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Contested Meanings: India's National Identity, Hindu Nationalism, and the Politics of Anxiety

T HE PRIMARY IMPULSE OF THIS ESSAY IS explanatory, not normative. It is important to keep this distinction in mind because the subject—the rise of Hindu nationalism—generates strong emotions. While dealing with Hindu nationalism, the customary intellectual tendency is to denounce or celebrate, not to explain. For an academic analysis, however, explanation must take clear precedence over denunciation or celebration.

The essay makes three arguments. First, a conflict between three different varieties of nationalism has marked Indian politics of late: a *secular* nationalism, a *Hindu* nationalism, and two *separatist* nationalisms in the states of Kashmir and Punjab. Hindu nationalism is a reaction to the two other nationalisms. In imaginations about India's national identity, there was always a conceptual space for Hindu nationalism. Still, it remained a weak political force until recently, when the context of politics changed. The rise of Hindu nationalism can thus be attributed to an underlying and a proximate base. Competing strains in India's national identity constitute the underlying base. The proximate reasons are supplied by the political circumstances of the 1980s. A mounting anxiety about the future of India has resulted from the separatist agitations of the 1980s, and from a deepening institutional and ideological vacuum in Indian politics. India's key integrative political institution since 1947, the Congress party, has gone through a profound organizational decay, with no centrist parties taking its place. And secularism, the ideological mainstay of a multireligious India, looks pale and exhausted. Claiming

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to rebuild the nation, Hindu nationalists present themselves as an institutional and ideological alternative.

Second, India's secularism looks exhausted not because secularism is intrinsically unsuited to India and must, therefore, inevitably come to grief. That is the principal claim of the highly influential recent writings by T. N. Madan and Ashis Nandy.[1] Insightful though their arguments are, Madan and Nandy do not sufficiently differentiate between different varieties of secularism. The secularism of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi was not a logical culmination of the secularism of Nehru. Politics over the last decade discredits the kind of secularism practiced by the various regimes in the 1980s. It does not discredit secularism per se.

Third, though a reaction to separatist and secular nationalisms, Hindu nationalism poses the most profound challenge to the governing principles and intellectual maps of an independent India. Hindu nationalism has two simultaneous impulses: a commitment to the territorial integrity of India as well as a *political* commitment to Hinduism. Given India's turbulent history of Hindu-Muslim relations, it is unlikely that Hindu nationalism can realize both its aims. What happens to India, therefore, depends on how powerful Hindu nationalism becomes, and the way in which this contradiction is resolved.

The national question is, of course, not the only contentious issue in India. Apart from the national order, two other orders—social and economic—have been challenged in recent times. The traditional caste hierarchy of the Hindu social order, slowly eroding due to the political equality of liberal democracy, has been explicitly confronted by politics emphasizing the mobilization of lower castes. The Fabian socialist core of the economic order is in its death throes, being attacked by an emerging market orientation and international openness in the country's economic policy. Some of this change is welcome in India, but much of it has come suddenly and simultaneously. Because of the simultaneity of change at several levels, and especially because of threats to the nation's integrity—the most serious since independence—Indian politics in recent years have been experienced by a large number of Indians as an anxiety, as a fear of the unknown, and on occasions such as the demolition of the Ayodhya mosque, even as a loss of inner coherence. A yearning for

reequilibrating designs that can impose some order on anxieties is unmistakable. Politics remains central to this enterprise.

THE CONTEXT: THREE CONTESTING NATIONALISMS IN INDIA

> People everywhere have an idea of who they are and what they owe
> themselves. . . .The liberation of spirit that has come to India could
> not come as a release alone. . . .India was now a country of a million
> little mutinies. . . .But there was in India now what didn't exist 200
> years before: a central will, a central intellect, a national idea. The
> Indian Union was greater than the sum of its parts.
> —V. S. Naipaul[2]

While one may disagree with Naipaul about whether a "national idea" existed in India in earlier times, he is rightly pointing to a paradox: both little mutinies and a "central" or "national idea" are surfacing at the same time. As disintegrative tendencies deepen, a sense of pan-Indian nationalism is also growing. The two tendencies— the mutinous disaggregation and a national resurgence—are fighting it out, with no clear victor at the moment. Recent accounts of India, especially the journalistic ones, have mostly concentrated on the disintegrative tendencies. The merit of Naipaul's position lies in his recognition that the political tendencies are dualistic, not unitary. It is also the kind of duality for which direct evidence, privileged in the social sciences, cannot yet be provided. No large-scale surveys exist. One has either to derive inferences from available political trends, or, like Naipaul, one has to travel, talk, hear, and see—that is, follow the method of a "writer."

Separatist nationalisms in Kashmir today and in Punjab until recently have been the most powerful expressions of the disintegrative tendency.[3] The other two varieties of nationalism—secular and Hindu—are committed to India's territorial integrity, though they seek to do it in different ways.

The three nationalisms do not have the same conception of the nation. Separatist nationalists claim that Sikhs and Kashmiris are not part of the Indian nation. They are nations by themselves. Their point is not simply that there is something distinctive about the Sikh and Kashmiri identities that separates them from India; rather, to use Ernest Gellner's words, "the political and the national unit should be congruent."[4] A nation is not merely a cultural

configuration; it means investing a cultural community with sovereignty, and, at the very least, with political autonomy.[5]

These movements, then, are not mere ethnic assertions. Ethnicity as a term designates a sense of collective belonging, which may be based on common descent, language, history, or even religion (or some combination of these).[6] An ethnic group may function without a state of its own; a nation implies bringing ethnicity and statehood together. In principle, this congruence may be satisfied in a federal arrangement, in which case the concerned nationalism becomes a subnationalism or an ethnicity. The larger federal entity, then, has the highest claims on that group's loyalty. Alternatively, one may opt for nothing short of sovereignty. That is what Sikh nationalists aimed at and Kashmiri nationalists are still fighting for. A Bengali can be both a Bengali and an Indian, so can a Gujarati. Bengalis and Gujaratis are ethnic groups: for separatists, Sikhs and Kashmiris are nations. However, for Indian nationalists—both secular and Hindu—the Sikhs and Kashmiris are ethnic groups, not nations.

The separatists, of course, may not succeed in their aims, in which case they may settle for the status of a state in the Indian federation. Sikh nationalism seems to have entered this phase already. It is important to remember, however, that the Sikh uprising was not simply a cultural battle for a separate identity; it was a political battle for nationhood. A nation, to repeat, is not just a cultural community; rather, it is a sovereign cultural community.

Unlike separatist nationalisms, secular nationalism, the official doctrine of India's national identity since independence, seeks to preserve the geographical integrity of India. In principle, it includes all ethnic and religious groups in its definition of the nation, and respects their beliefs and cultures. Giving security to the various ethnic and religious groups is considered part of nation-building. One can be a good Muslim or a good Bengali and a good Indian at the same time.

That, to Hindu nationalists, is the opposite of nation-building. A salad bowl does not produce cohesion; a melting pot does.[7] Hinduism, to Hindu nationalists, is the source of India's identity. It alone can provide national cohesiveness. This claim inevitably begs the question: Who is a Hindu? Savarkar, the ideological father of Hindu nationalism, explains: "A Hindu means a person who regards this land. . .from the Indus to the Seas as his fatherland as well as his

Holyland."[8] The definition is territorial (land between the Indus and the Seas), genealogical ("fatherland"), and religious ("holyland"). Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists can be part of this definition, for they meet all three criteria. All these religions were born in India. Christians, Jews, Parsis, and Muslims, however, can meet only two criteria. India is not their "holyland."

Can non-Hindu groups be part of India? Yes, but only by assimilation, say the Hindu nationalists. Of the groups whose holyland is not India, Parsis and Jews are, according to Hindu nationalists, already assimilated, having become part of the nation's mainstream.[9] With the departure of the British, Christianity also lost its political edge, being no longer associated with foreign rulers. Ultimately, Muslims became the principal adversary of the Hindu nationalists, in part because of their numbers, but also because a Muslim homeland in the form of Pakistan caused India's partition in 1947. Twenty-five percent of pre-1947 India was Muslim. Even after the formation of Pakistan, Muslims remained the largest minority, constituting about 12 percent of the country's population today. This explains, in part, the enormous attention given to Islam by Hindu nationalists.

