# CHAPTER 13

# India's Identity Politics: Then and Now

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"I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any." — Mahatma Gandhi.[a]

The basic argument of this paper can be precisely stated: India's identity politics remains primarily internally crafted and driven. That globalization is having an impact is evident, but it is an influence secondary to the internal drivers of change. To paraphrase Mahatma Gandhi, one of India's most intu itive political theorisers of all times, the windows of the Indian house are now more and more open, and the winds are blowing about with ever greater force, but India's feet remain quite firmly internally planted. Whatever the consequences of globalization for India's *economy* and consumption patterns, the primary determinants of changes in India's *identity politics* remain domestic.

At one level, this is surprising. As Amartya Sen points out, "India's recent achievements in science and technology (including information technology), or in world literature, or in international business, have all involved a good deal of global interaction." And "these interactions are not unprecedented in Indian history."[b] Indeed ideas "as well as people have moved across India's borders over thousands of years, enriching India as well as the rest of the world."[c]

India's founding leaders were also remarkably globalized in their moorings and inspirations. Mahatma Gandhi's politics was formed by experiences in Britain, South Africa, and India, and some of his key concepts emerged from

[a]Mahatma Gandhi (1921). "English Learning." *Young India,* 3(6).
[b]Amartya Sen (1995). *The Argumentative Indian.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 84.
[c]*Ibid.,* p. 86.

a dialog of Indian traditions with the ideas of Tolstoy and Thoreau. And Nehru's political life was defined by an encounter between his British and Indian experiences. Given how strongly these two figures shaped an entire generation, India's politics in the 20th century, including its identity politics, might be expected to have significant international influences.[b]

At another level, the persistence of a primarily internal cultural compass to navigate the uncertainties of transition is hardly surprising. Interaction and influence are two different categories. A certain cultural pride, if not cultural obduracy, goes with large countries like India (and China), heir to old civilizations and to long-lasting cultural traditions. Despite the opening of many windows, Mahatma Gandhi indeed remained culturally rooted in India, and Nehru, for all his British tastes so often commented upon, wanted his ashes scattered in the river Ganga after his death[d]:

> 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.

Before our narrative acquires too protean a character, as so many discussions of identity politics tend to become, we should indicate how we have constructed the analytical boundaries of this paper. With or without globalization, identity politics can cover a whole variety of issues, not all of which can be adequately analyzed at length here. To make the discussion tractable,

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[d]"Will and Testament." In: Gopal, S. (ed.) (1980). *Jawaharlal Nehru: An Anthology*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 647–648.

let us first ask: what key questions emerge when we analyze the relationship between identity politics and globalization?

The first set of questions is conceptual. All of us may know the basic features of globalization — defined as trans-border crossings of capital, labor, services, technology and ideas — but how does one conceptualize identity politics? We need, first of all, to draw a distinction between identity and identity politics. In a recent account, Brubaker shows that in its latest phase, the concept of identity, born in the works of Erik Erikson, was psychological.[e] We are not psychologists and the changing Indian psyche, especially of the middle class, is not the area of our expertise. We will concentrate on identity politics, not on identity *per se*. Identity politics refers to politics driven by demands and concerns rooted in identities — religious, ethnic, linguistic, national, gender, etc.

This means that we shall not deal with how the nation's rising economic profile is instilling a new confidence among India's business and middles classes; or how for the first time in modern history, beyond the Western states of Gujarat and Maharashtra, successful businessmen, especially in information technology (IT), are becoming icons and role models for younger people, who were fascinated in the past primarily with politicians, film stars, cricketers and the Indian administrative service; or how the success of Indian diaspora in many professions and the rise to international prominence of Indian novelists in the English language have become a matter of pride for many in the middle class, indicating new ways of achieving creative excellence. These are important matters. Urban middle class conversations have quite dramatically changed in India. But we do not yet have evidence of mainstream politics being seriously altered by such developments.

With regard to identity *politics*, we suggest a distinction between two dimensions: macro and micro. The macro questions have to do with national, sub-national and group identities: how is India's national identity defined, and what kinds of group identities — religious, linguistic, tribal, caste-related — have been prominent in national politics? The micro questions have to do with how *families* and *individuals* adapt to, and counter, changes in environment, and what sorts of politics such adaptations and challenges spawn.

[e]Rogers Brubaker (2004). "Beyond Identity." in his *Ethnicity Without Groups*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

A second set of questions concerns the relationship of globalization and identity politics. There are two ways of thinking about it. One has to do with the consequences of globalization for identity politics, and the other with the consequences of identity politics for the globalization of a nation's economic life. Only the former is typically analyzed. We need to look at both sides.

In what follows, we begin with two larger and background discussions that will illuminate our specific arguments. We first discuss at some length (a) how to understand identity politics in a multicultural society, and (b) what the enduring features of India's identity politics in the 20th century have been. Subsequently, we ask how globalization has affected these relatively permanent features and also turn to the consequences of India's identity politics for the nation's march toward economic integration with the world economy. Compared to China, India's march is slow and steady, but it is unmistakable and, in our judgment, irreversible.

We make three arguments. First, we argue that at the macro level India's identity politics remains largely a conversation internal to India, though one global influence — the non-resident Indians (NRIs) community — has played a limited role in sustaining this identity politics. While the support of the NRI community did contribute to the strength of the Hindu nationalist movement and may do so again, there is little evidence to suggest that identity politics in India is moving along a course charted by identity politics elsewhere around the globe. Second, unlike the cases of Islamic fundamentalism in northern Nigeria and Christian fundamentalism in Latin America or the Philippines, the forces of religiously inspired politics in India (both Hindu and Muslim) have either not concentrated on micro issues — gender roles, abortion, marriage, divorce — or if they have, they have been unable to transform the basic contours of India's identity politics, which remains primarily focused on macro, not micro, issues. Third, the major preoccupation of India's popular politics has on the whole been with issues of *group identity*, not with questions of *economic development*. The latter has been a very important aspect of elite politics, not of popular politics. In what might constitute a little-noticed paradox, this gap between the major concerns of elite and popular politics provided in the 1990s the political space for an internationally oriented economic reform program to move forward. If India's popular politics in the 1990s had not been consumed by issues of national and group identities, economic

reforms would have encountered much greater political difficulty than they actually did.


## 1. The Framework of Identity Politics

How should we understand the foundations of identity politics, in India or elsewhere?[f] After the Second World War, the expectation of statesmen like Nehru, or scholars, who later came to be known as modernization theorists, was that an onward march of modernity would before long obliterate people's attachments to religious, ethnic or caste groups.[g] In contrast, the passage to modernity all over the world — more in some places, less in others — has been accompanied by very different developments. As Charles Taylor has famously argued, two such developments — the demand for dignity and the urge to find one's authenticity — are critical for understanding the identity politics of individuals and groups.[h]

First, modernity has replaced the traditional discourse of *honor* with a conversation about *dignity*. Honor is reserved only for some and was characteristic of traditional social systems. In pre-modern times, human beings, even at the lower orders of society, customarily accepted pre-existing ascriptive hierarchies, or notions of birth-based superiority and inferiority. Living according to one's station in life, or leading one's life according to pre-assigned social roles, was the accepted norm. Modernity has transformed human life by giving precedence to dignity over longstanding hierarchies. Dignity is intrinsic to all human beings, and with modernity, more and more previously dominated groups and individuals have come to believe in the idea of equal dignity. Hierarchies can and do exist today, but they are increasingly achievement-based, not birth-based, and if the latter, are often challenged.

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[f]The ideas in this section rely on two of our previous writings: Vibha Pingle (2005). "Faiths, Equity and Development." Background Paper, *World Development Report 2006*, Washington, DC: The World Bank; and Ashutosh Varshney (2003). "Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict and Rationality." *Perspectives on Politics*, 1(1), March, 84–99.

