

The Ruined Center: Religion and Mass Politics in India

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Introduction

The famous Soviet dissident Andrej Amalrik predicted that 1984 would be the year of the collapse of the Soviet Union. He was right about its eventual collapse, but wrong about the year. Instead, 1984 turned out to be a crucial year for another huge imperial state: India. This paper tries to explain some elements of what happened that year in India by looking at two religio-political movements, one Hindu, one Sikh, that tried to change the shape of the Indian nation-state. In order to understand these events one has to analyze both the secularity of the Indian state and the religiosity of the two movements involved. My interpretation will be based on a historical analysis of post-colonial modernity and on a political science account of the development of the Indian

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political arena over the last twenty years.

In June 1984 the Indian Army attacked the Golden Temple Complex, the central shrine of the Sikhs, in an operation with the codename Blue Star. This huge complex contained, along with numerous other buildings, the Harimandir (Golden Temple) and the Akal Takhat (the Eternal Throne). The latter was occupied and heavily fortified by militant Sikhs who demanded the separation of a Sikh state, Khalistan, from what they described as Hindu India. The army encountered so much resistance in the complex

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that it had to bring tanks into the operation, which caused much greater damage to the religious buildings than the generals had expected. The operation lasted from 4 June until 7 June. It destroyed the Sikh Library, which contained a great number of sacred manuscripts and objects from the lives of the Gurus in the Sikh tradition. The numbers game of counting the casualties on both sides has not been conclusive and leaves us with estimates ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand.¹ On the Sikh side the number of dead militants was greatly outnumbered by the number of dead pilgrims who were caught in the crossfire during their visit.

The leader of the Khalistani Sikhs, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, was killed in the encounter. This, however, did not mean the end, but rather the beginning of his importance, as martyrs are central to Sikh tradition. His ghost turned out to be much more effective than he had ever been alive. Operation Blue Star took its place among the founding massacres in Sikh historical memory: the pre-colonial massacre of Sikhs in the battle of Malerkotka by the Afghan war leader Ahmad Shah Abdali in 1762, the colonial massacre of peaceful demonstrators in Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar by the British general Dyer in 1919, and now, in 1984 the post-colonial massacre of Sikhs in the Golden Temple.² These memories repress a lot, but end up constructing a narrative of Sikh suffering, inflicted upon them by outside states. It conveyed the message that Sikhs no longer belonged to the state of India, which was exactly what the militant Khalistanis wanted. The clearest and perhaps most threatening sign of the Sikh understanding of the events was the mutiny of Sikh soldiers in various regiments across the country, significant because of the crucial role Sikhs played in the Indian army from the late nineteenth century onward.

Operation Blue Star turned out to be Indira Gandhi's last battle. On 31 October 1984, India's prime minister was assassinated by two of her Sikh bodyguards. The assassination was followed by a widespread pogrom against Sikhs and their property, especially in major northern Indian cities with sizeable Sikh mi-

¹ Mark Tully and Satish Jacob, *Amritsar: Mrs. Gandhi's Last Battle* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986) pp. 184-85.

² Cynthia Mahmood, *Beyond Violence: Faith, Nation and Meaning in Sikh Militancy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming).

norities, such as Delhi and Kanpur. These pogroms were organized and led by political leaders of Mrs. Gandhi's Congress Party and were meant to "teach the arrogant Sikhs a lesson they would not forget," as people said at the time.³ The repression was allowed, and sometimes assisted, by the agencies of the state, including both the police and military. Trains and buses were stopped, and Sikhs were taken out and killed. In the Punjab the reverse happened, with the militant Sikhs killing Hindu passengers. In the elections of 1985, Mrs. Gandhi's son, Rajiv, a former airline pilot without any political experience, gained a landslide victory in what was called a "sympathy vote." The anti-Sikh pogrom, and the following electoral success of the political party that had orchestrated the violence, left a great number of Sikhs who had never sympathized with the idea of a separate Sikh state fundamentally disillusioned with the Indian state. Whatever happened afterwards, Khalistani militancy had gained a permanent place in the Indian polity.

The Hindu nationalist movement also had a crucial year in 1984. The Vishva Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council, VHP), a religious movement led by Hindu monks, and its political ally, the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party, BJP) began a campaign to remove the sixteenth-century Babar mosque from the alleged birthplace of the Hindu god Rama, one of the major gods of the Hindu pantheon. The mosque was located in the northern Indian pilgrimage center Ayodhya, and, according to an inscription on the mosque, it had been built by the Mughal general Mir Baqi in 1528. Local belief which dated back to the pre-colonial period had it that the mosque had been built on a destroyed temple for Rama and, actually, was situated on the birthplace of this god. The mosque had been closed by the government since 1949, when unknown Hindu activists placed an image of Rama inside it. Despite some agitation after independence, there had not been much of an effort to change the status quo.⁴ This changed completely when the VHP and BJP entered the stage. Both the VHP and the BJP are part of a *parivar* (family) of organizations, supported by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Corps, RSS), a militant group which has been in the forefront of Hindu nationalism since its founding in 1925.⁵ Despite this "family-connection"

³ Peter van der Veer, fieldnotes, November 1994.