The Hindu nationalist claim is not that Muslims ought to be excluded from the Indian nation. While that may be the position of Hindu extremists,[10] the generic Hindu nationalist argument is that to become part of the Indian nation, Muslims must agree to the following: *1)* accept the centrality of Hinduism to Indian civilization; *2)* acknowledge key Hindu figures such as Ram as civilizational heroes, and not regard them as mere religious figures of Hinduism; *3)* accept that Muslim rulers in various parts of India (between roughly 1000 to 1857) destroyed the pillars of Hindu civilization, especially Hindu Temples; and *4)* make no claims to special privileges such as the maintenance of religious personal laws, nor demand special state grants for their educational institutions. They must assimilate, not maintain their distinctiveness. Through *Ekya* (assimilation), they will prove their loyalty to the nation.[11] It is interesting to note that the Muslim politicians who have accepted this argument—for example, Sikandar Bakht and Arif Beg—have been members of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), the principal political party representing the ideology of Hindu nationalism in the electoral arena.[12]

Hindu nationalism thus has two simultaneous impulses: building a united India as well as "Hinduizing" the polity and the nation. Muslims and other groups are not excluded from the definition of India, but inclusion is premised upon assimilation, on acceptance of the political and cultural centrality of Hinduism. If assimilation is not acceptable to the minorities, Hindu nationalism becomes exclusionary, both in principle and practice.

Created in 1925 in the state of Maharashtra, the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS, National Voluntary Corp) is the institutional core of Hindu nationalism.[13] The ideological trend, however, goes much further back. Viewed as a way to resurrect India's cultural pride, Hindu revivalism in the second half of the nineteenth century was a response to British rule. This revivalism preceded the national movement headed by the Congress party in the first half of the twentieth century, but it could not dominate the movement itself.[14] There were two principal modes in the national movement: Nehru's secularism and Mahatma Gandhi's Hinduism. Nehru's hostility to religion is well-known. Even a devoutly religious Gandhi could not be called a Hindu nationalist. He was a Hindu and a nationalist, not a Hindu nationalist. Gandhi's Hinduism was inclusive and tolerant. Being a good Hindu and having respect for other religions were not contradictory.[15] Inclusion of non-Hindus in the Indian nation followed as a corollary of this position. Gandhi's love for Muslims even during the formation of Pakistan was, for Hindu nationalists, incomprehensible. In 1948, when a Hindu fanatic assassinated Gandhi, Hindu nationalism was set back by decades. In popular perception, Hindu nationalists killed the Mahatma, the father of the nation.[16] Many in the post-1948 generation were told by their parents to keep a safe distance from Hindu nationalists.

A weak political force for a century, Hindu nationalism has acquired unprecedented political strength since the mid-1980s. At no point before 1989 did the Hindu nationalists receive even a tenth of the national vote. The average was 7 percent. In 1989, this share increased to 11.4 percent, and, in 1991, to over 20 percent. Electorally confined to northern and western India, Hindu nationalism has politically penetrated all parts of India, including the South and the East. In the southern state of Karnataka, it won nearly 29 percent of the vote in 1991.[17] In Gujarat, Mahatma Gandhi's home state in western India, its share of the vote in 1991 was a remarkable 51

percent. The 1991 elections brought BJP governments to power in four states: Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Himachal Pradesh. Of these, Uttar Pradesh is the biggest state in India, and Madhya Pradesh among the biggest.

Equally important, by 1991 support for Hindu nationalism had gone beyond the urban trading community, its customary base, to include villagers and the modernized (and modernizing) middle classes.[18] Hardly known for Hindu religiosity and Westernized in their daily life, nearly thirty retired generals, including a Jewish former general, joined the BJP in 1991. So did a host of former civil servants. For a party customarily associated with obscurantism, it was a moment of great symbolic significance. The BJP savored the moment and proudly displayed its modern recruits.

It is not clear whether the demolition of the Babri mosque in December of 1992 will ultimately hurt or strengthen the Hindu nationalists.[19] That something as inconceivable as the mass demolition of a mosque could be undertaken and executed as a political project demonstrates, in and of itself, the new mobilizing capacity of this ideology.[20] The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 was the last politically critical act of Hindu nationalism, but that was not a manifestation of its organized strength nor an expression of its capacity to mobilize the masses. It was an insane act of an angry individual who was motivated by the ideology of Hindu nationalism.[21]

THREE STRAINS AND TWO IMAGINATIONS: INDIA'S NATIONAL
IDENTITY AND HINDU NATIONALISM

Who is an Indian? Deceptively simple, the question is hard to answer, as indeed it is with respect to several other nations in the world.[22] Literature on comparative nationalism suggests that national identities have historically been based on several principles of collective belonging: ethnicity (Japan, Italy, Germany, and much of Europe), religion (Ireland, Pakistan, and parts of the Middle East), ideology (successfully in the United States, unsuccessfully in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia), and territory (Spain, Switzerland, and a number of Third World nations).[23] One should note that the territorial idea inevitably becomes part of all nation-states, but territory does not have to be the defining principle of national identity.[24]

Moreover, in some cases, there may be no clear principle of collective belonging. Rather, competing notions of identity may exist, one of which becomes dominant at one time, the other at another time. As Stanley Hoffmann argues, there are two competing views about the French identity. One is based on the French Revolution and the principles of freedom and equality, which bring French national identity quite close to the definition of the American nation. A second one is based on quasi-ethnicity (conceptualized as history and heritage), which in French history leads to the Vichy regime and to Le Pen today.[25] In the United States, as Samuel Huntington has argued, the key constituents of the "American creed"—liberty, equality, individualism, democracy, and the rule of law— have not always existed together, nor can they possibly, for they do not form a coherent logical set.[26]

What turns on the distinctive principles of national identity? Their political implications vary. Some of the most passionate political moments of America have been over the issues of freedom and equality, just as those of Germany have been over ethnicity. Similarly, competing strains in national identity open up distinctive political logics. Excessive drift in one direction brings forth a reaction, and competing strains begin to acquire political momentum. A rising number of French people today are feeling threatened by the increasing ethnic diversity of France, which is conceptualized by some as a monoethnic society, a conception opposed by others as too narrow and destructive of the principles of the Republic.[27] In American history, as Huntington has argued, "Conflicts easily materialize when any one value is taken to an extreme: majority rule versus minority rights; higher law versus popular sovereignty; liberty versus equality; individualism versus democracy."[28]

Since the rise of the Indian national movement, three competing themes about India—territorial, cultural, and religious—have fought for political dominance. The territorial notion is that India has a "sacred geography," enclosed between the Indus river, the Himalayas, and the Seas, and emphasized for twenty-five hundred years since the time of the Mahabharata.[29] The cultural notion is that ideas of tolerance, pluralism, and syncretism define Indian society. India is not only the birthplace of several religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism), but in its history it has also regularly received, accommodated, and absorbed "outsiders" (Parsis, Jews, and "Syrian"

Christians—followers of St. Thomas, arriving as early as the second century, thus Christianity reached India before it reached Europe). In the process, syncretistic forms of culture and even syncretistic forms of religious worship[30] have emerged and become part of India. Apart from syncretism, which means a coming together and merging of cultures, pluralism and tolerance have also existed with different communities finding their niche in India and developing principles of interaction.[31] *Sarva Dharma Sambhava* (equal respect for all religions) is the best cultural expression of such pluralism. Finally, the religious notion is that India is originally the land of the Hindus, and it is the only land which the Hindus can call their own. India has the Hindu holy places (Benaras, Tirupati, Rameswaram, Puri, Haridwar, Badrinath, Kedarnath, and now Ayodhya) and the holy rivers (Cauveri, Ganga, Yamuna, and the confluence of the last two in Prayag). Most of India is, and has been, Hindu by religion[32]— anywhere between 65 to 70 percent in the early twentieth century and 82 percent today. A great deal of ethnic diversity may exist within Hindu society: a faith in Hinduism brings the diversity together. India viewed in this fashion is a Hindu nation.[33]

The three identity principles have their political equivalents. In political discourse, the territorial idea is called "national unity" or "territorial integrity"; the cultural idea is expressed as "political pluralism"; and the religious idea is known as *Hindutva,*[34] or political Hinduism. The political notion of pluralism itself has two meanings, dealing with the linguistic and religious issues. The principle of federalism was developed to respect the linguistic diversity of India: not only would the states be organized linguistically but the ruling party would also be federally organized, leaving enough autonomy for state-level party units. The political principle about religion has two levels. In general, religion would be left untouched so that religious pluralism in society could exist, but if the state did have to intervene in religious disputes, it would do so with strict neutrality. The state would maintain a posture of equidistance, a principle that came to define India's secularism.