[g]For the older as well as the revised, newer versions of modernization theory, see Ronald Inglehart and Christine Welzel (2005). *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2004). *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldw* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[h]Charles Taylor (1995). *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Second, modernity has also led to claims about recognition. Traditionally, an engagement with God was regarded as critical for discovering one's moral core. With modernity this conversation about morality is increasingly regarded as being with our inner self that is paradoxically understood not via meditation, but by means of dialogical contact with others. Dialogical contact, in other words, helps us answer "where we are coming from" and "who we are." With dialogical contact gaining prominence, misrecognition is regarded as causing injury; withholding recognition is seen as a form of oppression.[i]

Crude illiberal prejudice or hatred is, of course, an obvious source for such "confining, demeaning or contemptible" images. But the problem is much more complex. It is worth recalling that until this century, even well-meaning liberals believed in group-based notions of civility and barbarism. In one of the founding texts of liberalism, John Stuart Mill, for example, argued[j]:

> Nobody can suppose that it is not beneficial to a Breton, or a Basque of the French Navarre, to be brought into the current of ideas and feelings of a highly civilized and cultivated people — to be a member of the French nationality ... than to sulk on his own rocks, the half-savage relic of past times, revolving in his own little mental orbit, without participation or interest in the general movement of the world. The same remark applies to the Welshman or the Scottish Highlander, as members of the British nation.

In the modern world, thus, two different notions of worth have often been at odds: one stemming from the culturally inherited conceptions of groups as better or worse; and another arising out of a decline of social hierarchies and the rise of equality. By challenging the inherited structure or discourse of group hierarchy, the latter inevitably seeks to undermine the former.

*Identity politics* or what we might call the demand for recognition is thus, at its core, essentially the *politics of equal dignity* and the *politics of difference* (or authenticity). It has emerged both in the developing and developed world, and has roots in gender politics, sexual politics, ethnic politics, and religious interpretations, or some combination thereof. The founding arguments of many, if not all, of these movements combine tradition and modernity in

[i]Taylor, *Multiculturalism*, p. 25.
[j]John Stuart Mill (1990). *Three Essays*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 385 386.

unusual ways.[k] Many traditional ideas are revived or group traditions are fought for, but the language used is one of dignity and equal respect.

The resurgence of religious and ethnic identity movements has two related yet distinct implications for our concerns here. First, religious and ethnic movements have in various parts of the world also been accompanied by religious and ethnic nationalism, and *if such nationalism is majoritarian*, it has unequal, even threatening, implications for religious and ethnic minorities. Second, whether or not religious and ethnic minorities are threatened, such movements have tended to undermine the rights of vulnerable members of their own community. Nearly every religious and ethnic movement has, for instance, redefined the role and rights of women and insisted on a traditional conception of gender roles.

In short, the politics of dignity and the search for authenticity have some seemingly liberating features and some retrogressive ones. On the one hand, modernity tends to foster religious and ethnic movements which demand equality vis-à-vis other communities, and also tends to encourage the movements to define themselves in unique ways. On the other hand, these movements demand that their unique group identity (which defines the role of women or family lifestyles in a traditional manner) be recognized and respected by the state and other citizens. Thus, individuals and groups demand to be treated equally at the same time as they seek recognition for their uniqueness.

In what follows, we will not try to prove, or disprove, the arguments made above. This essay is not the place for a testing of grand theories. Our only claim is that this larger theoretical background will make much of what we say intelligible and put India's identity politics in a comparative and global perspective.

## 2. India's Identity Politics: the Patterns and the Playing Field[l]

In its nation-building effort since independence, India has primarily had to deal with four key group identities: language, religion, caste, and tribe. Nearly

[k] For example, gay rights movements demand the right to marry; women's rights groups in Egypt and Nigeria demand that the *Shariat* be imposed.

[l] This section relies heavily on Ashutosh Varshney (2002), *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, New Haven: Yale University Press, and Delhi: Oxford University Press, and Ashutosh Varshney (1993), "Contested Meanings: India's National Identity, Hindu Nationalism and the Politics of Anxiety," *Daedalus*, summer.

Table 1.    India's principal languages.

| Language | Spoken by percentage of India's population |
|----------|-------------------------------------------|
| Hindi | 39.9 |
| Bengali | 8.2 |
| Telugu | 7.8 |
| Marathi | 7.4 |
| Tamil | 6.3 |
| Urdu | 5.1 |
| Gujarati | 4.8 |
| Kannada | 3.9 |
| Malayalam | 3.6 |
| Oriya | 3.3 |
| Punjabi | 2.8 |
| Assamese | 1.5 |

*Source*: Census of India.

Table 2.    India's religious profile.

| Group | Percentage of population |
|-------|--------------------------|
| Hindus | 82.0 |
| of whom  a) Caste Hindus | 67.2 |
| b) Scheduled Castes | 14.8 |
| Muslims | 12.1 |
| Christians | 2.3 |
| Sikhs | 2.0 |
| Buddh    and Jains | 1.2 |

*Source*: Census of India.

40% of the country speaks Hindi as its "mother tongue," but there are at least 15 other languages spoken as a "mother tongue" by at least ten million people each (Table 1). Although having a Hindu majority, India has several other religions (Table 2). There are three meta-categories of caste — upper, middle, and ex-untouchables (Table 3).[m] The last two, viewed as historically deprived, constitute a majority by a huge margin; the upper castes, not more than 18% of the country, have on the whole dominated the nation's political, social and economic landscape. Tribes, constituting 8.1% of the population (called the scheduled tribes, Table 3), are the least known but an important category, and

[m]Caste is essentially a local category, and there are thousands of castes in India. With some qualification, they can, however, be grouped together in larger, meta-categories.

Table 3. India's caste composition.

| Group | Percentage of population |
| --- | --- |
| Upper castes | 16.1 |
| OBCs | 43.7 |
| Scheduled castes | 14.9 |
| Scheduled tribes | 8.1 |
| Non-Hindu minorities | 17.2 |

*Note:* Since no caste census has been taken since 1931, the figures above can be seen as best guesses, not exact estimates. They are sufficient to show the overall magnitudes, however. Also, the upper castes in this calculation include the "dominant castes" that are no longer considered deprived, even though they were ritually not placed in the upper category (as explained in note w).
*Source:* Government of India (1980). *Report of the Backward Classes Commission* (The Mandal Commission Report), 1 (First Part), 56.

culturally quite distinct from the mainstream. They are mostly concentrated in the middle and north-eastern part of the nation. On the whole, language and tribe tend to be geographically concentrated, whereas religion and caste are more evenly spread throughout the country.

How did India's founding fathers seek to deal with these diverse group identities? Their strategy was twofold: (i) adoption of a "salad bowl," as opposed to a "melting pot" view of the national identity, a view that came to called "composite nationalism"[n]; and (ii) a reliance on democracy to resolve conflicts. A "salad bowl" view of national identity recognizes diversities as central to the nation. However, despite this principle, it is possible that some groups remain discontented, either because their distinctiveness is not recognized, or if recognized, not given equal treatment. If so, democratic mobilization of disaffection and making a point through the election process would be the way to show that the claim about the group's distinctiveness had popular support. Once popular support was demonstrated, it would allow Delhi to make adequate concessions.

