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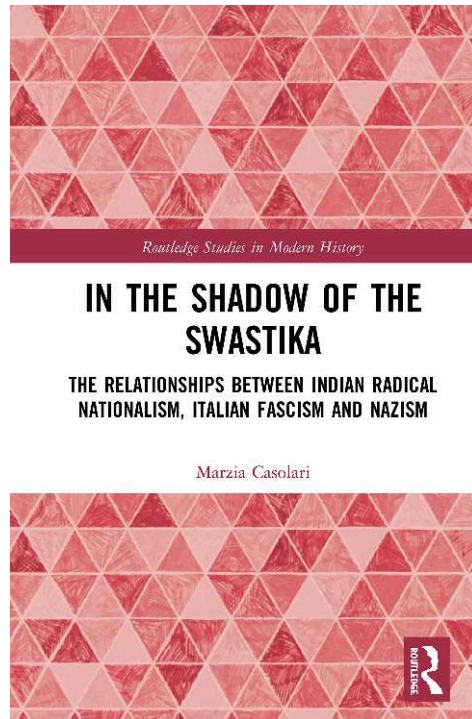
Marzia Casolari. *In the Shadow of the Swastika: The Relationships Between Indian Radical Nationalism, Italian Fascism and Nazism*

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Marzia Casolari. 2020. *In the Shadow of the Swastika: The Relationships Between Indian Radical Nationalism, Italian Fascism and Nazism*. New York: Routledge. 153 pages.

1 *In the Shadow of the Swastika* is a groundbreaking work by Marzia Casolari, an Italian scholar who specializes in Modern Indian History and, 20 years ago, wrote an article on the same topic which was published in *Economic and Political Weekly* (Casolari 2000). The article shook up the Indian history community as it established direct links between Italian fascists and Bengali nationalists in colonial India. There have been several works analyzing the relationship between Hindu nationalism and Fascism (see for instance Elst [2001] and Islam [2018]); the topic had not, however, been approached in such a manner. The use of new sources, particularly of Italian official archives of the period, makes this an innovative project.



- 2 In this book, Casolari expands on her previous work by giving a detailed historical overview of the relationship between Fascism and Hindu nationalism, focusing on the time period from early 1920's to late 1940's. The success of the article inspired Casolari to explore the topic in depth. The study is of prime significance as India is currently governed by the BJP, a party ideologically rooted in Hindu nationalism.
- 3 For her analysis Casolari relies on both Indian and Italian archives. She focuses on Bengal and Maharashtra as these areas were seen as centers of cosmopolitanism. These areas were more socially and politically organized compared to other parts of country. The text is thematically divided into three parts. Firstly, it focuses on Italian foreign policy regarding British India, when the emergent Italian fascist government was attempting to establish contacts with Indian nationalists. Secondly, it analyses the relationship of Bengali nationalists and Marathi Hindu nationalists with Fascism. And lastly, it showcases how the fascist and Nazi doctrines inspired Hindu nationalism.
- 4 Apart from using various official (National Archives of India, Nehru Memorial Library, State Archives of Mumbai) and private archives (Kesari archives in Poone) in India, Casolari relies heavily on Italian archives (archives of the Ministry of External Affairs and Central State Archives in Rome) as well as on newspapers from the period. Her book thus documents the period from the early rise of Fascism in the 1920s to the onset of World War 2. It highlights the role of Italian consulates in Bengal and Bombay in spreading the propaganda, using cultural activities to establish a network of loyalists sympathetic to Fascism. For instance, consulates organized visits of prominent nationalist leaders to Italy, set up a scholarship fund for Indian students to pursue higher education in Italy, several of whom would then be propped up as an entrepreneurial class sympathetic to the Italian government. The logic behind such a move was that India after its independence would require infrastructure for industrial development—a role which the Italian fascist government was keen on pursuing.

- 5 The book also analyses the role of Bengali and Marathi newspapers sympathetic to Italian Fascism and German Nazism. Marathi Hindu nationalists inspired by the fascist militarization of society aimed at emulating this model in India. Casolari explores these movements, which ran contrary to the nationalist movement led by the Congress party.
- 6 She starts with analyses of the foreign policy of the Italian fascist government with regard to India. The objective was primarily to promote the economic interests of Italy without interfering in local politics and risking upsetting the British. The Italians expected the British to leave India early, and their aim was to cultivate relationships that would prove useful for Italy to expand into free India. According to this plan, after the departure of the British, Italian companies would take over the role of building infrastructure in India. However, with the direct takeover of the Foreign Office by Mussolini in 1932, this policy was discarded and a new policy was pursued, which included direct political interference in India by popularizing Fascism as a “new civilization” that supported the liberation of the people from colonial rule. Bengal and Maharashtra were chosen to spread this propaganda owing to their prominence in political and social arenas. Networks consisting of a wide range of actors, primarily journalists and academics, were cultivated. These networks proved critical during Italy’s Abyssinian war (1935–36) as large-scale propaganda was disseminated to promote a positive image of Italy through exploiting the anti-colonial sentiments of the masses. Bengali nationalists and Marathi Hindu nationalists approached the relationship with fascists with different objectives. For Bengali nationalists, for example Subhash Chandra Bose, the aim was to do away with British rule and the relationship with Italians was a means to that end. For Marathi nationalists, the aim was to emulate Fascism in the Indian context and to militarize Hindu society. On the Italian side, the policy appears to have been mostly inconsistent and lacking in clarity. The Italians’ sole aim appears to have been to create a constituency that would be sympathetic to the Italian cause in India. This was in line with the policy of countering British hegemony in the Middle East and other parts of Africa, and presenting Italy as an ally of anti-colonial movements. After failing to rope in major Congress leaders, the Italians were forced to work with other political entities: Bengali nationalists and Marathi Hindu nationalists. From start to finish the relationship was an asymmetrical one, with more interest in it from the Hindu nationalists, as the potential benefits were greater for them than for the Italian government.
- 7 Bengal and Bombay presidencies were approached with different objectives, and Casolari analyses them separately. The fascist administration approached Bengali intellectual circles by organizing visits to Italy of towering Indian figures, such as Rabindranath Tagore, with the aim of creating in India a positive picture of fascist administration. Italian language courses were introduced and funded in the universities of Bengal. Cultural organizations such as ISMEO¹ were set up, and Indians were encouraged to study in Italy; scholarships were arranged for students who would then be indoctrinated with fascist propaganda. Newspapers such as *Modern Review* were funded to spread Italian propaganda and highlight the economic success of the fascist government. The support of these networks proved critical during Italy’s Ethiopian campaign in the late 1930s.
- 8 Bose’s links to Fascism has long been a subject of debate in Indian historiography (see Hayes [2011] and Tumiotto [2020]). Casolari approaches this topic at length, and we gain familiarity with Bose, who was inspired by Fascism and justified its blending with