These three strains have yielded two principal imaginations about India's national identity—the secular nationalist and the Hindu nationalist. The former combines territory and culture; the latter religion and territory. For the secular nationalist construction, the best source is Jawaharlal Nehru's *The Discovery of India.* Syncretism,

pluralism, and tolerance are the main themes of Nehru's recalling of India's history:

> Ancient India, like ancient China, was a world in itself, a culture and a civilization which gave shape to all things. Foreign influences poured in and often influenced that culture and were absorbed. Disruptive tendencies gave rise immediately to an attempt to find a synthesis. Some kind of a dream of unity has occupied the mind of India since the dawn of civilization. That unity was not conceived as something imposed from outside, a standardization. . .of beliefs. It was something deeper and, within its fold, the widest tolerance of belief and custom was practised and every variety acknowledged and even encouraged.[35]

Notice that Nehru, unlike Hindu nationalists, finds unity in culture, not in religion.[36] He has no conception of a "holyland." Ashoka, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Amir Khusro, Akbar, and Gandhi— all syncretistic or pluralistic figures, subscribing to a variety of Indian faiths[37]—are the heroes of India's history in *The Discovery of India,* while Aurangzeb, the intolerant Moghul, "puts the clock back."[38]

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the difference between culture and religion is to cite Nehru's will. Nehru wanted his ashes scattered in the Ganga, not because it was religiously necessary but because it was culturally appropriate:

> When I die, I should like my body to be cremated. . .A small handful of (my) ashes should be thrown into the Ganga. . .My desire to have a handful of my ashes thrown into the Ganga at Allahabad has no religious significance, so far as I am concerned. I have been attached to the Ganga and Jamuna rivers in Allahabad ever since my childhood and, as I have grown older, this attachment has grown. . . .The Ganga, especially, is the river of India, beloved of her people, round which are intertwined. . .her hopes and fears, her songs of triumph, her victories and her defeats. She has been a symbol of India's age-long culture and civilization, ever-changing, ever-flowing, and yet ever the same Ganga. . . .Ganga has been to me a symbol and a memory of the past of India, running into the present and flowing on the great ocean of the future.[39]

To religious Hindus, the river Ganga is sacred. To Nehru, it was part of India's culture, and equally dear. The sacredness was not literal, but metaphorical. Similarly, India's geography was sacred, not literally but metaphorically. The emotions and attachment

generated by the geography were equally intense. To draw a parallel, one does not have be a religious Jew to celebrate and love the land of Israel. Secular Jews can also do that. Consider how Nehru narrates the geography of India—as territory and topos, not as a holyland:

> When I think of India, I think of broad fields dotted with innumerable small villages. . .of the magic of the rainy season which pours life into the dry parched-up land and converts it suddenly into a glistening expanse of beauty and greenery, or great rivers and flowing water. . . of the southern tip of India. . . .and above all, of the Himalayas, snow-capped, or some mountain valley in Kashmir in the spring, covered with new flowers, and with a brook bubbling and gurgling through it.[40]

As discussed earlier, multiple strains of a national identity have their own political implications. An excessive shift towards one of the strains produces a reaction. Let us take secular nationalism as an example. If secular nationalists violate the principle of pluralism— let us say, by attacking federalism on the argument that too much federalism weakens national unity— they undermine a serious principle of the nation itself, and begin to generate a reaction. Such attacks do not correspond to the concerned state's view of national identity, which has a place for regional identity as well. A man from Tamilnadu is both a Tamilian and an Indian. Sometimes the reaction takes the form of separatist agitations. And these agitations, in turn, generate concern about territorial integrity. The centralizing solution thus worsens the disease. Indira Gandhi repeatedly undermined federalism on the grounds of "national integrity," only to generate separatist nationalisms.

On the other hand, one can also go too far in protecting pluralism. Kashmir was given a special status in the Indian Constitution. Delhi was to be responsible only for foreign affairs, defense, communications, and the currency; the state government would handle the rest. Other Indian states had fewer powers. The Kashmir arrangement, thus, had the potential of contradicting the territorial principle if Kashmiris claimed they were still unhappy. Nehru loved Kashmir and was instrumental in shaping its special status, but he himself had to deploy force to quell Sheikh Abdullah's vacillations between India and independence.[41] A second form of pluralism

deemed excessive and therefore harmful for national integrity concerns "personal laws." Should the various religious groups in India be under a common civil code or under their distinct religious laws? If secular nationalists claim that separate personal laws destroy national unity, they generate a reaction in the religious community whose personal laws are at issue. If, on the other hand, they promote personal laws on the argument that such concessions make minorities secure, they set off a reaction in the majority community that the state may have gone too far in minority appeasement, opening up fissiparous tendencies and undermining national unity.[42]

Since the territorial principle is drawn from a belief in ancient heritage, encapsulated in the notion of "sacred geography," and figures in both imaginations, it has acquired political hegemony over time. It is the only thing in common between the two competing nationalist imaginations. Therefore, just as America's most passionate political moments concern freedom and equality, India's most explosive moments concern its "sacred geography," the 1947 partition being the most obvious example. Whenever the threat of another breakup, another partition, looms, it unleashes remarkable passions in politics. Politics based on this imagination is quite different from what was seen when Malaysia and Singapore split from each other in the 1960s, or when the Czech and Slovak Republics separated in 1992. Territory not being such an inalienable part of their national identity, these territorial divorces were not desecrations. In India, however, they become desecrations of the sacred geography.

If national identities are imaginations (though not unreal for that reason),[43] an important counterfactual question remains to be answered. Why did secular nationalists not put the ideas of pluralism, tolerance, and syncretism at the heart of India's definition, so that the territorial idea was displaced? Why could it not be a purely cultural imagination of tolerance, pluralism, and syncretism which in principle could be a solution for the tensions between territory and culture? Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation, embodied these ideas in his person and politics.[44] That, however, was a source of strength as well as an impediment. Gandhi, a devout Hindu both in his private and public life, used religion to mobilize the masses in the national movement, turning a movement confined to the educated and anglicized upper middle classes into a mass movement in the 1920s. Given Gandhi's religiosity, these ideas got inextricably

entangled with Hinduism, making them suspect in the eyes of many
Muslims. For Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, Indian nationalism
under Gandhi was Hindu nationalism. The nonviolent, inclusive
mass movement created a nation and shook the British, but the
religious foundations of mass politics led also to Hindu-Muslim
riots.

Because pluralism, syncretism, and tolerance became associated
with Gandhi and Hinduism, the secularists in their construction of
national identity sought to escape the religious trappings. The political
challenge consisted in putting these ideas at the heart of India's
definition, making them part of India's dominant political discourse
without linking them to Hinduism—that is, explicitly defending
them as inalienable parts of Indian culture common to all religious
traditions and communities of India. It is conceivable that a secular
Nehru and his colleagues might have undertaken this challenge.
They did not. Nehru sought instead a solution in modernity and
economic development: big dams became "temples of the modern
age." Believing that all interpretations of India's past would generate
controversy, that creating a national idea in terms of India's past
was inherently problematic, he tried to make modernization and
economic development the basis for national identity, something on
which presumably everyone could agree. National identity, by this
reading, could dissociate itself from a common past or from common
origins, and gravitate towards a common future or a common
purpose. Let us forget the traditional past, let us build a modern
future: this was Nehru's political refrain. State policy, institutions,
and ideological discourse, Nehru thought, would deepen the nation's
commitment to modernity. As a consequence, the historically derived
ideas of pluralism and tolerance became the implicit idiom of
Nehruvian politics: while they informed his political conduct, they
were not explicitly articulated as the basis of India's national identity.
Politics since Nehru has paid even less attention to the principles of
pluralism and tolerance.

From Religion versus Culture to Religion as Culture

Finding a blending of territory and pluralism insufficient, the Hindu
nationalists argue that politics, laws, and institutions do not make
a nation. Emotions and loyalty do. Pluralism in the secular view is
embodied in laws (such as personal laws and the protection of

minority educational institutions) and in political institutions (such as federalism). According to Hindu nationalists, laws can always be politically manipulated,[45] and a proliferation of prominority laws has not led to the building of a cohesive nation. Instead, "fissiparous tendencies" have regularly erupted. Rather than running away from Hinduism, which is the source of India's culture, one should explicitly ground politics in Hinduism, not in laws and institutions:

> The Hindu *Rashtra* [nation] is essentially cultural in content, whereas the so-called secular concept pertains to the state and is limited to the territorial and political aspects of the Nation. [T]he mere territorial-cum-political concept divorced from its cultural essence can never be expected to impart any sanctity to the country's unity. The emotional binding of the people can be furnished only by culture and once that is snapped then there remains no logical argument against the demand by any part to separate itself from the country.[46]

In their conception of Hinduism, Hindu nationalists fluctuate between two meanings of Hinduism—Hinduism as a culture (as the above quotation suggests), and Hinduism as a religion. "Hindu is not the name of a religious faith like the Muslim and the Christian; it denotes the national life here," declares Sheshadri, a top-ranking RSS leader. In the same vein, Advani, President of the BJP, once argued that since Hinduism is the description of the nation, Muslims could be called Muslim Hindus, Sikhs could be called Sikh Hindus, and Christians could be called Christian Hindus.[47]

However, when Hindu nationalists make speeches for the liberation of Lord Ram's birthplace, the phraseology is imbued with religious imagery, and the rituals are *sanatani* (religious in an idol-worshipping sense). It is not at all clear what the intended distinction between religion and culture is for Hindu nationalists. While they are correct that the term Hindu, in its original meaning, meant those who lived in Hindustan (the everyday term for India in much of the North), over the last few centuries the term "Hindu" has become a religious term, and "Indian" has replaced "Hindu" for the civilizational meaning.[48] Labels acquire new meanings in history.