Thus, the government would not accept all claims about cultural distinctiveness, only those which were demonstrably popularly backed. This gave a

[n] For a longer treatment, see Ashutosh Varshney (1993). "Contested Meanings." *Daedalus, op. cit.*, on which the discussion here heavily relies.

great incentive to political entrepreneurs to mobilize identity groups, making group conflict quite ubiquitous in India. But if diversity and democracy had to coexist together, there was no other way out. Groups were free to mobilize and make claims. The assumption also was that the greater the freedom to mobilize, the lesser would be the drive toward secession. The accommodation inherent in India's salad bowl strategy was expected to make insurgencies redundant. India's founding leaders were clear that if a violent insurgency nonetheless arose, it would not be tolerated and force would be used. Nehru, it is said, used to keep two statuettes on his desk: Gandhi's and Lincoln's. The former symbolized the willing embrace of diversities, the latter an unwavering opposition to violent insurgencies.[o]

An outgrowth of India's freedom movement, composite nationalism was legitimated by the country's constitution after independence. Fundamentally, this view of the nation evokes the image of nation as a family. In principle, all religions (as well as languages, castes, and tribes) have an equal place in the national family, and none will dominate the functioning of the state. In practice, this ideal has not been fully realized, nor is it easy to realize it, but the important point is that ideal was never given up formally. India's founding fathers never developed a notion of *bhumiputras* (sons of the soil). One's religious faith, linguistic, caste or social background would not determine citizenship in the country and the rights that go with it; birth in India, or naturalization, would be the sole legal criterion.

Although the Congress party, which led the freedom movement, has been the prime representative of this narrative in Indian politics, most political parties and currents have on the whole subscribed to this view of diversities and the nation. The main challenges to this ideology have come from two sources: religion and caste. They have clear implications for how the nation deals with group diversities.

## 2.1. *Hindu nationalism and its demand for recognition*

In the sphere where religion came to interact with politics, the "salad bowl" ideology came to be called "secular nationalism." A state governed by such an ideology would maintain "equal distance" from all religions, privileging

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[o]Akbar, M.J. (1988). *Nehru: The Making of India.* Delhi: Penguin, p. 565.

none. The greatest challenge to this view has come from Hindu nationalism, a powerful force since 1989. The Hindu nationalist view of the nation is embedded in a "melting pot" model. Hinduism, according to this narrative, gives India its distinctive national identity, and other religions must *assimilate* to the Hindu center. India, according to this narrative, is originally the land of the Hindus. Most of India is, and has been, Hindu by religion[p] — anywhere between 65 and 70% in the early 20th century India and 82% today. India thus viewed is a Hindu nation.[q]

The term Hindu is further specified by Hindu nationalists. Savarkar, the ideological father of Hindu nationalism, gave a definition in *Hindutva*, the foundational text of Hindu nationalism: "A Hindu means a person who regards this land ... from the Indus to the Seas as his fatherland (*pitribhumi*) as well as his Holyland (*punyabhumi*)."[r] The definition is thus territorial (land between the Indus and the Seas), genealogical ("fatherland") and religious ("holyland"). Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists can be part of this definition for they meet all three criteria. All of these religions were born in India. Christians, Jews, Parsis, and Muslims can meet only two, for India is not their holyland. "Their love is divided."[s]

For Hindu nationalists, Muslims and Christians are the principal enemies of the nation — especially the former, pardy because of their numbers, and partly because a Muslim homeland in the form of Pakistan after all did partition India in 1947. The Muslims were 25% of the pre-1947 India, and even after the formation of Pakistan, they have been the largest minority, about 12.8% of the country's population at this point.

What should these communities, especially the Muslims, do to show that they are part of the Indian nation? In extreme versions of Hindu nationalism, a claim about the legal primacy of Hindus, which the Muslims must accept, is made. In other words, a differential bundle of *citizenship rights* is proposed.

[p]Some historians disagree. They argue that a Hindu identity is at best a creation of the last 200–300 years. Before that, there were different sects, but no Hindu identity as such. See Romila Thapar (1989). "Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for Hindu Identity." *Modern Asian Studies* 23(2).
[q]Sheshadri, H. V. (1989 1990). "Hindu Rashtra: What and Why." *Hindu Vishva* Silver Jubilee Special Issue, 25(12), p. 30. Nanaji Deshmukh (1989). *Rethinking Secularism.* Delhi: Suruchi Prakashan.
[r]Savarkar, V.D. (1989). *Hindutva.* Bombay: Veer Savarkar Prakashan (sixth edition), title page, elaborated further between pp. 110 113.
[s]Savarkar, V.D. *Hindutva, op. cit.*, p. 113.

Expressing his admiration for how Hitler dealt with the Jews, Golwalkar, one of the fathers of Hindu nationalism, wrote[1]:

> Race pride at its highest has been manifested (in) ... Germany ... The foreign races in Hindusthan [i.e., the Muslims] must adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence the Hindu religion, must entertain no ideas but those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture [...and] may [only] stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing — not even citizen's rights.

Muslim acceptance of the cultural and political, not legal, primacy of Hindus for shaping India's future is, however, the generic Hindu nationalist argument, shared by moderates as well. That is, to become part of the Indian nation, Muslims must: accept the centrality of Hinduism to Indian civilization; accept key Hindu figures such as Ram as civilizational heroes, not disown them as mere religious figures of Hinduism; remorsefully accept that Muslim rulers of India between 1000 A.D. and 1757 A.D. destroyed pillars of Hindu civilization, especially Hindu Temples; not claim special privileges such as maintenance of religious personal laws; and not demand special state grants for their educational institutions. Via *Ekya* (assimilation), they will prove their loyalty to the nation. Maintaining distinctiveness would simply mean that "their love," as Savarkar put it, "is divided."

It is important to understand what is at stake here. Drawing a distinction between three terms — pluralism, syncretism, and assimilation — is perhaps the best way to illustrate the differences between the two views. Composite nationalism insists on pluralism and syncretism; Hindu nationalism on assimilation.

Pluralism would indicate co-existence of distinctive identities (*A respects, and lives peacefully, with B*). An example of pluralistic tolerance from Hinduism would be Mahatma Gandhi, while Maulana Azad, his colleague during the national movement, embodied pluralistic Islam. Syncretism would signify not a tolerant co-existence of distinctions, but a merging of cultures/religions, leading to a new form of culture/religion (*A interacts with B, and an amalgam C emerges as a result*). In its interaction with Hinduism, Islam, especially Sufism,

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

developed forms of piety and culture that represented Indian as opposed to Arab versions of Islam.[u] Syncretism should also be distinguished from assimilation. Assimilation means absorption into the dominant culture/religion (*A merges into B, losing its distinctive identity*); syncretism implies a give-and-take between cultures and religions (*C represents elements of A and B*). Sikhism is a syncretistic religion par excellence, combining elements of Islam and Hinduism, and becoming a faith in itself.

Pluralism in the secular nationalist view is embodied in laws and political institutions (such as personal laws of minorities about divorce, marriage and inheritance, and protection of minority educational institutions). The Hindu nationalists argue that emotions and loyalty make a nation, not politics, laws and institutions. Laws, they say, can always be politically manipulated.

In India, Islam has historically developed two broad forms: syncretistic, and exclusivist. Syncretistic Islam integrated into the pre-existing Indian culture, just as Indonesian Muslims retained their pre-Islamic heritage of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Exclusivist Islam can be a personal faith, or may also enter the political sphere, thus becoming an ideology, displaying sometimes what are known as fundamentalist qualities. Syncretistic Islam has produced some of the pillars of Indian culture, music, poetry, and literature.[v] Indian Muslims of various hues have, moreover, also fought wars against Pakistan. By not making these distinctions, the Hindu nationalists embitter even those Muslims who are syncretistic in their religiosity and culture, as also those for whom Islam is a faith, a way to sustain troubled private lives, but not a political ideology. In the Hindu nationalist discourse, these important distinctions blur. An anti-Muslim hysteria is often its natural outcome.

Since 1947, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been the principal patron of religious nationalism in politics. The party was called the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS) until 1977. The aim of Hindu nationalists, one should also note, is not only to emphasize the centrality of Hinduism to India, but also to build

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[u] Worship at the graves of great Sufi saints resembles Hindu _____ of piety in several ways: devotional music, deposition of flowers, and a priestly offering of the "sacred sweets" (*prasad*) bring the two together; idols (Hinduism) and graves (Islam) separate them.