⁴ See Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth* (London: Athlone, 1988).

⁵ See Ainslee Embree, *Utopias in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

between the VHP, the BJP and the RSS, they have considerable independence and important differences in aims, strategy and leadership. In September 1984, the VHP organized a demonstrative procession of trucks called: "Sacrifice to Liberate Rama's Birth-place." This procession went to the state capital, Lucknow, where it attracted large crowds. It was supposed to end in a huge rally in Delhi, but the rally fell flat due to the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi. The anti-Sikh pogrom going on at the same time drew attention away from Hindu-Muslim tensions surrounding Babar's mosque in Ayodhya, but only for a short time. A surprise decision of a district judge in Faizabad led to the opening of the mosque for the Hindu public in 1986. This decision could not have taken place without the assent of the central government.⁶

In 1988 the BJP and the VHP organized a number of demonstrative processions throughout the country, and even among migrant communities abroad, in which bricks were consecrated for use in the temple that would be built in the mosque's place. In the elections of 1989, the Congress Party of Mr. Gandhi lost its majority in Parliament, and the opposition Janata Party of V.P. Singh replaced it, with the parliamentary support of the BJP. Despite its official support of the new government, the VHP-BJP alliance continued its agitation for the replacement of the mosque with a temple. In 1990 they organized a large procession, led by L.K. Advani, the leader of the BJP, which started in Somnath in western India and was meant to end in Ayodhya, with the ultimate goal of destroying the temple. The procession was stopped in Bihar, and Advani and a number of his lieutenants were arrested, leading to the BJP's withdrawal of parliamentary support for Singh's government. The 1991 elections brought the Congress Party to power again in the wake of the assassination of its leader, Rajiv Gandhi, who had been killed by Sri Lankan Tamil separatists in southern India. The BJP, which had grown enormously in the years of Ayodhya agitation, continued its campaign for the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque.

On 6 December 1992 the VHP and the BJP organized another rally in Ayodhya. The aim of the rally, which was publicly announced by the VHP leadership in all major Indian newspapers, was to destroy the Babar mosque. Despite this public announce-

⁶ For a detailed description, see Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

ment, the rally was allowed by the authorities, under the eyes of the gathered press and without much hindrance by the huge paramilitary police force present in Ayodhya. Activists proceeded to demolish the old structure until, after a day of hard work, all that remained was rubble and a question: Why didn't the police intervene?

A high ranking police officer told the press that the police could easily have intervened and prevented the demolition, but they had not received orders to do so.⁷ Naturally, they did not get any orders from the state officials of Uttar Pradesh, as the state was governed by the BJP, the political party behind the demolition. The paramilitary forces, however, were under the direct command of what in India is called "the Center," the Union government in Delhi. Why did the Center not act? The story is that India's prime minister, Narasimha Rao (Rajiv Gandhi's successor), was taking a nap and, as he is a very old man, nobody wanted to disturb him. When he woke up, the demolition had already proceeded too far.⁸ I do not relate this story to illustrate indecisiveness on the part of the Indian Government, as on the next day the Union government did act very decisively: It dismissed the state governments of four states in which the opposition party BJP ruled. It put the leadership of the BJP and the VHP in jail for a short time and banned a few radical movements, on both the Hindu and the Muslim side. Rao's nap had been a strategic one which allowed the Union government to re-establish the supremacy of the Congress Party after a serious challenge from the BJP. Nevertheless, all these political actions did not prevent the civil war that broke out in many parts of the country, in which thousands (mostly Muslims) were killed, nor did they prevent the relations between Hindus and Muslims from reaching their lowest point since partition. Many Muslims had by then totally lost their confidence in the state and its institutions, because politicians seemed unwilling to protect the rights and lives of the Muslim minority.

The stage was thus set in 1984 for the introduction of two series of events which can be connected in a narrative involving the destruction of sacred centers of religious minorities, either by the state or with the assent of the state. Such a story shows the extent to which the so-called secularist Congress Party and the

⁷ CNN Broadcast, 6 December 1992.

⁸ CNN Broadcast, 6 December 1992.

institutions of the Indian secular state are instrumental in the marginalization of religious minorities. A story told in this way demystifies the narrative of religious nationalism. It shows, from the standpoint of the cynical, well-informed observer, that what seems to be a religious conflict is in fact a political game. Such stories show the political dynamics of conflict situations, but they do not answer the question of why these religious centers would become an issue in the first place.