For a secular nationalist, the two terms—religion and culture—are clearly separable: syncretism and tolerance are properties of all religions and communities in India, and not simply of Hinduism. A celebration of Indian culture does not require one to be a Hindu.

For Hindu nationalists, the two terms—India and Hindu—are synonymous. They make no special attempts to incorporate Muslim symbols into their conceptions of culture. The Hindu nationalist attitude to the great Moghul monuments such as the Taj Mahal remains unclear. Many object even to the Muslim names of North Indian cities: Aligarh, they say, should be called Harigarh, Allahabad Prayag, and Lucknow Lakshmanpur.[49] In *Hindutva,* the cultural and religious meanings of Hinduism blend into each other, and the distinction so critical for the secular nationalist disappears.

The Hindu nationalist discourse on Islam is selective and ominous. In India, Islam developed two broad forms: syncretist and exclusivist. Syncretistic Islam integrated into the preexisting Indian culture, just as Indonesian Muslims retained their pre-Islamic heritage of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Exclusivist Islam may be a personal faith, or may also enter the political sphere, becoming an ideology, sometimes displaying fundamentalist qualities.[50] Syncretistic Islam has produced some of the pillars of Indian culture, music, poetry, and literature. It is not possible to conceptualize India's culture today if Muslim influences are completely excluded. Moreover, Indian Muslims have also fought wars against Pakistan. By generating an anti-Muslim discourse, Hindu nationalists threaten embittering 110 million Muslims permanently, including those syncretistic in their religiosity and culture, and also those for whom Islam is a faith, a way to sustain troubled private lives, but not a political ideology. One may argue that the political and ideological battle of nationalists is against Islamic fundamentalism and Muslim separatism. How can it be against all those who profess faith in Islam? In the Hindu nationalist discourse, these distinctions easily blur. An anti-Muslim hysteria is its natural outcome.

It should now be clear why secular and Hindu nationalisms are ideological adversaries, and have remained so for decades. In an ingenious way, Mahatma Gandhi sought to combine the two. Tolerance and pluralism, he argued, stemmed from his belief in Hinduism. Being a Hindu and having respect for Muslim culture could easily go together. Frequently referring to his appreciation of Christianity, Buddhism, and Jainism, he never defined India as a Hindu nation.[51] The nation, he argued, should incorporate all religions; being a Muslim in no way excluded one from being an Indian.

Gandhi, of course, succeeded and failed. India acquired its political identity and independence, but he was unable to persuade Jinnah and the Muslim League from creating Pakistan. "Midnight's Children," independent India and Pakistan, were born together. Gandhi's failure to prevent the partition of India sent two signals. To the secular nationalists, it highlighted the antinomy between religion and Indian nationalism. To the Hindu nationalists, it reinforced their belief in the complementarity between Hinduism and the Indian nation on the one hand, and a basic antinomy between Islam and Indian nationalism on the other. Since Gandhi's death, therefore, Hindu and secular nationalisms have been locked in a conflict for political power and for the ideological shaping of India. The first battle for political and ideological hegemony after independence was won by secular nationalism; the battle today is not so clearly in favor of secular nationalists. The context since the 1980s has changed.

HAS THE "SECULAR PROJECT" UNRAVELED?

The Organizational Decay of the Congress Party

In twentieth-century India, the principal organizational embodiment of secular nationalism has been the Congress party. Once a powerful organization associated with the founding and building of the nation, the Congress party is today a rusty, clay-footed colossus. Nations, as we know, are politically created; they do not naturally exist. Just as peasants were turned into Frenchmen over the course of many years,[52] the Congress attempted to turn an old civilization into a nation in the first half of the early twentieth century. Of the other large multiethnic countries in the world,[53] the Communists in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia also sought to create nations, but not on the basis of conciliation and democracy. Because their nation-building was based on coercion, it was not clear how deeply a Croat felt for Yugoslavia, or how ardent a Georgian or a Balt was for the Soviet Union.[54] The Congress party mobilized the masses into a national movement, generated pride and belief in India, and, most of all, maintained an ideology of nonviolence, an ideology that emphasized that even the British were to be politically defeated, not killed. While violence erupted periodically, it was not the

cornerstone of the national movement. The mobilization lasted almost three decades. As a result, the idea of India as a nation reached every part of India. By the 1930s and 1940s, Gandhi, Nehru, and the Congress party were everywhere. In Punjab, the site of an insurgency until recently, they were viewed as local folk. In today's insurgent Kashmir, a Hindu-Muslim-Sikh coalition openly embraced Gandhi even as the rest of India was burning with communal violence over partition. The emergence of Pakistan was the greatest failure of the Congress. The Muslim League could not be won over. Nor could the Muslim League win over all Muslims in the subcontinent, in good part because of the interreligious idea of India so painstakingly promoted by the Congress party.

Under Indira Gandhi (1969–1984) and Rajiv Gandhi (1985–1991), the Congress declined as an institution. Electoral success coexisted with organizational emaciation. The organizational decay of the Congress coincides with Indira Gandhi's rise to unquestioned power by the early 1970s. Nehru had used his charisma to promote intraparty democracy, not to undermine it, strengthening the organization in the process. Indira Gandhi used her charisma to make the party utterly dependent on her, suspending intraparty democracy and debate, and weakening the organization as a result. Nehru's ideological positions were openly debated in party forums, and sometimes rejected. Party elections regularly produced state-level leaders; their democratic victories, even when disagreeable, were respected. Indira Gandhi imposed her positions on the party. She would suspend the state-level leaders if they dared to oppose her; she would not allow the state unit to elect its leader. Since this could not be done in a party that elected its office holders, she finally did away with party elections.[55] She also tried to suspend national elections, but that attempt failed miserably.[56]

By the late 1980s, there was an organizational and ideological vacuum in Indian politics. Organizationally, the Congress was listless. Ideologically, it was not obvious what it stood for. Professing secularism, its leaders were unafraid to use religion for political purposes. Professing socialism, some of its leaders wholeheartedly embraced the market. The Congress is no longer a party but an undifferentiated, unanchored medley of individuals sustained by patronage. What is worse, most opposition parties have followed

the Congress' lead. They do not have organizational elections either, nor for that matter do they show ideological cohesion.

There have been two major exceptions to this institutional rot: the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPM) and the BJP. The class-based mobilization of the CPM has some inherent limitations in India, making it hard for the CPM to extend its popularity beyond isolated pockets. At the national level, the discipline of the BJP may emerge as an alternative to the Congress. If the available reports are correct, the demolition of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya was the party's first major failure in discipline.[57] Before that, the BJP came increasingly to be associated with a party that could claim discipline, probity, principles, and organization. Having not been in government for long,[58] it was not tainted with a lust for power or corruption. Most politicians and parties looked hopelessly compromised by the end of the 1980s. It is to be seen whether these images of the BJP will survive the Ayodhya imbroglio.

Secularism as a Modernist Ideology

It is not modern India which has tolerated Judaism in India for nearly 2,000 years, Christianity from before the time it went to Europe, and Zorastrianism for more than 1,200 years; it is traditional India which has shown such tolerance. . . .As India gets modernized, religious violence is increasing. . .In the earlier centuries, inter-religious riots were rare and localized. . . .[S]omewhere and somehow, religious violence has something to do with the urban-industrial vision of life and with the political process the vision lets loose.

—Ashis Nandy[59]

Social analysts draw attention to the contradiction between the undoubted though slow spread of secularization in everyday life, on the one hand, and the unmistakable rise of fundamentalism, on the other. But surely these phenomena are only apparently contradictory, for in truth it is the marginalization of faith, which is what secularism is, that permits the perversion of religion. There are no fundamentalists or revivalists in traditional society.

—T. N. Madan[60]

With these words written by T. N. Madan and Ashis Nandy, a powerful argument against secularism has emerged in India in recent years. India's secularism is collapsing, according to the antisecularist view, not because it has not gone far enough, but

because it has gone too far. Secularism is a victim of its official success.

