and new strategies. It pushed the overfamiliar hot-button issues such as conversion and cow slaughter. In their essay "Analysing Three Flashpoints", Arvind Narrain and Clifton D'Rosario note that the Sri Rama Sene, the Bajrang Dal, the Hindu Jagrana Vedike and other pro-Hindu outfits carried out 27 attacks on various churches across 11 districts in September 2008 on the pretext that they were encouraging conversions to Christianity. In response, the BJP government tried to help the perpetrators to escape punishment by constituting a biased one-man commission. Through acts such as these and others, like seeking a ban on cow slaughter, it actively abetted in dividing society on religious lines.

Ideological base

The BJP also oversaw new strategies of securing its ideological base. The communal outfits tried to mobilise the support of traditional

Hindus by attacking youth in pubs and resorts in Mangalore. In these instances of “moral policing”, the attackers were ostensibly protesting against modern culture.

Musab Iqbal’s essay “The Story of Daily Violence and Control” is an impassioned description of the everyday moral policing of communal outfits that intimidated local Hindu youth in coastal Karnataka against interacting with their peers in other religions.

Propaganda about “love jihad”, which held that Muslims had hatched a conspiracy against Hindus by luring Hindu girls into romance and conversion, was also rife. Attacking youth on Valentine’s Day was yet another strategy to mobilise support in the name of tradition. The BJP government also aroused anti-Muslim sentiment by the way it handled cases of so-called “terror blasts”. The cultural landscape of the State was transformed by such activities of the pro-Hindu outfits, which were given a free hand by the BJP government.

The party also freely used government machinery to further its ideological goals. The essays by Rajendra Chenni and S. Bageshree show the myriad ways in which the BJP government introduced Hindutva into the education system. Tampering with school curricula and manipulating appointments to academic and administrative bodies were two recurring means. One of Bageshree’s examples is illustrative of the right-wing ideological harm on the minds of children:

“Govina Haadu (The Song of the Cow) is one of the most popular fables in Kannada. It tells the story of a cow called Punyakoti who teaches a ferocious tiger a lesson in the value of truthfulness. The story ends with the repentant tiger jumping to his death. The Hindi textbook of Class 5 in the coastal district of Dakshina Kannada, however, gives it a curious twist. The tiger here does not kill himself but promises Punyakoti never to eat cow meat again” (page 230).

B.N. Jagadeesha’s essay points out how the BJP government appointed its own ideological supporters to the Women’s Commission and the Backward Classes Commission and subverted the original mandates of these bodies. It also discusses the BJP’s inauguration of the notorious practice of sanctioning large government grants to religious *maths* to undertake “development” work and channeling funds to temples to offer pujas at the time of floods.

Melwyn Sunny Pinto lays out evidence to show the underperformance of the economy under BJP rule. For instance, while 16,52,079 households were issued job cards under the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS) in 2011-12, only 45,129 among them completed 100 days of work. In Andhra Pradesh, 8,70,048 households completed 100 days of work in the same period.

The Lok Ayukta report on illegal mining in the State shows how the state colluded to set aside its own laws and regulations to enable its lease-owning Ministers and private companies to loot natural resources. This poses a challenge to anyone theorising the rule of law and internal sovereignty in India.

The changes in Karnataka’s popular culture during the BJP’s tenure do not find explicit discussion in the book. Instances of casual communalism are not uncommon in films. And, the rise of the BJP has paralleled the increasing segregation in media spaces. Television serials on mainstream channels rarely feature stories with Muslim, Christian or lower-caste characters.

It would be valuable to explore what the mainstreaming of the BJP in the State’s party system has meant for the aesthetics of contemporary Kannada cinema and music. The increasing number of right-wing ideologues in the State’s media regulatory committees and juries has also meant a lack of creative freedom for artists who depend on state patronage.

Whatever the future electoral fortunes of the BJP in the State, five years of its rule has channelled sufficient resources to strengthen the propaganda work of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), which has opened four large schools in Bangalore and revived its daily newspaper, which was shut down for financial reasons.

Fr Pinto’s epilogue hints at the need for not ceding the domain of religion to the fundamentalists:

“The party has mobilised the voters on the ‘Hindutva’ card by making use of religion and culture, both of which have very little to do with the finer aspects of faith that inspire people to concern, compassion and conscience and culture that puts people in touch with reality of their heritage and provides them a sense of community” (page 308).

Imagining modes of anti-communal activism that engages the “finer aspects of faith” continues to be crucial.

Realities of communalism

The book serves as an invitation for renewed academic attention on the realities of communalism in the country. A historical investigation into the workings of the Hindu right-wing in Karnataka is long overdue. The Hindu Mahasabha had a branch in the old Mysore state. The Rashtrottana Parishat, an RSS institution, has existed in Karnataka since 1965. How have these institutions functioned? How did they raise their resources to pursue their strategies? Did they have an impact on the formation of the State’s political and cultural life?

Other research questions also seem good to pursue: What are the new forms of communalism in contemporary India? How do they relate to the rise of neo-traditionalism (the popularity of *vaasthu* and yoga, for example)? Engaging questions such as these seem essential for continuing the work against communal politics.

Five Years of Saffron Rule is a timely book of democratic activism. Its catalogue of the large number of misdeeds during BJP rule should refute the party’s loud electoral claim that only it can “develop” India. It has also usefully archived the episodes in “state criminality”, to borrow Justice Michael Saldanha’s phrase in the book, for public memory.

Chandan Gowda is Professor of Social Science, Azim Premji University, Bangalore.