socialism in the Indian context. For Bose, Fascism was distinct from Communism and would prove more useful in India, given the importance of religion in Indian society and given that there was an active national movement for Independence. According to him, Fascism could be molded to suit the Indian context.

- 9 In the second chapter of the book, Casolari focuses on Marathi Hindu nationalism and the role played by Fascism and Nazism in its formation. Unlike Bengali nationalists, the relationship of Marathi Hindu nationalists with fascists was more of a one-way relation, as fascists were very interested in gaining the support of established parties such as the Indian National Congress. However, for Marathi Hindu nationalists Fascism and Nazism were a solution to all the major problems of India, in terms of both ideological doctrine and organizational setup. Hindu nationalists, mostly centered around Maharashtra, followed European politics through newspapers such as *Marrata* and *Kesari*. These newspapers promoted a larger-than-life picture of Mussolini and of how he had brought order in society and transformed Italy from a backward country into an industrial power. Casolari highlights the visits of important Hindu nationalists, such as B.S. Moonje to Italy, which proved critical for Hindutva organizations. Moonje, president of the Hindu Mahasabha and mentor of Golwalkar (the founder of the RSS), met Mussolini and was shown the militarization of society through a guided tour of organizations such as *Balilla*.² Moonje was deeply influenced by these organizations, in which he saw an opportunity to militarize Hindu society in order to ward off both internal and external threats. Returning from his visit, he set up a military school in Nasik. The RSS later appropriated this model on a larger scale, and there is an almost uncanny similarity between the RSS and *Balilla* in terms of recruitment and organizational setup.
- 10 Casolari analyses the ideas of Hindutva ideologue Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and his approach to the situation in Europe during the Second World War. In his speeches, Savarkar praised Italian cultural nationalism as well as the racial ideas of the Nazis. Casolari examines his speeches, interviews in newspapers and private communications. It seemed Savarkar had found an answer to the “Muslim problem” of India, and shifted his priorities from fighting colonial rule to imagining an India that would be an exclusively Hindu nation. In his articles published in German newspapers, he justified the exclusion of minorities (Jews) in the making of German national identity.
- 11 British officials followed the work of German and Italian consulates closely and were suspicious of Italian influences from the start. At the onset of World War II, Bengali and Marathi Hindu nationalists put pressure on the Congress party to stand neutral in the war and prevent any Jewish migration to India. However, during the war and after the arrest of Congress leaders following the Quit India movement, Hindu nationalists seized the opportunity to collaborate with the colonial administration as well as with the Muslim league. Their aim was to increase the outreach and influence of Hindu parties such as the Hindu Mahasabha and present them as spokespersons for India’s Hindus. The Hindu Mahasabha also expected support from the British administration in its endeavor to increase the militarization of society and create an organized Hindu militia in view of the anticipated civil war. The role of this militia proved crucial during partition as it helped in the violent take-over of the princely states of Kashmir and Hyderabad.
- 12 Casolari discusses the role of various Indian newspapers during World War II in detail; all prominent newspapers showcased the important events happening in Germany, and

heavily criticized Nazis and fascists for their policies against minorities. The sympathy and support for fascist Italy and Nazi Germany came from a minority, including Bengali and Hindu nationalist intellectual circles. Casolari thus reinvigorates the debate on the collaborative attitude of prominent Indian leaders, including Bose and Savarkar who, despite being aware of the situation of minorities in Europe, chose to stay silent.

- 13 Casolari's book is well researched and written in simple language, making it accessible to a wide readership. The text is critical as it explores the contacts of fascists with Indian nationalists in detail and the role that ideologies of Nazism and Fascism played in shaping Hindutva thought, which has severe repercussions on the present Indian political context. Studying Hindutva is today more important than ever. The book also raises new questions for Indian nationalist historiography about how to deal with the past of revered figures such as Bose and their affiliation with authoritarian regimes. However, it lacks a well-defined structure and a coherent narrative as it attempts to cover distinct topics on a wide spectrum. While Fascism is the main object of analysis, the author sometimes switches to Nazism without explaining this transition. Moreover, she does not entirely address the ambiguity of Marathi Hindu nationalist organizations regarding colonial rule, which collaborated with the British during the 2nd World War while at the same time praising Nazi rule. Still this text, owing to its lucid style and the relevance of the topic to current circumstances, is an interesting and useful addition to modern Indian history.

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NOTES

1. Italian Institute for Middle and Far East.
2. Fascist paramilitary youth movement in Italy during the time of Benito Mussolini.

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