CHAPTER 6:
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Benito Mussolini, the founder of fascism in Italy, was head of the Italian government from 1922 to 1940. As a dictator, he held absolute power. The term ‘Fascism’ is derived from the word ‘fascio’, which means a bundle of rods; symbolizing discipline, unity and strength. The crisis of World War I was the turning point in Mussolini’s career. Mussolini responded to this war like other socialists. A series of events contributed to the rise of Fascism to power. One of these was the weakness of the post-war liberal government of Italy. The position of the Government was seriously weakened by widespread resentment due to the belief for not having fully secured interests of Italy in the Peace Conference of Paris. The debt of Anglo-Saxon countries was mounting up high. A series of strikes broke out dislocating the economic life of the country. The socialists were planning a revolution. In the face of all these, the Italian government remained inactive. At this moment, Mussolini appeared on the scene to rescue Italy from post-war anarchy, and establish a new political and social order.

The first Fascist group was instituted at Milan. ‘Mussolini founded the Fascist Party in 1919, and led it to power in Italy three years later.’¹ The movement soon spread to other towns and then villages. He was now burning with a sense of outraged patriotism and was determined to make Italy a first-rate European power. The members of the Fascist group looked upon themselves as the soldiers of national revival, and wore the uniform of black shirts. ‘The elections in 1921 sent him to

parliament at the heed of 35 Fascist deputies, the third assembly of his movement gave birth to a national party, with more than 250 thousand followers and Mussolini as its uncontested leader. In October 1922, Mussolini successfully marched into Rome, Italy. Mussolini and his followers occupied the public offices, railways, post, telegraph offices etc. This was on the whole a peaceful event. The government could do nothing, but resign. To avoid civil war, the king summoned Mussolini to form the Ministry and the Chamber of deputies granted the Cabinet full powers. ‘Eager to create the impression of Fascism as a revolutionary and vigorous movement, Fascist propaganda latter asserted that power was taken by force in 1922.’ In the early days of the movement, Mussolini had no fixed programme and changed his position more than once. His early cabinets consisted of persons belonging to various parties. ‘The Nationalist Party and Fascism, though associated during 1920-22, remained separated until 1923. After Mussolini’s advent to power and fusion of the two parties, it was the Nationalist who transmitted their doctrine to Fascism.’ By a series of enactments, the Ministry was relieved of its responsibility to parliament, and Mussolini became the Head of the Government. The ministers became the subordinates of the dictator instead of being his colleagues. He became the leader. ‘The law on the powers of the Head of Government (1925) effectively ended the right of parliament to control the Prime Minister and gave the latter authority over the other minister. The same year, a law was passed increasing the government’s power over the bureaucracy political tests for civil servants.’

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In 1925, Mussolini delivered a speech in the Chamber, which marked the end of the first period, and the true dictatorship began. ‘In December 1922, and January 1923, two important measures were taken to increase his control over the party - the creation of the voluntary Militia for Nation Security, which was designed to bring the squads under a central command and the institution of Fascist Grand Council as the main-policy making body for the party.’\(^6\) The chamber was given no power of initiative. It could submit only proposals submitted to it by the Head but could not reject them. The Head of the Fascist Party was also the Head of the Fascist Government.

The keynote of Fascist doctrine is its conception of the state. Fascism claims for the state an all-pervasive character, which leaves no scope for independent action, whether on the part of individuals or groups. Fascism advocates a state with vigorous action. Fascism desires the state to be strong, organic and formed on a wide population base. ‘For the Fascist, everything is in the state, and nothing human or spiritual exists, much less as value, outside the state. In this sense, Fascism is totalitarian and the Fascist state, the synthesis and unity of all values, interprets, develops and gives strength to the whole life of the people. Outside the state there can be neither individuals nor groups.’\(^7\) The individual in the totalitarian state is completely subordinated to the authority of the leader. Authority, discipline and subordination were the watchdog of the Fascist Party. The discipline of the Fascist Party was the cement which held together the framework of the Fascist regime. Fascist ideology bases itself upon a strong belief in the unity of a particular nation.

\(^6\) Alexander De Grand, *The Italian Nationalist Association and the Rise of Fascism in Italy*, (University of Nebraska Press, London, 1982,) p. 44.

Earlier in his life, Mussolini was strongly influenced by Pareto, Sorel and Michels. Everything he had learned from them. ‘Fascist doctrine was largely Mussolini’s own product. The three principal doctrinal sources of the Fascist synthesis were, “…..the anti-parliamentarian sociological tradition of Gumplowicz, Mosca, Pareto; the radical syndicalist tradition of Sorel, and nationalist tradition of Corradini……..What was lacking was a principle of unity, a concept which would articulate these elements into a defensible rational. That unifying concept was the Gentilean notion of the state; and with its adoption, Fascism became the first frank totalitarian movement of the twentieth century.”  