The antisecularist argument proceeds at two levels— a larger theoretical level and an India-specific level. The theoretical attack on secularism is embedded in the generic critique of modernity, now so common in the disciplines of anthropology, literary criticism, and history (especially of the developing world). Secularism, in this view, is a necessary concomitant of the project of modernity, science, and rationality. Modernity is viewed as facing serious political difficulties all over the world, leading to religious (and ethnic) revivals. The basic flaw of modernity, according to this view, is that it mocks the believer for his morality, but it provides no alternative conception of what the purpose of life is, what the good life is, or how we should conduct ourselves in our families and communities. Politics founded on such a modernist, secular vision suffers from irremediable defects. No means are considered detestable enough so long as they facilitate the realization of political ends. Holding nothing sacred, lacking an alternative source of ethics, and having no internal restraints on political behavior, modernity and secularism denude politics of morality. Because human beings cannot live without notions of right and wrong, the secular and modernist project creates increasing popular skepticism. Moreover, because it also generates condescension toward religion, secularism puts the believer on the defensive, setting off a religious reaction.

Pointing to the origins of secularism, the antisecularists also argue that it is a Western concept with foundations in the Enlightenment and Reformation. The Enlightenment heralded the supremacy of reason over belief, and, by making the individual responsible for his salvation without the intermediation of the Church, the rise of Protestantism made the separation of the state and Church possible. Secularism became embedded in Western culture. There is no similar civilizational niche for secularism in India. Religion was, and remains today, the ultimate source of morality and meaning for most Indians. Communal riots never took place in traditional India, for traditional religiosity allowed for principles of religious tolerance and coexistence. Modernity, however, has led to two results in the realm of religion and politics. Because of the link between secularism and amoral politics, communal riots in India have increased with the advent of modernity. And because

secularism places the believer on the defensive, fundamentalism and secularism have become two sides of the same coin. Principles of tolerance will have to be derived from traditional India in the manner of Mahatma Gandhi, not from modernist secularism as Nehru did.

This is not the place to engage in an argument about the relationship between modernity and morality. For purposes of this paper, the application of "modernist logic" to Indian politics is more pertinent. It will suffice to note that the view that modernity and secularism lead to a moral and spiritual vacuum in human life is philosophically grounded in the Counter-Enlightenment. The themes of the Counter-Enlightenment continue to reverberate in several fields of knowledge: literature, philosophy, social sciences, and surprisingly, even in the natural sciences.[61] Moreover, several leading students of rationality accept the claim that rationality (and science) are morally neutral. As Albert Einstein argued, science and rationality are essentially about "is," not about "ought." Unless morally grounded, rationality can indeed be destructive. Embedded in moral ends, however, it can make a remarkable contribution to human life. Nuclear energy, according to Einstein, is the best example of this reasoning.[62]

The antisecularists may indeed be right that modernity is morally neutral. It does not follow, however, that modernity (or secularism) therefore leads to intolerance and violence. Given contrasting conceptions of truth, religiously driven men may also be intolerant and violent, notwithstanding the morality of each religious system. Moral men do not necessarily make a tolerant society if there are multiple and exclusive conceptions of morality.

The antisecularists do not distinguish between different types of tradition, or between the various types of modernity. Akbar, the tolerant Mughal ruler, and Aurangzeb, the intolerant one, were both products of medieval India. Akbar built bridges across communities; Aurangzeb destroyed them. Not only did he repress "infidels" (the non-Islamic religious groups), but he also sought to impose religious purity within the Muslim community, targeting "heretics" and "apostates," and killing his own brother, Dara Shikoh, in the process. Shikoh's crime was heresy: he used Islam

to justify his attempt to combine features of Islam and Hinduism. Religion and tradition can thus be tolerant as well as brutally violent.[63]

Varieties of Secularism (and Modernity): Tolerance, Arrogance, and Innocence

Similarly, modernity and secularism can come in various forms. Two trends have marked the recent behavior of India's secular politicians. One may be called secular arrogance, the other secular innocence. Secular arrogance was best exemplified by Indira Gandhi, secular innocence by Rajiv Gandhi. Both of these variants are very different from Nehru's secularism, which can be called secular tolerance.[64] Nehru, a modernist, might have held strong reservations about religion, but his private beliefs did not translate into an arrogant abuse of religion in public life. It is principles in public life, rather than cosmologies governing private life, which are at issue. In their private lives, Nehru, Indira and Rajiv Gandhi may have all been a-religious (though there are indications that Indira Gandhi turned towards religion in the last years of her life). In their public life, however, they were profoundly different. Secular arrogance and secular innocence, associated with India's political decline of the last decade, fit the Nandy-Madan view best. It was not preordained that tolerance over time would degenerate into arrogance and innocence.

Secular arrogance is the idea that political power may be used either to co-opt the believer, or to subdue him. The believer is viewed not only as an object of modernization/secularization (an aim which a number of modernists including Nehru agreed with), but also as a pawn on the political chessboard, which modernists like Nehru never imagined. In its worst form, secular arrogance combines two drives: the use of the believer by the politician for secular, political purposes, and the wish to crush him.

This kind of process was initiated by Indira Gandhi. Her political dalliance with Sikh religious extremism in the late 1970s was dangerous. To defeat the Akali Dal, a moderate Sikh party which competed with the Congress in Punjab, she used a religious leader, Sant Bhindranwale. Religious preachers like Bhindranwale felt that the Sikh community was losing its soul, in part by the economic prosperity that the Green Revolution had brought about. Indira

Gandhi would not concede the secular demands of the moderate Akali factions (a greater share of river waters or a larger federal investment of fiscal resources), but she conceded several demands of the religious extreme (declaring Amritsar a Holy City, banning smoking there, and allowing Sikh religious broadcasts over the state-controlled radio).[65] That was in striking contrast to the situation in the late 1950s and early 1960s when religious issues figured in Punjab politics. Nehru refused to legitimate the Master Tara Singh faction associated with a religiously based politics. Instead, he strengthened the Sant Fateh Singh faction associated with *linguistic* demands, defeating the *religious* faction in the end.[66] He would neither politically trifle with religion, despite his opposition to religion, nor would he legitimate religious leaders in politics.

Indira Gandhi used religion for political purposes; Bhindranwale used politics for his religious pursuits. She achieved a dubious success in the end. The moderate Akali factions, her rivals in party politics, were weakened, but the preacher and his men went out of control. Seeking to restore piety, Bhindranwale and his followers targeted the heretics and apostates, then the "infidels." They eventually took shelter in the Golden Temple, the Vatican of the Sikhs, and conducted their religious mission from there. Indira Gandhi finally ordered the army to invade the temple.[67]

The desecration of the Golden Temple was a transformative event in Hindu-Sikh relations. It led to Indira Gandhi's assassination by her Sikh bodyguards. June 6, 1984 (the attack on the Golden Temple) and October 31, 1984 (Indira Gandhi's assassination) began a cycle of desecration and revenge. Even the most patriotic Sikhs felt violated by her desecration of the Golden Temple. A large part of the Hindu middle class was equally revolted by the action of her Sikh bodyguards. Indira Gandhi's motivations remain unclear, although several interpretations are possible. Amoral, Machiavellian statecraft was known to be her hallmark. Weakening the moderate Akalis was her goal; the legitimacy of means was not an issue for her. Given her notion of politics and power, in all probability she imagined that state power would ultimately subdue Bhindranwale; that even after a mighty desecration, the enticements of power would either co-opt the Sikh community, or crush its "pretensions." She paid for this arrogance with her life, and it may take a long while before the Hindu-Sikh wounds are fully healed.

Secularism as innocence can also spell danger if combined with India's definition of secularism. In India, secularism is not defined as a radical separation between the state and church.[68] The founders argued that in the Indian context, keeping the state equally distant from all religions and not letting it favor any one in public policy was the best solution.

Unlike the clarity entailed in a radical church-state separation, secularism as equidistance is a nebulous concept. *Equal distance* can also be translated as *equal proximity*. If it is alleged that the state is moving towards one particular religion, the state, to equalize the distance, can subsequently move towards other religions. Each such equalizing step may be aimed at soothing the religious communities. But the state gets more embroiled in religion. An unstable equilibrium results, breeding distrust all around. Under Nehru, equidistance was not turned into equiproximity. Under Rajiv Gandhi, it was.

The turning point was the Shah Bano case in the mid-1980s. Shah Bano, a Muslim woman, filed for maintenance after being divorced by her husband. The husband argued that maintenance was not permissible under Islamic law. Shah Bano sought protection under the country's civil law, not the Islamic personal code. The Supreme Court argued that the country's civil law overrode any personal laws.[69] Faced with a Muslim furor, Rajiv Gandhi first supported the Court. Then, to soothe Muslim feelings, he ordered his party to pass a law in parliament that made the *Shariat* (Islamic personal law) superior to the civil law in matters concerning the maintenance of divorced Muslim women. He argued that secularism required giving emotional security to the minorities. A Hindu storm consequently erupted. The Temple-Mosque site in Ayodhya, closed for years, was opened to Hindu pilgrimage and worship. The largest demonstration of Muslims seen in Delhi followed, with riots breaking out. Ostensibly trying to equalize the distance between religions, the government became more entrapped in religion.