[v] A very large number of Muslims have been exponents of Indian classical music. Muslim playwrights and poets, writing in Hindi, have also existed. Similarly, some of the leading Urdu poets have been Hindu (e.g., Firaq Gorakhpuri). The Taj Mahal, the most popular monument of India, has syncretistic Indo-Persian motifs. The tomb of Salim Chishti, a Sufi saint, is visited by millions of Hindus and Sikhs, not simply Muslims.

Hindu unity. The Hindus, after all, are a religious majority only in a manner of speaking. They are divided internally by multiple caste cleavages. As an ideology, Hindu nationalism is thus opposed to both composite nationalism as well as to the other principal caste-based ideology of the last 100 years, as discussed below.

## 2.2. *Caste politics and the demand for equal dignity*

The second big ideological challenge to composite nationalism has come from lower caste political parties and organizations.[w] Their ideology is not directly opposed to composite nationalism; rather, their notion of which diversities are important and should be central to nation making is different. The lower caste ideology speaks of the deeply hierarchical and unjust nature of the Hindu social order, in which the lower castes have historically had a lower bundle of rights and some have been most shabbily treated and oppressed by the upper castes. An egalitarian restructuring of Hindu society is the chief goal of the caste narrative: caste should not determine whether an individual is treated as an inferior or superior human being.[x]

This ideology, thus, concentrates on India's religious majority, the Hindus. When it speaks of non-Hindu groups, it does so by arguing that both religious minorities as well as the lower Hindu castes suffer from discrimination by the higher castes. An alliance of lower castes and religious minorities, therefore, is natural. Moreover, according to this narrative, to make up for centuries of caste oppression, affirmative action favoring the lower castes in government jobs and education should be the primary vehicle of achieving social justice.

The "lower caste narrative" has, by and large, risen to all-India prominence of late. It was a South Indian narrative to begin with, used as it was to mobilize the masses in the first half of this century in Southern India.[y] Capitalizing on their numbers in a democracy, the lower castes of South India

[w] For an account by one of the founders of the ideology, see Rammanohar Lohia (1964). *The Caste System.* Hyderabad: Lohia Samara Vidyalaya Nyas.

[x] For an overview of caste identities and caste politics, see Vibha Pingle (2003). "Caste: Continuity and Change." In: Sumit Ganguly and Neil deVota (eds.) *Understanding Contemporary India.* Boulder Colorado: Lynne Riener.

[y] Marguerite Ross Barnet (1967). *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, and Robert Hardgrave (1969). *The Nadars of Tamil Nadu.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

ended the political and social dominance of the Brahmins in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s and 1990s, this ideology of politics finally spread to the North. The lower castes have come of political age in much of India, pressing the polity in new directions and achieving significant public policy successes. The changes in, and the enlargement of, India's affirmative action program, as it was originally conceived in the 1950s, has a great deal to do with the rise of lower castes in politics.[2]

## 3. Globalization and Macro Identity Politics

Have religious and caste identity politics been influenced by globalization? Has the cross-border movement of capital, labor, goods, services, technology and ideas, and India's greater integration into the international system, left a discernible impact on how India's language and religious groups, castes and tribes have formulated their politics and made claims on, or against, the polity? Globalization has no identifiable connection with language and caste politics, so we do not discuss them below. Globalization has had its greatest impact on how religion has come to be deployed as a group identity in Indian politics, especially in its Hindu nationalist version. Tribal politics has also become part of Hindu nationalist politics of late. At the heart of both reformulations is the role of India's diaspora in the Hindu nationalist imagination.

Following Benedict Anderson, diasporic attachments to the homeland are now called "long distance nationalism."[aa] When it first sought intervention in India's public sphere in the 1980s, India's diaspora — the so-called NRI community — was given a rather lukewarm treatment by the "homeland." In the 1990s, two things changed. Attracting enormous public attention, the diasporic success stories multiplied, especially in the Silicon Valley where Indians, mostly graduates of Indian Institutes of Technology, registered

[2]For a detailed treatment how lower castes have used democracy to advance their claims and power, see Ashutosh Varshney (2000). "Is India Becoming More Democratic?" *Journal of Asian Studies* March; Myron Weiner (2001). "The Struggle for Equality: Caste in Indian Politics." In: Atul Kohli (ed.) *The Success of Indian Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, and Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Rudolph (1968). *The Modernity of Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
[aa]Benedict Anderson (1998). *The Specter of Comparisons*. London: Verso.

an extraordinary ascent, a phenomenon noted globally.[bb] Their entry into mainstream American society plausibly also introduced them to the claims made by minorities in America and tutored them in the language of identity politics. Second — and more important — the electoral fortunes of Hindu nationalism changed dramatically in the 1990s, bringing a BJP-dominated coalition to power in Delhi in 1998. The Hindu nationalist conception of India created space for diasporic intervention in Indian politics.

The basic issues in the debate over the political role of India's diaspora can be simply outlined . How does one define an Indian? Are millions of NRIs, ethnically Indian but citizens of other lands, really Indian? Is an Indian citizen, even if born outside India, someone like Sonia Gandhi, not Indian? Indeed, it was the intervention of Sonia Gandhi in India's electoral politics in 1998 that gave this debate an enormous intensity.

## 3.1. *Jus solis versus jus sanguinis*

On how a citizen is defined, there are two models available in the world. Some nations are based on what is called the principle of *jus solis* (soil); others on *jus sanguinis* (blood). These ideal types are not perfectly realized anywhere. The best real-world examples of the first model are France and the US; and the typical illustrations of the second would be Germany and Japan.[cc]

Nationhood in the first model is defined in terms of a set of principles: liberty, equality and fraternity in France, and the five principles of the Declaration of Independence — liberty, equality, individualism, democracy, and the rule of law— in the US.[dd] *Anyone* can be "French" or "American", including ethnic Indians, so long as they subscribe to these principles. Naturalization is relatively easy in these countries. In the Olympic teams of France and USA, naturalized citizens, migrants until recently or children of migrants, belonging to all sorts of races, are present by the dozen. They hold American and French flags with transparent pride and emotion.

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[bb]See for example the special issue of *Businessweek* on "China and India: What You Need to Know." August 22/29, 2005.

[cc]Rogers Brubaker (1992). *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

[dd]Samuel Huntington (1983). *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Huntington's view has changed by now. For the argument that American is not defined by political ideas, but by cultural inheritance, see his *Who Are We?* New York: 2004.

The second model does not allow easy naturalization, but lets ethnicity be the decisive, often the only factor, in citizenship. Those born to ethnically German parents anywhere in the world can become German citizens without any difficulty, even if they have lost German as their language. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, many ethnic Germans, who had lived in the Soviet Union and come to speak Russian as their first language, migrated to Germany and became German citizens. In contrast, several million Turks, living in Germany since the 1960s, including a large proportion, who were born in Germany, are still "guest workers." Only a small fraction of "guest workers" have been allowed German citizenship. Japan has a roughly similar idea driving its nationhood and citizenship.

By celebrating and courting overseas Indians, who are mostly citizens of other countries, and unleashing political venom on Sonia Gandhi, who has been an Indian citizen since 1984–1985 and has lived in the country longer, the Hindu nationalists sought to take Indian nationhood in the *jus sanguinis*, or the German and Japanese, direction. The leaders of Indian freedom struggle, Gandhi and Nehru, had never defined the nation ethnically. Rather, they gave Indianness a cultural definition: those who accepted Indian culture, including foreigners, were welcome to be Indians. Mahatma Gandhi famously argued that even Englishmen could be Indians so long as they accepted Indian culture as their own. "It is not necessary for us," said the Mahatma, "to have as our goal the expulsion of the English. If the English become Indianized, we can accommodate them."[ee] Since the term "ethnic Indian" for Hindu nationalists for all practical purposes means "Hindu Indian," Gandhi's argument about Hinduism and India also worth noting: "If the Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in a dreamland. The Hindus, the Muslims, the Parsis and the Christians who have made India their country are fellow countrymen."[ff]

After a vigorous debate marked by some dissent, India's Constituent Assembly (1946–1950) accepted the Gandhian idea of citizenship. Indians in Southeast Asia and in South and East Africa, the Assembly argued, had to be citizens of their adopted countries, not of India. There was a demand that they be given Indian citizenship.