Fascism is not only the negation of individualism; it is also opposed to capitalism, International Socialism, Liberalism and Parliamentary Democracy. It is particularly opposed to Communism, which is based on the idea of class struggle and dictatorship of Proletariat. ‘The belief in the unity of nation and or race leads to a rejection of ideologies which stress conflicts within nations or races. Marxist notions of class conflict are seen as divisive and appealing exclusively to one part of the nation / race, namely working class.’

Fascism is absolutely opposed to the doctrine of Liberalism or Capitalism. It differs from traditional Laissez-faire Capitalism which seeks to reduce the activity of the state to a minimum. In the complexity of modern economic life and vast social problem, Fascism believes in the intervention of the state in all sphere of life

Fascism is Anti-pacifist. It teaches that war keeps up all the energies of man to their highest pitch, and hence it is imbued with an imperialistic expansion. According to Fascism, international peace is a coward’s dream. Fascist propaganda sets out

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deliberately to create an atmosphere to implant in the minds of Italians, the conviction that they are a nation, which is marching on. The youth of Italy receive a special training, which is designed to mould them to Fascist pattern. ‘Instructors in the lower schools were introduced with an eye to implanting in the younger generation adulation for the duce and beliefs that would make them martial, tough, and obedient.’ The Schools were conducted under a system of drill and discipline, military in its character.

The Fascists were nationalists first and last, but their nationalism was narrow. It is an enemy of internationalism. It is anti-democratic. Fascism is governed by one party. It allows no opposition. Mussolini had always opposed parliamentarianism. Among the anti-fascist, some were killed as a result of fascist attacks. The murder of Matteotti, a member of the Italian parliament, in 1924, under mysterious circumstances, is not something which can be easily explained. His only fault was that he spoke his mind freely in parliament. Count Balbo lost his life in an equally mysterious manner. Though the founder of fascism avoided formulating a theoretical programme, but two of his objectives remained distinctive feature of the movement. One was the need of strengthening the authority of the state and the other was the National Syndicalism. Fascism tries to bring together the interests of the workers, of the employers and of the public into a common whole. The guiding principles are national production and promotion of common interests. “In order to define and co-ordinate the relations between capital and labour, the Italian people were organized on a vocational basis in syndicates. In order to regulate the nature and scope of production in the national interests, all the productive forces were knit together in

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institutions known as Corporations. Together the Syndicates and Corporations provided the framework of the Corporate State, which represented the most notable contribution of Fascism in the field of politics and economics.\textsuperscript{11} The employers and employees are represented by two parallel sets of institutions, which the state and the Fascist Party acting as the supreme arbiter and connecting link. Like all other countries, in 1930 economic depression arrived in Italy. But before the depression, Fascists had already begun to put together the first instrument of economic control. Fascism sought the creation of Greater Italy that would be capable of sustaining itself against the imposer of capitalist powers. \textsuperscript{12} Before the advent of that crisis and its attendant dislocations Fascism had already begun to articulate the policies of the closed industrial state, the substance of which was the developmental economic nationalism that characterized Fascism’s ideological origins. \textsuperscript{12}

The chief reason behind the success of Fascism for over twenty years was the dynamic leadership of Mussolini. When he came to power, Italy was treated as an inferior nation to western countries. But in a few years, Mussolini succeeded in making Italy the chief Mediterranean power. He was moved by an extraordinary combination of self-confidence, decision and will. The basic ideological elements of fascism he resolved, will be advocated in such a way that fascism will be a direct threat to democracy and freedom. It believed neither in the possibility nor the utility of world peace. War was used in Italy to divert people’s attention from internal difficulties of government. The 1935 Ethiopian war was planned to direct attention


away from internal problem. As the 1930’s ended, Mussolini was losing all his support within Italy.

So, it may be concluded here that Italian Fascism was based upon Italian nationalism and the restoration of Italy as well as territorial expansionism. Benito Mussolini combined his fasci of workers, that is, small groups organized to bring about revolutionary changes in Italy. In many ways, fascism constituted a revolt against the ideas and values of western political thought. Fascism is opposed to mainstream political thought - liberalism, Marxism and Idealism. Fascism was anti-rational, anti-liberal, anti-conservative, anti-capitalist, anti-bourgeois, and anti-communism and so on. Italian fascism was essentially an extreme form of statism that was based on absolute loyalty towards a totalitarian state. In Fascism, man is prepared to dedicate his life to the glory of his nation or race and to give unquestioning obedience to supreme leader. The Fascist state requires complete conformity, rigid discipline and unquestioning obedience, and force is legitimate which conduces to these ends. It embraced expansionist nationalism. Fascist nationalism did not respect for other cultures but asserted the superiority of one nation over all others. Benito Mussolini served as Italy’s 40th PM from 1922 until 1940. He is considered a central figure in the creation of Fascism. In 1943, Mussolini was overthrown and imprisoned by his former colleagues in the Fascist government. Mussolini was rescued by German commandos. He was installed as the leader of a new government but had little power. As the allies advanced northwards Italy in 1945, Mussolini fled towards Switzerland. He was captured by Italian partisans, and shot on 28 April 1945, and ended fascist regime in Italy.