Twisted Meanings, Embattled Symbols

The Shah Bano case gave Hindu nationalists a remarkable opportunity to press their claims on the disputed Temple-Mosque site. Hindu belief about the birthplace of Ram, argued Hindu nationalists, was enough for the construction of a Ram temple. Courts, they said,

could not pronounce judgments on matters of faith. The government's response that civil laws were prior to religious faith (or religious laws) had become a contradiction in terms. In the Shah Bano case, after all, the superiority of religious faith over civil law had already been affirmed by the government, and the Supreme Court had been overturned. The secular contention about the superiority of law over faith could not possibly apply to only one community.

After agitating for and getting a faith-based legislation, Muslim leaders could not, without contradiction, claim the mosque. Their arguments were either religious or legal. The religious argument was that a mosque was always a mosque even if it was not in use as the disputed mosque had been for several decades. And the legal argument was that as a mosque, the building was their property and could not be destroyed. By the time L. K. Advani led the mobilization to rebuild the Ram temple in 1990, these arguments, whatever their legal validity, were becoming part of the political process where a different logic operated.[70] Arguments were not only to be made; they also had to be made acceptable to the masses in general.

It is in the political realm that the secular and Muslim leadership showed a lack of imagination, playing into the hands of Hindu nationalists. So long as the issue was presented as a mosque versus temple issue, the dispute remained religious, and could not generate a movement. But when it became a Ram versus Babur issue, which is how the BJP simultaneously presented it, it took on nationalistic overtones. Babur was unquestionably an alien conqueror; Ram was not. Babur, of Turko-Mongol descent, invaded India with an army and founded an empire. Though several of Babur's descendants, especially Emperor Akbar, blended into India's culture, Babur himself remains an outsider in popular imagination. Contrariwise, though no Hindu god is uniformly popular all over India, for all of Hinduism's pantheism, Ram is one of the most popular. His popularity has made him both a religious and cultural figure. The Ramayana (the tale of Ram) is the most popular epic, especially in North India. An annual and popular enactment of the tale of Ram (*Ramlila*) in which many Muslims have traditionally participated, makes Ram a part of everyday culture in much of India. One does not have to be religious to experience culturally the Ramayana in India.

Muslim and secular leadership dwelled on the religious meaning of Ayodhya, and refused to encounter the second, nationalistic

meaning. The various mosque-action committees (and the secular historians) initially argued that Ram was a mythological figure; there was no historical proof either for Ram's existence or for his birthplace. This was a gratuitous argument. Core beliefs of many religions flourish without proof. How can one *prove* that Prophet Mohammed's hair was brought to a mosque in Sri Nagar: Muslims of Kashmir believe so. Similarly, how can one prove that Buddha left his tooth in Sri Lanka, or that Jesus was born of a virgin. Religious belief does not depend on rational evidence. If the *Shariat* was the word of God for which no proof was required—as the Muslim leaders had claimed in the Shah Bano controversy—how could proof be sought for a Hindu belief?

The problem was compounded by three more facts. First, it is widely known that the disputed mosque had not been used for the last several decades. Second, mosques are known to have been moved in the past, even in Muslim countries. By repeatedly attacking an article of faith over a mosque not used for decades, the mosque-action committees and Muslim leadership gave the appearance of utter intransigence. Was Babur so much more important than Ram in India? The question was repeatedly asked by a large number of Hindus, many of them nonreligious.[71]

Finally, while the Muslim leadership was conducting its struggle to save the Babri mosque, some of the most visible leaders of the Muslim community, for example, Shahabuddin and Imam Bukhari, gave a call for the boycott of India's Republic Day. The aim, according to them, was to draw attention to their demands. This strategy was symbolically disastrous not only for Hindu nationalists, but for a large number of secular Indians. The fight was presumably with Hindu bigotry, not with India as a nation. The Republic Day was a matter of pride for the entire nation, not simply for the Hindus. Some of India's Muslim leaders did indeed reject the call for a boycott. Unfortunately, the most visible leaders continued undeterred. There were also moments when Shahabuddin tried to identify with Sikh militants who were bent upon undermining the nation.

As I have argued, Indian Islam has taken syncretistic as well as separatist forms. Most Muslims are syncretistic in their culture, if not in their religious beliefs. Why Muslim leadership did not reflect the cultural syncretism of Indian Muslims but chose instead dangerous

symbolic politics is an unresolved puzzle. A reaction against the existing Muslim leadership may well be emerging, rooted in the increasing realization that Muslim leadership in India has not taken good care of the Muslim community.[72]

The context, thus, provided muscle to the BJP's critique of the actually existing secularism in India. Secularism in India, Advani argues, is a pseudosecularism; it has meant excessive appeasement of minorities, or what he calls "minorityism." The argument is both right and wrong, but the wrong side was scarcely noticed in the politics of the late 1980s.

Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, and Buddhists, added to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (nonreligious minorities, nonetheless viewed as minorities), constitute more than 37 percent of India's electorate.[73] In a "first-past-the-post" British-style parliamentary system, a 40 percent vote can easily translate into 50 to 60 percent of the legislative seats. Since, according to conventional wisdom, the fractious majority community does not vote as a bloc but the minorities do, there is a temptation in the system for power-seeking centrist parties to develop prominority programs. Purely in an electoral sense, therefore, India's political system does indeed gravitate towards the minorities, though the minorities may feel that this is not enough, and there is some justice in their claim.

Whatever the objective truth—if there is one—the problem of perceptions dominates the discussion. Minorities are visible in India's upper political, bureaucratic, and cultural layers. Roman Catholics and Sikhs have led the armed forces of India. General Jacob, a famous Jewish general, led India to victory in the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War. Muslims have regularly occupied positions in the Cabinet. The man who produced India's first medium-range missile is a Muslim. The man who leads the national cricket team, a sport that generates national hysteria, is a Muslim. Muslims are among the leading classical musicians of the country. Muslim film stars have been role models, even for Hindu youth. Minority educational institutions have legal privileges, enjoying special grants from the government. The Constitution gives Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, a special status, making several federal laws inapplicable there even as the rest of the states are bound by these laws. Finally, in 1986, the government, on political grounds, overruled the Supreme Court by declaring that Muslim personal law was superior to the

country's civil law in matters of marriage and divorce, and no
Muslim woman could opt out of it without leaving the faith itself.[74]
If Muslims remain unhappy, many secularists and Muslim politicians
argue, the state ought to do more.

The same set of facts, however, is used to present the BJP story.
Muslim film and sports stars, musicians, and scientists are proof
that talent matters irrespective of religion and that a largely Hindu
society may not be unfair. This argument has a serious flaw. The
BJP forgets that Muslims, despite these special provisions, are among
the poorest and least educated community in the country. Often,
they are also the object of police brutality in riots.

The problem of perceptions boils down to how many concessions
to the minorities are sufficient. There is no objective answer to this
question, in India or elsewhere. Muslim politicians and secularists
point to the economic backwardness of Muslims and argue for
greater assistance. The BJP points to the visibility of minorities in
India's political and cultural life, saying that enough is enough.

When secularism was equated with secular tolerance and legitimated
by Nehru's principled behavior, arguments that it was the responsibility
of the majority community to make minorities secure could be
openly made.[75] Despite such open arguments in favor of minorities,
Hindu nationalists were not able to win against Nehru. When
principled secularism—not legitimating religion in political
mobilization but maintaining a concern for minority welfare—was
replaced by unprincipled secularism, the secular project began to
unravel.

This weakening does not disprove the worth of secularism as a
political principle, as Nandy and Madan have argued. Morality and
meaning in politics, first of all, do not have to emerge from religion;
they can also emerge from a modernist, liberal conception of ethics.
Nehru was moral as well as a-religious. Moreover, nonreligious
ethical behavior can also be politically legitimated, even in societies
marked by intense religiosity. Secularism by itself thus does not
make one amoral or unethical. If this is how secular politicians of
the 1980s behaved, it is not what secularism as a principle entails.
This distinction is crucial for explaining the events of the last
decade.