[ee] Mahatma Gandhi (1938). *Hind Swaraj*. Ahmedabad: Navjivan Press, pp. 45–46.
[ff] *Ibid.*

By Mahatma Gandhi's definition, which India's constitution adopted, Sonia Gandhi is only *ethnically* Italian, but *culturally* Indian. Even though "constructed" in the long run, ethnicity is typically inherited in the short run. In contrast, cultures and nations can be adopted. By accepting Indian ethos, making a family in India and living in the country, and finally engaging in political campaigns, Sonia Gandhi had made her ethnicity, as in the Franco–American model, irrelevant to her citizenship. A debate on whether a foreign-born citizen could be the head of government would not have been in defiance of the spirit of the constitution. But the Hindu nationalists focused on something analytically and politically very different: can a foreign born and ethnically un-Indian person be Indian? India's constitution has no doubts on this matter. The answer is yes.

None of what we have said above should be construed to argue that contemporary India should become indifferent to the NRIs. Thanks to globalization and advances in communication technology, the first decade of the 21st century is not the same as the 1950s. Frequent contact with the ancestral homeland is possible, and diasporas in contemporary world have become an asset to many countries. If the NRIs are willing to contribute to the lands they came from, there is every reason to embrace their goodwill, ideas, resources and energy. It will not only be unpragmatic, but an utter folly, to do otherwise.

But defensible pragmatism is not the same as an overarching principle. The BJP-led government turned the debate into the latter. In a highly symbolic gesture, it also appointed two Indian ambassadors for Washington, one officially acceptable to the US government, another bearing the same title but managing the affairs of NRIs. The community ambassador also had special access to, and special claims on, the visiting BJP dignitaries.

It is this new definition of India *as a community of blood* that opened the space for the intense participation of overseas Hindu nationalist organizations in tribal education and proselytization. Overseas groups for long have been involved in "development" activities. Making India's tribal communities Hindu, however, was not one of their main goals. In central and Western India, tribal religiosity has on the whole historically been ambiguous. Large-scale attempts at tribal conversion to Hinduism and tribal participation in anti-Muslim violence, as was true in Gujarat 2002, are new

developments.[gg] It is hard to prove rigorously the exact connections between the tribal anti-Muslim violence and Hindu nationalist campaigns. All the same, without the Hindu nationalist campaigns, jointly undertaken by domestic and NRI organizations, it is not easy to explain why such developments took place at all.[hh]

## 4. Globalization and Micro Identity Politics

Entering politics in a big way in many parts of the world, questions of micropolitics — family, marriage, gender relations, and sexuality — have, however, remained relatively unimportant in Indian politics. The transmission of global ideas on India's micropolitics has been minimal.

It is by now unmistakably clear that with the prominent exception of Christian religiosity in Western Europe, in both developing and developed world and among the believers of the world's most popular faiths — Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism — there has been a remarkable rise in religiosity.[ii] Much of the politics in these countries has acquired a religious tinge.

In a widely noted argument, Olivier Roy has recently suggested that in the Muslim world, political Islam and its calls to establish an Islamic *state* have been replaced by a "globalized Islam" that is concerned with establishing an Islamic *identity* that transcends cultural boundaries, as engagement with modernity and globalization continues.[jj] The leaders of "globalized Islam," and to a greater degree the leaders of political Islam in Europe, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East, have been increasingly concerned with defining the boundaries of their community and of the Islamic *Umma* (community). They have attempted to do this by redefining the role of women in society, specifying what may be considered acceptable individual behavior. While there are some variations from country to country, Islamists in most countries have chosen to restrict

[gg]Ganesh Devy (2002). "Tribal Voice and Violence." In: Siddharth Vardarajan (ed.) *Gujarat: The Making of a Tragedy.* Delhi: Penguin India.

[hh]There is another side to the tribal question, confined primarily to Northeastern India. The best arguments available on India's Northeast show a link between the neglect of the region by Delhi and the rise of tribal discontent, sometimes violently expressed. The northeastern India seeks an equal inclusion in the nation and polity, and will not settle for a politics of central neglect. Sanjib Baruah (2005). *Durable Disorder?* Delhi: Oxford University Press.

[ii]Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2004). *Sacred and Secular, op. cit.*

[jj]Olivier Roy (2004). *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah.* London: Hurst and Company; and New York: Columbia University Press.

the role of women in the public space, define the attire women may wear, and specify the "right" contours of the relationship between men and women.

Christian movements, like Islamic movements, have also been on the rise. The Catholic Church and Evangelical Protestant churches have all gained in popularity on the coat-tails of identity politics. Membership in churches, especially evangelical churches, is growing in all regions except Western Europe, and the competition between churches is triggering all manner of religious extremism and fundamentalism.

Evangelical Protestant churches as well as the Catholic Church have been increasingly concerned with micro politics — with redefining gender relations, women's rights, gay rights, and marital relations. Many of them have sought to restrict the rights of women formally protected by national constitutions, international law and by international declarations. In Chile and the Philippines, the Catholic Church has not only promoted the hard-line position on birth control that has been adopted by the Vatican, but it has also engaged in *real* politics seeking to better control the political and social agenda. In the United States, the radical rhetoric and activities of evangelical groups have sought to undermine, among other things, birth control policies and HIV/AIDS prevention programs adopted by the United States as part of its aid activities in the developing world.

Intriguingly, Hindu nationalism and Muslim politics in India have both baulked at this trend. At the present time, the Hindu nationalist movement consisting of three prominent organizations are: the BJP, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP). Of the three, the BJP is viewed as political (in the narrow electoral sense), the second as cultural, and the third as religious. The VHP consists of priests as advisors as well as office holders. Despite VHP's importance in the movement, Hindu nationalism has been less concerned with religious or social reform, more with political and nationalist mobilization.

This is not to say that micro political issues have been entirely absent. Arguments about a common civil code — identical laws on marriage, divorce, and inheritance for all of Indians regardless of what the different religious codes say — have repeatedly appeared in Hindu nationalist discourse. But these arguments have been presented in the context of discussions about secularism and national identity, not as arguments about micro identity politics or as having implications for them.

In the last decade, some Hindu nationalist groups have every year staged protests on Valentine's Day, threatening those "deracinared," "modern" young Indians who seek to emulate the West in the matters of heart. A few others have also been concerned with "sanskritising" lower castes, seeking to give them a status closer to the upper castes.[kk] But these issues have not ignited passions in Hindu nationalist politics. No major Hindu nationalist leaders have staked their careers on a common civil code, or on reforms in the Hindu caste system. All social or religious reform ideas have been sacrificed at the altar of an anti-Muslim, anti-Christian political program. Nothing moves and drives Hindu nationalism more than an anti-Muslim campaign.

Muslim leaders in India appear to be similarly concerned with influencing national identity debates. Their efforts have been directed at thwarting the Hindu right's agenda and at interpreting secularism in the Indian context. Unlike their counterparts in the Middle East or North Africa, they have not sought to transform Muslim micro-politics by redefining gender rights or the role of women in society.[ll]

Why has the Hindu right paid little attention to micro-politics, especially gender-based micro-politics? Why have India's Muslim leaders tended ignore it as well?

