

Uncanny parallels

POLITICS AND PLAY | How India in the 2020s resembles Italy in the 1920s



Hitler and Mussolini in Munich, Germany, June 18, 1940. Hitler was at a high point, as his army accomplished a string of victories and was completing its conquest of continental Western Europe.

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I read a lot of biographies, these often set in other countries than my own. A book I have just finished is *Benedetto Croce and Italian Fascism*, by the Canadian scholar, Fabio Fernando Rizi. It uses the life of a great philosopher to tell a larger story of the times he passed through.

Reading Rizi's book, I found uncanny parallels between the Italy of the 1920s and the India of the 2020s. The myth of Benito Mussolini, like the myth of Narendra Modi, was crafted by writers and propagandists "eager to sing paeans to the genius of the Duce." These propagandists had begun to call the leader of fascism "the providential man", "the man of massive faith", or simply, "the Man of Providence". Thus was created "the myth of the Duce, the chief who is always right, the leader who dares where others vacillate."

In December 1925, the Italian State passed a new law, which came down hard on the press and its freedoms. The consequences of this law were that "within a few months, the most important papers came under Fascist control, one by one. Some owners were compelled to sell under economic or political pressure. All the liberal editors had to resign and were replaced by more accommodating men."

In the same year, Benedetto Croce characterized the ideology of the ruling party and of Mussolini as a “bizarre mixture of appeals to authority and to demagoguery, of professed reverence for the laws and of violation of the laws, of ultra-modern concepts and of musty old trash, abhorrence of culture and sterile attempts at producing a new one...” In this regard, the Italian State of the 1920s bears a striking resemblance to Modi’s regime today which speaks respectfully of the Constitution while blatantly violating its spirit and essence, which appeals to ancient wisdom while displaying a contempt for modern science, which claims to exalt ancient culture while manifesting an utter philistinism in practice.

While most independent-minded Italian intellectuals were forced into exile, Benedetto Croce stayed on in his homeland, offering an intellectual and moral opposition to fascism. As his biographer puts it, “[w]hereas the regime employed the mass media and the education system to promote the cult of Mussolini and to inculcate submission to authority, demanding from the new generations, in mystical union with the Duce, without asking questions, ‘to believe, to obey, to fight’, Croce, instead, offered a set of liberal values, preached freedom, defended the dignity of man, as a free agent, and urged individual decision and personal responsibility.”

Reading further into Rizi’s book, I found this passage: “By the end of 1926, liberal Italy had died. Mussolini had consolidated his power and created the legal instruments for the continuation of his dictatorship. Political parties had been outlawed, and freedom of the press destroyed. The opposition had been disarmed and Parliament reduced to impotence. By 1927 it had become almost impossible to undertake any political action; it was also dangerous to express critical opinions in personal letters or in public places. Civil employees could lose their jobs if they expressed views contrary to government policy. Besides a powerful and revitalized police division in the Ministry of the Interior, under the direct responsibility of the chief of police, a new and efficient secret police organization, ominously and mysteriously called OVRA, was created with the aim of repressing any sign of anti-fascism and controlling any expression of dissent. In a short while, it collected files on more than one hundred thousand people, including Fascist leaders, and built an impressive web of special agents, spies, and informers whose reach extended throughout the country and even abroad.”

As I was transcribing these words from Rizi’s book, news came in of the home ministry demanding, from the Finance Commission, a sum of Rs 50,000 crore to fund what it called “real-time surveillance” of citizens. This at a time when the states are being denied the money owed to them by the Centre; and while the home ministry has already dangerously abused its powers through the foisting of fake cases on independent thinkers, activists, and journalists.

And here is Rizi’s description of the Italian Parliament, c. 1929: “Parliament had become a rubber stamp of the government’s decisions. Speeches of the few remaining members of the opposition were ignored, or more often shouted down to jeers from the floor and from the public galleries.”

Fabio Fernando Rizi’s book focuses on one person in one country, and eschews comparative analysis. However, in passing, the author remarks that “Italian Fascism created an authoritarian regime, ever increasing its reach, but it did not have the time, perhaps did not even possess the strength, to build a totalitarian society.” This must be read as meaning only one thing; however awful Mussolini’s Italy was, it was not nearly as awful as Hitler’s Germany.

After reading Rizi's intellectual biography of Benedetto Croce, I turned to David Gilmour's magnificent book, *The Pursuit of Italy*, a wide-ranging and compellingly readable history of that country from the beginnings of time. Thirty of the four hundred pages of this book deal with Mussolini's years in power. As with Rizi, much of what Gilmour said about Italy in the past chillingly resonated with what I am witnessing in my own country at present. Consider thus these remarks: "In the 1930s the regime's style became more ostentatious. There were more parades, more uniforms, more censorship, more hectoring, more speeches from the leader, more shouting, gesturing and grimacing from a balcony to vast crowds, which greeted Mussolini's every reference to *patria* and *gloria* with chants of 'Du-ce! Du-ce! Du-ce!'" .

Much the same could be said about Modi's rule, especially after he won a second term in 2019, his every utterance greeted with 'Mo-di! Mo-di! Mo-di!'.

Why did the Italian demagogue enjoy such great popularity among the masses? Here is Gilmour's answer: "Mussolini survived so long partly because he incarnated certain strands of Italianità; he embodied the hopes, fears and generations that believed Italy had been cheated of its due, both by its liberal politicians and by its wartime allies, who had forced it to accept the 'mutilated peace.'" By the same token, Modi has successfully appealed to an alleged Golden Age in the distant past where Hindus were supreme in India and abroad, argued that Hindus had slipped from that pedestal owing to Muslim and British conquerors in the past, and pitted himself against conniving and corrupt Congress politicians who would drag Hindus and India down again.

Reading these books about Italy in the 1920s in the India of the 2020s, I was depressed by the many parallels; but also consoled by the few departures. Unlike Mussolini's Italy, in Modi's India, the Bharatiya Janata Party has had to contend with political opposition from other parties; admittedly an Opposition much attenuated at the Centre, but still fairly robust in half-a-dozen major states of the Union. The press has been tamed, but not entirely crushed. And while Mussolini's Italy had only Benedetto Croce to call it to account, Modi's India still has many writers and intellectuals speaking out courageously in defence of the founding principles of the Republic, and in all the languages of the Republic too.

In *The Pursuit of Italy*, after describing how Mussolini consolidated his rule, Gilmour remarks: "Fascism's appeal was blunted, however, by its failure to provide prosperity. Italians might be deceived into thinking they were well governed but they could not be deceived into thinking they were well off." Mussolini failed in providing jobs and prosperity; whereas Modi has, in fact, done far worse on the economic front, his ill-thought and quixotic policies annulling much of the progress that the Indian economy had made in the three decades since liberalization.

Millions of young men today fanatically follow Narendra Modi. The fate that awaits them, and us, is anticipated in what Benedetto Croce said with regard to the millions of young men who fanatically followed Mussolini. After the Italian dictator had died and his regime had finally fallen, Croce wrote sadly of "the treasury of moral energies that the oppressive regime misguided, exploited and at the end had betrayed." Benito Mussolini and his fascists thought they would rule Italy forever. Narendra Modi and the BJP think likewise. These fantasies of eternal rule will not come to fruition; but so long as the present regime remains in power, it will continue to extract a horrendous cost — in economic, political, social, and moral terms. Italy took decades to recover from the ravages of Mussolini and his party; India may take even longer to recover from the ravages of Modi and his party.

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