If the India of the 1990s did not follow from Nehru's secularism,
is reviving Nehru's secular modernism a solution for the current

difficulties? The defense of Nehru's secularism should not be construed as an argument for its revival. As already indicated, the Nehruvian rationale for secularism relied on certain ideas of political liberalism and modernity. Nehru did not make a case for his project in terms of India's civilization, for which *The Discovery of India* laid the groundwork. He wanted Indians to leave their pasts and become modern. While futures are indeed created, they are not typically created on a clean slate. It is hard for nations to leave their pasts behind. The more pertinent issue is: How does a nation reconstruct its past? Which traditions should be revived, and which ones dropped? Since a nation's past is not undifferentiated, contesting visions are generally available. The ideological task is to retrieve that which is valuable, and to make this selective retrieval a political reality. An England could not have been, and cannot be, created in India; only a future consistent with one of India's several pasts is possible.

Strictly speaking, Nehru's political pluralism and his opposition to religion are separable. One does not depend on the other. It is possible to reconceptualize secular nationalism, by combining Nehru's political pluralism with his understanding that India's history is marked by cultural pluralism. One does not have to defend political pluralism and tolerance in terms of a modernist liberal theory; one can also defend it in terms of India's historical and cultural traditions. A pluralist democracy and secularism can thus be civilizationally anchored. This vision of politics requires recalling the pluralistic and syncretistic heroes of India's past, explicitly defending a politics and ideology of secularism in cultural terms, and mobilizing the people on that understanding.

CONCLUSION

What happens to India now depends on who rules India and what the ruling ideology is going to be. Hindu nationalists have a moderate faction and an extremist faction. The moderate faction emphasizes *dialogue* with the Muslim community on a common civil code, state grants to minority educational institutions, and the special status of Kashmir (making it equal to all other states).[76] This faction, though not dominant, is not inconsequential. Against these ideological pushes towards a center-right position, the right wing staged a coup in Ayodhya.[77] Many of the cadres were galvanized into action by

the promise of a Ram temple and wanted that promise to be kept, regardless of the political implications. It is still not clear which of these two factions will win out in the long run.

At the national level, there are four possibilities: *1)* a continuation of Congress rule, though with a changed, promarket economic ideology (with or without a revived organization); *2)* the rise of the BJP to national power with the center Right in command; *3)* the rise of the BJP with the right wing in command; and *4)* a non-Congress coalition, or a coalition of the Congress with other anti-BJP parties. Politics, as we know, is considerably open-ended. As of now, we can only present scenarios.

If Hindu nationalism were to come to power at all, the second scenario could be its relatively peaceful face. It would probably entail an inclusive view of Hinduism. Whether or not the moderates can define BJP politics remains unclear. Much depends on where the most popular leaders of BJP go and how well they communicate with the base, how the Congress behaves, and whether Muslim politics change at all.

It is the third scenario which means the end of India as we know it civilizationally (and perhaps also territorially). As Ayodhya has shown, the right wing is bigoted, communal, and exclusionary. Hatred is the cornerstone of its politics. It will bring back the hatred associated with the 1947 partition, not the understanding that created India as a nation. To believe that 110 million Muslims can be beaten into submission is to believe a lie, a most dangerous lie.

Much, therefore, is at stake. Politics created a nation in the first half of the century. Politics will revive it, add to its troubles, or even unmake it. Syncretism, pluralism, and tolerance— defended as attributes of Indian culture as it has historically existed, not simply those of Hinduism, and placed at the center of India's political discourse —remain India's best bet. The political party that can give a forceful and organized political expression to this cultural reading has the best chance of keeping India together. It is not clear which political party will mount an ideological challenge to the BJP on these lines.

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ENDNOTES

[1]T. N. Madan, "Secularism in its Place," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 46 (4) (November 1987); and Ashis Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance," *Alternatives* 13 (3) (1988).

[2]V. S. Naipaul, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (New York: Viking, 1990), 517–18.

[3]Reports indicate that by now the insurgency in Punjab, after a decade of brutal violence, has in all probability died down. Even though Sikh militants threatened violence if the people participated in elections, the last two elections saw large turnouts of over 70 percent, indicating an erosion in the ability of militants to shape politics. See "A Victory for Hope," *India Today*, 15 February 1993.

[4]Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

[5]See Isaiah Berlin, "The Bent Twig: On the Rise of Nationalism," *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992). Also see Stuart Hampshire's review of Berlin's views in "Nationalism," in Edna and Avishai Margalit, eds., *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[6]Some would like to separate religion from this list, letting ethnicity incorporate the other attributes. From the viewpoint of political identities and group solidarity, it is not entirely clear that this separation is justified in principle. It does become critical, however, when ethnicity and religion clash (East and West Pakistan, Kashmiri Hindus and Muslims, Irish Protestants and Catholics, Black and White American Christians). See Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1985).

[7]I borrow this way of distinguishing models from Ashis Nandy,"The Ramjanmbhumi Movement and the Fear of Self," paper presented at the CFIA South Asia Seminar, Harvard University, April 1992.

[8]V. D. Savarkar, *Hindutva* (Bombay: Veer Savarkar Prakashan, 1989), 110–13.

[9]Nanaji Deshmukh, *Rethinking Secularism* (Delhi: Suruchi Prakashan, 1989).

[10]One only has to hear the tapes of Sadhvi Ritambhra, a prominent Hindu activist repeatedly allowed by the BJP to make speeches during 1990–1992, to appreciate how much hatred the right wing has for the Muslims.

[11]Savarkar, *Hindutva*; Deen Dayal Upadhyay, *Akhand Bharat Aur Muslim Samasya* (*Undivided India and the Muslim Problem*) (Noida: Jagriti Prakashan, 1992); and M. S. Golwalakar, *Rashtra (The Nation)* (Delhi: Suruchi Prakashan, 1992), 301–306.

[12]Sikandar Bakht is a Vice President of the BJP. His position on the demolition of the Babri mosque is explained in an interview in *Saptahik Hindustan* (Delhi), 23–30 December 1992.

[13]The RSS does not participate in elections. The best study of the RSS is Walter Anderson and Sridhar Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron* (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1986).

[14]The three main proponents of Hindu nationalism within the national movement were Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Sardal Patel, and P. D. Tandon.

[15]For a brief view of Gandhi's position on religion, see Mahatma Gandhi, *My God* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1962) and *Hindu Dharma* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1978). See also Margaret Chatterji, *Gandhi's Religious Thought* (London: MacMillan, 1983).

[16]A government investigation committee found that the RSS was not directly involved in the assassination; some RSS individuals were. In the eyes of the populace, this was not an important distinction. For details, see Bruce Graham, *Hindu Nationalism and Indian Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), chap. 3.

[17]See James Manor, "BJP in South India: 1991 General Elections," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 13–20 June 1992.

[18]India now claims to have a two hundred million strong middle class. It is generally believed that a fairly large segment of the new middle class supports Hindu nationalism. For how the rise of Hindu nationalism may be related to the emergence of a new middle class, see Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, "Modern Hate," *The New Republic*, 22 March 1993.

[19]Opinion polls indicate that the BJP has benefited in the short run. The most reliable opinion survey indicates that if elections had been held in December 1992, the BJP would have won 170 seats in parliament instead of its current 119, though it would still not have won as many as the Congress party. Cf. Prannoy Roy, *India Today*, 15 January 1993.

[20]For a detailed analysis of the Ayodhya movement, see Ashutosh Varshney, "Battling the Past, Forging a Future? Ayodhya and Beyond," in Philip Oldenburg, ed., *India Briefing* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993).

[21]For an analysis of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination, see Ashis Nandy, "The Final Encounter: The Politics of Gandhi's Assassination," in Ashis Nandy, *At the Edge of Psychology* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981).

[22]For earlier scholarly attempts at defining India's national identity, see Rajni Kothari, *Politics in India* (Boston, Mass.: Little Brown, 1970), chaps. II, VII, VIII; Ravinder Kumar, "India's Secular Culture," in Ravinder Kumar, *The Making of a Nation* (Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1989); and Ainslie Embree, *Imagining India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[23]Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985).

[24]See David Laitin, *Hegemony and Culture: Religion and Politics Among the Yoruba* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

[25]Stanley Hoffmann, Tanner lectures on "The Nation, Nationalism and After: The Case of France," (forthcoming); also see Stanley Hoffmann, "Thoughts on the French Nation Today," in this issue of *Dædalus.* For a comparison of French and German national identities, see Rogers Brubaker, *Immigration and Citizenship in Germany and France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[26]Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), chap. 2.

[27]Judith Miller, "Strangers at the Gate," *The New York Times Magazine,* 15 September 1991; and *The Economist,* 22 March 1991.

[28]Huntington, *American Politics,* 16.

[29]Diana Eck, "The Mythic Construction of the Land of India," paper presented at the South Asia Seminar, Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 16 March 1990. Also see Ainslie Embree, ed., *Alberuni's India* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1971).