## 4.1. *Hindu micro politics: religious interpreters or religious interlocutors?*

Religious leaders who seek to redefine micro-politics especially with regard to gender issues generally present themselves as interpreters of religion all over the world. In India, however, this has not been the case. Despite the fact that many leaders of the VHP are priests, they are not regarded as, nor do they appear to regard themselves as, *interpreters* of Hindu texts. They are seen instead as mere *interlocutors* between the Hindu religious world and the political world. Is this peculiar to Hinduism?

[kk] A well-known RSS leader, Govindacharya, sought to take Hindu nationalism in this direction. But his ideological status and power in the RSS hierarchy remain unclear. He has not been able to turn caste reform into a principal project of Hindu nationalism.

[ll] The Shah Bano case, we argue later, had less to do with gender based micro-politics and more to do with the politics of redefining India's secular identity.

The multiplicity of Hindu religious texts arguably means that priests who are politically powerful or prominent do not necessarily take on, or are bestowed with, the mantle of "interpreters." Leaders of Islamic politico-religious movements in Nigeria or Egypt have, by contrast, positioned themselves as serious interpreters of Islam, not simply as interlocutors between the religious Islamic world and politics. The route for becoming a "legitimate 'interpreter' of Hinduism, who not only is a 'representative' of Hindu society but who also refashions the core elements of Hinduism, is not as clear as it is in Islam, or Christianity."[mm]

These days the RSS (the cultural wing of the Hindu nationalist movement) does present its ideology as an interpretation of Hindu culture (though not of Hinduism) and does concern itself with gender-based micro politics. However, none of the various elements of its interpretation seriously challenge existing beliefs about gender relations held by most in the Hindu community. The RSS's definitions, in other words, as not significantly at odds with the definitions widely accepted by the Hindu community.

The RSS glorifies mothers and sisters at the expense of wives — much as the popular Indian cinema in Hindi does, or for that matter cinema in Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, etc., do. While *purdah* (veiling) is critiqued by the RSS and the VHP because it is seen as what "Muslims do," overexposing Hindu women's "bodies more and more to the public gaze"[nn] is frowned upon. Hindu nationalist leaders think that the ideal mother is one who teaches her sons "true" Hindu culture, brings out their virile qualities, and encourages them to battle India's enemies.[oo] Again, this is not significantly different from the message traditionally delivered by India's popular films.

Thus, both the religious wing of the Hindu nationalist movement (VHP) as well as its cultural wing (RSS) have little to say about gender micro politics in India that is controversial or that is seemingly out of sync with the beliefs and interpretations of the Hindu community more generally. Both are more

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[mm]This was not always true of Hindu religious leaders. Buddha and Mahavira in ancient times, and to a lesser extent the leaders of Brahmo Samaj (Rammohan Roy) and Arya Samaj (Dayanand Saraswati) in modern times both headed religious reform movements and attained the status of interpreters of Hinduism, leading in some cases to the formation of new religions like Buddhism.

[nn]Golwalkar (1980). *Thoughts*, pp. 491-493.

[oo]Bacchetta, Gender in the Hindu Nation: RSS women as ideologues, p. 34.

importantly only minimally concerned with influencing debates about micro politics and are primarily focused on macro political issues. The BJP, the electoral wing of Hindu nationalism, not surprisingly, is also concerned with macro identity politics as it engages with other political parties at the national, state and local levels.

## 4.2. *Muslim micro politics: ignoring global trends and thwarting the Hindu right*

As noted earlier Muslim leaders in India also do not appear to be particularly interested in micro political issues. There are no visible social and religious movements from within the Islamic community striving strenuously to limit the space for women in the public space, or to make women's rights a political and social issue. There are comments here and there by the Muslim clergy about whether Sania Mirza, an Indian Muslim teenage tennis star, was appropriately attired, when she played at the US open, but such comments die out before long, and no systematic political thrust ever appears. Even the landmark Shah Bano Case in 1985 and the adoption of the Muslim Women's (Protection of Right of Divorce) Law by parliament in 1986, a seemingly critical event for gender relations in the Muslim community, does not appear to have redefined gender micro-politics within the Indian Muslim community. It appears, to the contrary, to have provoked debate and discussion about the nature of India's secularism.

Shan Bano, a Muslim woman, was divorced by her husband of 43 years who refused to give her alimony. To justify his actions, he cited the *Shariat*, which requires that the children of the divorced women provide maintenance to the mother; or if the children are not capable of doing so, the community institutions, the Waqf Boards, do so. The Supreme Court ruled that Muslims divorce, especially the issue of alimony, could be covered by some of the secular laws of the country. The court ruling led to protests by many of India's Muslim leaders and organizations. In an attempt to keep the electoral and political affections of Muslims, the leaders of Congress party, ruling the country at that time, sought to overturn the court's verdict. Under India's constitution, courts can be overruled by the legislature, if more than two-thirds of parliament members agree to do so. In 1986, Congress Members of Parliaments (MPs) constituted nearly three-fourths of India's directly elected lower house. A whip

to enforce party discipline in parliamentary vote was issued by the Congress party. As a result, India's parliament, by a huge majority, in effect outlawed the Supreme Court's verdict that divorced Muslim women were entitled to alimony.

Generating much momentary passion, the Shah Bano case was a key event in the nation's politics in 1985–1986. It was also potentially an opportunity for political leaders to make a decisive shift in Indian politics toward issues concerning family, marriage, and gender rights, but that was not to be. Women's organizations, some including Muslims, did protest the governmental decision, but they had no capacity to mobilize the masses. Muslim organizations on the whole supported community identity over claims of gender justice. The Hindu nationalists were the greatest political adversaries of the government and they did mobilize large numbers of people against the government's moves. But it soon became clear that the Hindu nationalists were less concerned about debating gender rights, of Muslims or Hindus, and more interested in using the Shah Bano debate as an instrument in debates about macro identity politics. The Shah Bano case, according to them, showed that (a) the Muslim community did not wish to enter the national mainstream, maintaining separatist traditions; and (b) India's "pseudo-secular" Congress government pandered to the Muslims for the sake of votes, and was not interested in reforming "backward" Muslim religious laws. Thus, the Shah Bano case, instead of initiating a new era of gender politics, became an element in the anti-Muslim Hindu nationalist politics, which came eventually to be dominated by other issues such as contested shrines and perceived historical wrongs. Gender relations simply became an inconsequential footnote in this politics.[PP]

## 4.3. *The middle eastern migration*

Another issue is of relevance here. The Hindu nationalists have often claimed that ever since the large-scale migration of India's Muslims to the Middle East began in the 1970s, international Muslim organizations, especially those from the Middle East, have penetrated the educational and religious life of Indian

[PP] For a fascinating discussion of the Shah Bano Case framed in terms of community identity versus gender justice, see Niraja Gopal Jayal (1999). *Democracy and the State.* Delhi: Oxford University Press, Chapter 3.

Muslims, strengthening their religious "fundamentalism" and deepening sepa-
ratist attitudes. A survey conducted in six Indian cities in the mid-1990s raises
serious doubts about the veracity of such claims.[99] While six cities are hardly
sufficient for robust all-India generalizations, the fact that they are located in
very different parts of India— two in the north (Aligarh and Lucknow), two
in the west (Ahmedabad and Surat) and two in the south (Hyderabad and
Calicut) — makes them highly suggestive.

Three survey results, contradicting Hindu nationalist arguments, stand
out. First, the religious organization that reached all cities was not Middle
Eastern, but Indian — namely, the Tablighi Jamaat. It is a quietistic orga-
nization, interested in the expansion of Muslim piety, and is not associated
with politics or separatism at all.[rr] Second, a substantial proportion of the
Muslim community respected this organization, but did not necessarily agree
with its views about what the authentic forms of religious piety were. Third,
an overwhelming proportion of Muslim respondents argued that *taalim, sehat
aur rozgaar* (education, health, and employment) were more pressing issues
for Muslims than *mazhab aur zubaan* (religion and language). By education,
these respondents meant modern, not religious, education.

