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3 How the Hindu Right Opposed the National Flag and the Quit India Movement
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6 As the Modi government's much-hyped 'Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav' (immortal celebration of our independence) gathers momentum, one is likely to fall prey to two impressions that are sought to be conveyed. The first is that the present regime is more firmly wedded to the principles of nationalism than others and the second is the utter devotion with which it remembers the nation's struggle for independence.

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8 While the first comes out clearly in the regime's obsessive worship of the national flag - punishing all and sundry for 'disrespecting' the sacred tricolour - this extra-religiosity is actually to cover up the utter contempt with which their political ancestors, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Hindu Mahasabha, had opposed our tricolour.

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10 The Hindu Right had taken no part in India's struggle for freedom and while the RSS had kept its members away from it all, the other organisation, the Hindu Mahasabha of Savarkar and Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, had sided with British imperial rule. This was particularly cruel during the Quit India movement of 1942, as the British were then jailing thousands of Indian freedom fighters and mercilessly beating up others. Both the present regime's programmes, namely, the ultra-veneration of the national flag (introducing a non-Hindu whip of 'blasphemy' around it) and the national celebration of the 75th year of Independence are really meant to smother over the ugly reality of history. They represent Narendra Modi's attempt to appropriate the wreath of patriotism and the glory that accompanies it.

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12 On the eve of Independence, the RSS's mouthpiece, Organiser, had declared its opposition to the Congress's path in its issues of 17th and 22nd July 1947. It stated that the Indian national tricolour will "never be respected and owned by the Hindus. The word three is in itself an evil, and a flag having three colours will certainly produce a very bad psychological effect and is injurious to a country."

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14 On this logic, the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar, which is integral to Hinduism, would become unacceptable and that the TriGuna virtues expounded in the Bhagavat Gita are to be rejected. Will the 'trishul' that is based on three, hence be 'evil'? In his book, Bunch of Thoughts, MS Golwalkar, the second Sarsanghchalak or head of the RSS, had expressed his opposition to free India's flag. "Our leaders have set up a new flag for the country," he stated, "but why did they do so?... ..Ours is an ancient and great nation with a glorious past. Then, had we no flag of our own? Had we no national emblem at all these thousands of years? Undoubtedly we had. Then why this utter void, this utter vacuum in our minds?"

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16 What Golwalkar was hinting at as our 'ancient flag' or national emblem of India was the Bhagwa Dhvaj, the saffron 'split flag'. It is a purely Hindu flag and he overlooked the fact that the national tricolour represents the plurality of Indian civilisation. The point is that the RSS had opposed the national flag and had continued to do so until the deputy prime minister of India, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, kept all the leaders of the RSS in jail for 18 months, from February 1948, following Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. As a condition for the release of their leaders in July 1949, the RSS swore to respect the Indian flag. It is ironic to see how strongmen of the Sangh parivar threaten and beat up hapless citizens who they view as not giving sufficient honour to the tricolour.

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18 As we commemorate the 81st anniversary of the historic Quit India movement, we are reminded of the manner in which the Hindu Right boycotted the most momentous phase of our national struggle. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, who is venerated by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for switching from the Hindu Mahasabha to establish the party's earlier incarnation, the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, went a step further.

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20 When the Congress, the largest party that emerged from the 1937 elections, refused to support AK Fazlul Haq's first coalition cabinet in the undivided Bengal Province, Mookerjee spied an opportunity to become a minister under Haq. He soon reached out to the British for both blessings and power, as the governor had an overriding role under the 1935 Act. The colonial government couldn't care less for such overtures but then, he sensed the regime's nervousness when the Congress became more and more aggressive in the middle of 1942 - a few weeks from Gandhi's 'Do or Die' Quit India movement.

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22 This is when he wrote his terribly controversial letter to the governor of Bengal, John
Herbert, on the 26th of July 1942. He condemned the national movement declaring "anybody
who, during the war, plans to stir up mass feelings, resulting in internal disturbances
or insecurity, must be resisted by....government". To ingratiate himself to foreign rulers
and to create hurdles for Congress's anti-British agitation, Mookerjee approached the
governor saying "as one of your Ministers, I am willing to offer you my whole-hearted
cooperation and serve my province and country at this hour of crisis".

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24 His leader, VD Savarkar, had earlier set such supplicatory traditions, by begging the
British for mercy for being released from jail. Shyama Prasad followed this and told
governor Herbert that "The administration of the Bengal province should be carried on in
such a manner that in spite of the best efforts of the Congress, this (Quit India)
movement will fail". He promised the governor that he and his party's ministers would
"tell the public that the freedom for which the Congress has started the movement,
already belongs to the representatives of the people...Indians have to trust the British".

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26 This is the tradition of Narendra Modi's political gurus, and the prime minister
personally renamed the Kolkata Port Trust after Shyama Prasad Mookerjee. Governor
Herbert was not impressed by this crouching minister and this antagonised Mookerjee, who
started complaining against him and his bureaucrats. It is this later angst that is
bandied around by the Hindu Right to justify that Mookerjee was actually a
'nationalist'. The Hindu Right family has not found time to apologise for opposing both
the national flag and the national struggle. It is upto the nation whether to consider
Modi's fixation with the tricolour and his Amrit Mahotsav as either atonement for past
misdeeds of his gurus or as attempts to snatch the monopoly of patriotism and obliterate
facts and history.

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