[30]P. M. Currie, *The Shrine and Cult of Muin-al-Din Chishti of Ajmer* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989); Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Cults: Islam and Christianity in South India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[31]A clear distinction between three terms —pluralism, syncretism, and assimilation— should be made here. Pluralism would indicate a coexistence of distinctive identities. Syncretism would signify not a tolerant coexistence of distinctions but a merging of cultures/religions, leading to a new form of culture/religion. In its interaction with Hinduism, Islam, especially Sufism, developed forms of piety and culture that represented Indian as opposed to Arab versions of Islam (for example, worship at the graves of great Sufi saints). Syncretism should also be distinguished from assimilation. Whereas assimilation means absorption into the dominant culture/religion, syncretism means a give-and-take between cultures and religions.

[32]Some historians disagree. They argue that a Hindu identity is at best a creation of the last two hundred to three hundred years. Before that, there were different sects, but no Hindu identity as such. See Romila Thapar, "Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for Hindu Identity," *Modern Asian Studies* 23 (2) (1989); and Robert Frykenberg, "Constructions of Hinduism at the Nexus of History and Religion," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23 (3) (Winter 1993).

[33]M. S. Golwalkar, *We or Our Nationhood Defined* (Nagpur: Bharat Publications, 1939).

[34]Savarkar, *Hindutva.* Savarkar and many other Hindu nationalists contest that *Hindutva* is a religious term. For them, it has a cultural meaning.

[35]Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 62.

[36]In a similar vein, Rajni Kothari writes: "In contrast to the great historical empires, the unity of India owed itself not to the authority of a given political system but to the wide diffusion of the cultural symbols, the spiritual values, and the structure of roles and functions characteristic of a continuous civilization. The essential unity of India has not been political but cultural." Kothari, *Politics in India,* 251. A contrast with another large multiethnic nation, the United States, can be drawn

here. Several commentators argue that the unity of the United States lies in the political principles that founded the nation, while different communities evolved their distinctive cultures. See Michael Walzer, *What It Means To Be An American* (New York: Marsilio, 1993).

[37]Of these, some are past rulers, others purely cultural figures. Kabir and Nanak were saints that inspired syncretistic beliefs and preached interreligious understanding and love. See John S. Hawley and Mark Jurgensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[38]Nehru, *The Discovery*, 270.

[39]"Will and Testament," in S. Gopal, ed., *Jawaharlal Nehru: An Anthology* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980), 647–48.

[40]Nehru, *The Discovery*, 63. Also see his discussion of the role of *Dharti* (land) in the peasant conception of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) in Ibid., 57–60.

[41]For a fuller discussion of Kashmir, see Ashutosh Varshney, "India, Pakistan and Kashmir: Antinomies of Nationalism," *Asian Survey,* November 1991, and "Three Compromised Nationalisms: Why Kashmir Has been a Problem," in Raju Thomas, ed., *Perspectives on Kashmir* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992).

[42]Arun Shourie, *Religion in Politics* (Delhi: Roli Books, 1987), 91–124.

[43]Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso Press, 1983).

[44]Judith Brown, *Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990).

[45]Nanaji Deshmukh, *Rethinking Secularism* (Delhi: Suruchi Prakashan, 1989); H. V. Sheshadri et al., *Why Hindu Rashtra* (Delhi: Suruchi Prakashan, 1990).

[46]H. V. Sheshadri, "Hindu Rashtra: What and Why," *Hindu Vishva* (Prayag) 25 (12) (Silver Jubilee Special Issue 1989–1990): 30.

[47]Interview with L. K. Advani, *Sunday* (Calcutta), 22 July 1990.

[48]Frykenberg, "Constructions of Hinduism."

[49]Interviews in Lucknow with Hindu nationalists, December 1991.

[50]Ashis Nandy has suggested the distinction between faith and ideology in "The Politics of Secularism."

[51]How could Gandhi be a Hindu as well as respect other religions? In a metaphorical statement that has become legendary, Gandhi described his pluralism thus: "I do not want my house to be walled on all sides and my windows stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any." Statement made on 1 June 1921.

[52]Eugene Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1976).

[53]The United States is perhaps the best successful case of multiethnic nation-building in the world. See Michael Walzer, *What It Means To Be An American.*

[54]Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist Leninist Theory and Strategy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983),1–42, 128–71.

[55]Earlier in 1991, the Congress had its first party elections since 1973.

[56]The debate between those who argue that Indira Gandhi was a prisoner of social forces and those that argue that she led her party's decline will never be settled. See Atul Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent: The Crisis of Governability in India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[57]Interview with Atal Behari Vajpayee in *India Abroad,* 18 December 1992.

[58]The BJP has formed state goverrnments, though at the central level, it has been part of the ruling coalition only for two years (1977–1979).

[59]Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance," 155.

[60]Madan, "Secularism in its Place," 749.

[61]For literature, see Milan Kundera, "The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes," in his *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); for philosophy, see Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current* (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), and L. Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1990); and for natural sciences, see Albert Einstein's essays on science and religion in *Ideas and Opinions* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1954, 1982).

[62]Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions,* 36 –53.

[63]Also see the paper by Chris Bayly, "The Pre-History of Communalism? Religious Conflict in India, 1700 –1860," *Modern Asian Studies* 19 (2) (1985).

[64]Distinctions have thus far been drawn between the secularism of Nehru (a-religious tolerance) and the secularism of Gandhi (interreligious tolerance based on religiosity). See, for example, Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, "Rethinking Secularism," *Pacific Affairs* 56 (Spring 1983). Distinctions within the modernist secularism, as opposed to between modernist and "traditional" secularisms, have not yet been drawn.

[65]See Mark Tully and Satish Jacob, *Amritsar: Mrs. Gandhi's Last Battle* (London: J. Cape, 1985).

[66]See Paul Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

[67]There were other ways to deal with the problem: the Rajiv Gandhi government later flushed out its targets by constructing a siege around the temple, not by desecrating it.

[68]Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and Politics in South Asia* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1963). For a comparison of Indian and American secularism, see Marc Galanter, "Hinduism, Secularism and the Indian Judiciary," *Law and Society in Modern India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

[69]The Supreme Court also argued that even the *Shariat,* if read carefully, permitted maintenance. Muslims argued that a secular court had no business to pass judgments on religious matters. Strictly speaking, the second argument was not required for the judgment. For the political controversy around the Shah Bano case, see Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Shah Bano Controversy* (Delhi: Ajanta Publishers, 1987). For the legal issues involved, see John Mansfield, "Personal Laws or a Uniform Civil Code?," in Robert Baird, ed., *Religion and Law in Independent India* (Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1993).

[70]Mansfield, "Personal Laws or a Uniform Civil Code?," argues that legally speaking, both the secularists and Muslim leaders had a case. First of all, Indian courts since British times have mostly given precedence to religious laws on personal matters. The Supreme Court in the Shah Bano case broke the tradition—declaring the superiority of the civil code. By legislating on the basis of the *Shariat*, Rajiv Gandhi merely restored an old practice. Secondly, the existing mosque, in legal terms, was also Muslim property, which called for protection. The legal verities, unfortunately, lost their meaning against the emerging political verities. Advani's political mobilization was indeed enormous, making legal intricacies largely irrelevant against the rising political tide.

[71]Based on numerous field interviews conducted from 1990–1992.

[72]*India Today,* 15 February 1993. Javed Habib, a member of the Babri Masjid Action Committee, was perhaps the only Muslim politician to have publicly demonstrated a keen appreciation of the problem. He was, however, no match for the senior and more prominent Muslim politicians. See Javed Habib, "Main Bhi Ram ko Maryada Purushottam Manta Hun" ("I also accept Ram as a Symbol of Moral Excellence"), *Dharmayuga,* 16 January 1991.

[73]For further implications, see Myron Weiner, *The Indian Paradox* (Delhi: Sage Publications, 1989), chap. 7. On how the term "minority" is used in India, see Myron Weiner, "India's Minorities: Who Are They? What Do They Want?," in Ibid.

[74]Theoretically, a Muslim judge married according to the *Shariat* can have four wives, yet he can annul the marriage of a Hindu and grant divorce on grounds of adultery. This theoretical possibility pointed out by Ainslie Embree, *Utopias in Conflict* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1990), has not yet become a reality.

[75]Sarvepalli Gopal, *Anatomy of a Confrontation* (London: Zed Books, 1992), 17–20.

[76]Interview with Atal Behari Vajpayee, "Mere Adavaniji Se Matbhed Hain" ("I Have Differences with Advani"), *Dharmyuga* (Bombay), 16–31 January 1991. Vajpayee is the leader of the moderate faction. He was Minister for External Affairs in the Janata Government (1977–1979) and led the BJP from 1981–1986.

[77]Interview with Vajpayee, *India Abroad,* 19 December 1992. Also see Ashutosh Varshney, "Battling the Past, Forging a Future?."