Even communities whose members have migrated to the Middle East seek-
ing employment in large numbers do not appear to be significantly influenced
by the global trend within Islam toward redefining gender micro-politics. The
state of Kerala has witnessed the most voluminous migration to the Middle
East. Nearly a fourth of Kerala's population has family members in the Middle
East, and migrant remittances are customarily estimated to constitute up to
a half of the state's gross domestic product.[ss] And Muslims are the largest
participants in Kerala's labor outflows to the Middle East.

A recent study argues that compared to the families of Hindu and
Christian migrants, those of Muslim migrants have undergone considerable

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[99]The survey, conducted under the joint auspices of Harvard University and Delhi's Center for the Study of
Developing Societies, was for a study of Hindu-Muslim violence. See the questionnaire in Varshney, *Ethnic
Conflict and Civic Life, op. cit.*, Appendix A, especially p. 304 and 307. Findings for this part of the survey
are being reported here for the first time.

[rr]For details of this organization, see Yoginder Sikand (2002). *Origins and Development of Tablighi
Jammat (1920–2000)*, Leiden: Brill.

[ss]Banerjee, S.K., Jayachandran, V. and Roy, T.K. (1997). "Has Emigration Influenced Kerala's Living Stan
dards?" paper presented at the T.N. Krishnan Memorial Conference, Trivandrum: Center for Development
Studies, September 7–9.

changes.[ff] It shows that the latter spend a substantial proportion of the rising incomes on Muslim religious institutions, including mosques and Waqf Boards. This has become a standard way to announce a family's upward mobility among Kerala's Muslims. These religious institutions have not produced fundamentalist politico-religious organizations or leaders concerned with micro identity politics. They appear to have merely strengthened the existing religious institutions.

The Muslim League, a moderate Muslim party, continues to be the leading Muslim political organization in Kerala. It has been a great beneficiary of rising Muslim incomes as a result of migration, but it is primarily interested in the customary gamut of modern politics — cabinet positions, jobs, business, and education — not in religious issues. Religious fundamentalism, represented by a right wing Muslim party, remains a small part of Kerala politics. Thus, the heartland of Muslim migration to the Middle East continues to combine politics and religious belief without fostering the radicalization of either macro or micro identity politics.

Even when the odd Islamist group rears its head in India and intervenes in micro identity politics, it is quickly shot down by other religious and/or political Muslim groups in India. Consider the recent case of the *fatwa* against women's participation in electoral politics. The Islamic seminary of Deoband, Darul Uloom, appears to have issued the *fatwa* in response to a journalist's question about Muslim women running for public office and campaigning during elections. The *fatwa* was strongly critiqued by both Muslim clerics and Muslim politicians and its legitimacy was challenged as well.

Two factors appear to move Muslim leaders in India away from the global trend: first, the challenge posed by Hindu nationalists also forces India's Muslim groups to focus on macro identity concerns rather than on micro identity questions. Second, the multiplicity of Islamic religious and/or political organizations within the context of democratic institutions works against the rise of any group that promotes extremist positions. India's democracy undermines Islamic extremism, as it does Hindu extremism.

In short, Hindu nationalism as well as Muslim confessional politics has not been concerned with policing and monitoring the boundaries of their

[ff]Prema A. Kurien (2002). *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity: International Migration and Reconstruction of Community Identities in India.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, especially Chapter 8.

community. They have arguably not sought to redefine the " 'core' identity" of Hinduism or Islam. They have instead been primarily focused on how the idea of India incorporates members of their community. This is in sharp contrast to how right-wing religious politics have behaved in other parts of the world. As recently argued, Islamists and Islamic religious leaders are increasingly unconcerned with controlling state politics; rather, they want to tighten their grip on their community of followers, concentrating on redefining and reinforcing the boundaries of their community. [uu] Not so in India.

## 5. Economic Reforms and Identity Politics

In the economic circles, it is often argued that India's economic reforms of the 1990s were made necessary by the macroeconomic crisis of mid-1991, when India ran into a serious balance of payments problem and had foreign exchange reserves worth only 2 weeks of imports. This economic view, though necessary, is not sufficient. It has two analytic faults. First, a macroeconomic crisis requires stabilization, not structural adjustment. Stabilization programs are short-run and macro; they can, in principle, solve a balance of payments crisis. In contrast, structural adjustment, besides being long-run, also covers policies that change the microenvironment of firms: how and where to borrow capital, how to price products, where to buy inputs and where to sell outputs, which technology to use, etc. In 1991, India went for both macro stabilization as well as structural reforms. A purely economic explanation cannot account for why India *continued* on the path of economic reforms *after* the short-run balance of payments problem was resolved. India's foreign exchange crisis was over within 2 years — in 1993.

Second, and more important, a basic restructuring of economic policies has to go through a well-defined political process in India. Specifically, the annual government budget becomes the key indicator of changes in economic policies, but it is an instrument over which the executive does not have final authority. The government can only present a budget, but cannot approve it. In a parliamentary system like India's, the legislature must approve the budget. In many countries, the budget simply sums up the health of government finances. In India, given the historically entrenched and highly interventionist

[uu]Olivier Roy (2004). *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah.* London: Hurst and Company.

role of the state in the economy, all big changes in economic policy, especially those that reduce the role of government and, therefore, alter taxes, public expenditures, and economic laws, show up prominently in the budgetary instrument. If a budget is not approved by parliament, the government can neither economically function nor introduce market-oriented economic policies. We must, therefore, not only ask why the government introduced reforms, but why India's parliaments repeatedly endorsed them by approving the budget.

From the viewpoint of the political process, the answer is clear. Economic reforms were a big concern in India's elite politics, but a secondary or tertiary concern in the nation's popular politics. Ethnic conflict and identity politics drove India's mass politics. A political space like this is essentially two-dimensional, with ethnic politics playing itself out on one axis and reform politics on the other. Scholars of economic reforms have generally assumed that reforms are, or tend to become, central to politics. That is a one-dimensional view. Depending on what else is making demands on the energies of the electorate and the politicians — ethnic and religious strife, political order and stability — the assumption of reform centrality may not be right. The main battle lines in politics may be drawn on issues such as how to avoid (or promote) a further escalation of ethnic conflict, whether to support (or oppose) the political leaders if there has been an attempted coup, whether to forgive (or punish) the "crimes" of high state officials. *Paradoxically, it may be easier to push through reforms in a context like this, for politicians and the electorate are occupied by matters they consider more critical.*[w] That is what happened between 1991 and 1996 in India. It is the nation's preoccupation with identity politics during the 1990s that gave economic reformer the political room to bring in many market-oriented reforms.[ww]

Elite politics is typically expressed in the institutionalized realms of the polity: debates within bureaucracies and cabinets, interactions between business associations and government, dealings between labor aristocracy and

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[w] This argument, of course, does not mean that an ethnic civil war is the best context for reforms. A distinction between ethnic conflict and ethnic breakdowns is required. It is the latter, which is being highlighted above. National anxieties about increasing ethnic violence or declining ethnic relations may provide a niche for reformers to push measures that might otherwise generate considerable political resistance.

[ww] For a fuller development of this argument, see Ashutosh Varshney (1999). "Mass Politics or Elite Politics?" In: Sachs, J., Varshney, A and Bajpai, N. (eds.) *India in the Era of Economic Reforms.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

political parties, etc. In contrast, street is the primary theater of popular politics. Issues that unleash citizen passions trigger mass politics. Its characteristic forms are agitations, demonstrations, civil disobedience, riots, and assassinations. Elite concerns — investment tax breaks, stock market regulations, tariffs on imported cars— rarely filter down to popular politics. In contrast, ethnic conflict is almost always in popular politics.

But what, analytically speaking, would allow a policy or issue— economic, cultural, or political — to enter popular politics? Three factors are typically critical: (a) how many people are affected by the policy, (b) how organized they are, and (c) whether the effect is direct and short-run, or indirect and long-run. The more direct the effect of a policy, the more people are affected by it and the more organized they are, the greater the potential for mass politics. This reasoning would apply to economic policy as well as to non-economic matters, such as ethnic disputes.

Within economic policy, following this reasoning, some issues are more likely to arouse mass contestation than others. For example, inflation, by affecting more or less everybody except those whose salaries are inflation-indexed, quickly gets inserted into mass politics. A financial meltdown has a similar effect, for a large number of banks and firms collapse and millions of people lose their jobs. Short of a financial collapse, stock market disputes or fluctuations rarely, if ever, enter popular politics in less developed countries.

What of trade liberalization and currency devaluation? They are often integral parts of neoliberal economic reforms. Are they part of popular politics or elite politics? In countries like Mexico, they are known seriously to have affected popular politics. In Venezuela, they were followed by a military coup, and a link between the reforms and the coup was explicitly made.[xx]

If a country's economy is heavily dependent on foreign trade, a lowering of tariff walls, a reduction in quantitative trade restrictions and a devaluation of the currency will indeed be of great concern to the masses, for it will directly affect mass welfare. In 2001, trade constituted more than 50% of the GDP of Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Mexico, Hungary, South Korea, Poland, and Venezuela, and between 40 and 50% of the GDP of Israel, Chile, China, and Indonesia. Changes, especially dramatic changes, in the

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[xx]Moses Naim (1993). *Paper Tigers and Minotaurs: The Politics of Venezuela's Economic Reforms.* Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment.

trade and exchange rate regimes of these countries have a clear potential for popular politics. However, if trade is a small part of the economy, as has been true of India and Brazil historically, changes in trade and exchange rate regimes will be of peripheral, short run importance to the large sections of the population.[yy] In 1991, India's trade/GDP ration was a mere 15%. Even after a decade and a half of reforms, it has only reached 25%. If it continues to grow like this, trade may well enter popular politics before long. But that has not been true thus far.

Compared to economic policy, consider now the role of ethnic conflict in politics. Ethnic disputes tend quickly to enter popular politics because they isolate a whole group, or several groups, on an ascriptive basis. They also directly hit political parties — both ethnically based parties (which may defend, or repel attacks on, their ethnic group) and multiethnic parties (which may fiercely fight attempts to pull some ethnic groups away from their rainbow coalitions). Because they invoke ascriptive, not voluntary, considerations, the effects of ethnic cleavages and ethnically based policies are obvious to most people and, more often than not, ethnic groups are either organized, or tend to organize quickly.

In a survey of mass political attitudes in India conducted in 1996,[zz] only 19% of the electorate reported any knowledge of economic reforms, even though reforms had been in existence since July 1991. In the countryside, where two-thirds of India still lives, only about 14% had heard of reforms, whereas the comparable proportion in the cities was 32%. Further, nearly 66% of the graduates were aware of the dramatic changes in economic policy, compared to only 7% of the poor, who are mostly illiterate. In contrast, close to three-fourths of the electorate, urban and rural, literate and illiterate, rich and poor, were aware of the 1992 mosque demolition in Ayodhya; 80% expressed

[yy]The overall size of the economy complicates the meaning of low trade/GDP ratios. Smaller economies tend generally to have a high trade/GDP ratio, making trade very important to their political economies. With the striking exception of China, however, the largest economies of the world    the U.S., Japan, Germany    are less trade dependent. Still, trade politics, as we know, has aroused a great deal of passion in the U.S. and Japan. The meaning of the same ratios can change, if the leading sectors (autos, computers) or "culturally significant" sectors (rice for Japan, agriculture in France) of the economy are heavily affected by trade.

[zz]The survey was conducted by the Center for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), India's premier research institution for election studies, under the leadership of Yogendra Yadav and V.B. Singh. For the larger audiences, the findings are summarized in *India Today*, August 15, 1996. All figures cited below are from the CSDS survey.

clear opinions of whether the country should have a uniform civil code or religiously prescribed and separate laws for marriage, divorce and property inheritance; and 87% took a stand on the caste-based affirmative action.

Further, economic reforms were a non-issue in the 1996 and 1998 elections. In the 1999 elections, the biggest reformers of the land either lost or did not campaign on reforms. Economic reforms turned out to be an issue in the 2004 elections, but not a critical determinant of the outcome.[aaa]

This insight also makes it easier to understand the pattern of India's economic reforms. India's decision-makers had greater success introducing and executing reforms that directly affected the welfare of elites, and less or no success touching areas that directly affected mass welfare. Policy arenas such as trade and exchange rate regimes, capital markets, industrial investment regimes were examples of the former; and matters such as food and fertilizer subsidies, agricultural policy, privatization, labor laws and rules about small-scale industries were instances of the latter. Counterfactually speaking, if India's policy makers had attacked the economic irrationalities of the latter set of policies in the early years of reform, the politics could well have become impossible to manage. An important reason for the success of economic reforms is that using the distractions provided by communal and caste politics, which determined the political coalitions in the 1990s, the less politically difficult reforms were embraced first.

## 6. Conclusion

The various arguments made in this paper can be reduced to two basic propositions. India's identity politics, only partially influenced by globalization, remains primarily internally driven; and it is the prominence of identity issues in the nation's popular politics that provided political room for India's integration with the world economy. Ethno-communal conflict may seem ubiquitous in the country, but that is entirely to be expected in a highly ethnically and religiously diverse democracy, which has stood firmly on the principle that groups are free to mobilize support and make claims on the state. Democracy, therefore, becomes both the channel through which conflict is waged, as

[aaa] Ashutosh Varshney (2004). "Towards a Gentler India." *India Today*, June 5.

well as the channel through which conflict is solved or managed.[bbb] With the prominent exception of Kashmir, whose peculiarities are well-known,[ccc] this larger theoretical understanding of democracy holds good for India as well.

It is worth speculating under what circumstances the self-limiting nature of conflict in India would cease to exist. Can the multi-stranded group conflict really explode out of control, making the policy unstable and its relationship with the outside world unpredictable?

A takeover of Indian politics by the right-wing of Hindu nationalism is the most plausible *speculative* scenario, which can trigger such a dark future. The extreme versions of Hindu nationalism are against the idea of India developed during the freedom struggle, and also against the self-correcting equilibrium Indian politics has come to represent: an equilibrium provided by groups fighting for their rights and dignity, making vociferous claims and advancing through politics, but always stopping short of mutual annihilation and settling for some widely accepted principles of victory and defeat, namely the vote, elections and democracy. The ideologically pure Hindu nationalism has no commitment to democracy, only to an aggressive, muscular and orderly Hindu nation where minorities, especially the Muslims, would "behave" or be forced to "behave."

Political predictions can be hazardous, especially because "exogenous shocks" like that of September 11, entirely unanticipated but quite possible, can transform politics in wholly unexpected ways. But that is not what one can bet on, while thinking about the future. One goes by the normal logic of a political system, and if we follow that route, we can safely say that the extreme versions of Hindu nationalism have virtually no chance of coming to power through the mechanism of vote. Even moderate Hindu nationalism had to, and will have to, make all kinds of political compromises to come to power, which it lost last year.

To conclude, while extreme Hindu nationalism can undermine India as a nation and will almost certainly be intensely inward-looking, it is most difficult to conceive of a political situation arising out of the usual course of democratic politics, which will allow it to control the Indian state. India's diversities and

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[bbb] Robert Dahl (1991). *Democracy and its Critics.* New Haven: Yale University Press.
[ccc] Ashutosh Varshney (1991). "India, Pakistan and Kashmir: Antinomies of Nationalism." *Asian Survey*, November.

its democratic institutions, however imperfect, make that nearly impossible. Diversity and democracy have become the institutionalized and deeply rooted common sense of Indian politics by now.

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