One answer to this question, perhaps more gratifying to a western audience than the political game described above, is that the forces of secular modernity are up against the forces of religious obscurantism (otherwise called fundamentalism). The leadership of the Congress Party, from Nehru up through Rao, which wants to bring India into the world of modern progress, are opposed by Muslim, Hindu or Sikh extremists, who dream of religious nation-states. This explanation, dignified by forms of Weberian modernization theory, is so much a part of western mythology (otherwise known as common sense) that it is constantly broadcast by the mass media when they report events in Egypt, Iran, Algeria, India, Sri Lanka and other places. It is a story that is hard to question, since any alternative is often viewed as a relativist attack on equality, liberty and fraternity, the founding myths of the liberal nation-state.

In this paper I present a somewhat different reading of these events by looking at the secularity of the modern nation-state in India and the religiosity of nationalist movements. This reading depends on an analysis of the relationship between state and society as well as on an analysis of social movements which try to alter that relationship. The movements I have introduced above present radical and violent answers to some of the basic questions posed in postcolonial modernity. Some of these answers are readily classified in the category of fascism, but by labelling them as such we have not made the questions go away. The sacred ruins we see today in India are, to an important extent, the result of both the successes and failures of the postcolonial state.

The Secularity of the Indian Nation-State

The nation-state is a hyphenated phenomenon, both aspects of which, nation and state, have to be taken into consideration. Crucial to the nation-state is the notion, as expressed by Ernest Renan, that "the nation is a daily plebiscite."⁹ This sense

of community and collective will is produced in nationalism. Like every community, the nation can be imagined in many ways, but liberal theory emphasizes that the nation can only be modern if it is secular. Therefore, the role that religion plays in nationalisms in many parts of the world today is often felt to be an embarrassing anomaly by those who adhere to a Weberian modernization theory.¹⁰ Nationalism has to be connected to secularism to be truly modern. In the West, religion has been defined as an autonomous sphere, separate from politics and economy; this should also happen in the rest of the world, if it is to become truly modern. This idea is expressed in many ways, but most succinctly in what is known as the secularization thesis. The boredom that takes hold of almost any audience when one speaks about contemporary religion is perhaps the most striking effect of the secularization thesis which, basically, argues that we already know everything that there is to know about religion: It declines. The success of industrialization, science and technology has made religion in the modern world obsolete. In sociological theories of modernity the transition from the pre-modern, rural community to the modern, industrial and urbanized society is said to be marked by the decline of religion as an expression of the moral unity of society.

In the age of nationalism, the nineteenth century, nationalism in Europe was often far from secular. Contrary to many nationalism theories, nationalism does not replace religion, but has its origin in religion and develops by nationalizing religion.¹¹ The secularization thesis is even less applicable to the history of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and most other religions than it is to Christianity. The organization of religion, the place of religion in society and the patterns of recruitment are so different that not only secularization theory itself, but also the empirical and theoretical problems which are derived from it in the context of western Christianity, become meaningless. As we have already seen, all this has not kept social scientists from universalizing this ill-founded theory about the West to include the rest of the world. Because all societies modernize, and secularization is an intrinsic part of modernization, all societies secularize; so the rhetoric,

⁹ Ernest Renan, "Qu'est ce que c'est une nation?" in *Oeuvres Completes*, vol. 1 (1882; reprint, Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1947-1961) pp. 887-906.

¹⁰ See, for example, Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983).

¹¹ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991).

dressed up as argument, goes.

Just as the nation is, in many instances, not secular, the secularity of the state, as expressed in the separation of church and state, may not be as clear-cut as it appears. This separation takes shape in very different forms in different societies. The different histories of state-society relations in different parts of the world cannot be captured in a single master-narrative of secular modernity. What we have to consider in the case of India is a colonial history of state-society relations. The events in Amritsar and Ayodhya are not a sign of backwardness, but are the product of a specific history of what I would, provisionally, call "post-colonial modernity." The Khalistani militants who are fighting for a separate nation-state, the Hindu activists who destroyed the mosque in order to establish Rama's kingdom on earth, Mrs. Gandhi who ordered Operation Blue Star, Rao who took a nap when the VHP activists exerted themselves, the millions who watched the events in Ayodhya on CNN, all of them are fully modern. They all live under the material conditions and participate fully in the discursive practices of the modern world-system of nation-states. There is no reason to say that any of them is caught in a time warp, medieval or backward as compared to others who are the bearers of reason and progress. However, their positions are different, because they are the product of different histories.

Since the nineteenth century, then, religion has been the site of difference on which the struggle for alternatives to Christian modernity in many parts of the colonial world took place. In that very struggle new religious discourses and practices have emerged which have been placed in the category of fundamentalism (a term derived from American Protestantism), precisely because they are different from the dominant religious forms of the late twentieth-century West.¹² For at least some of these new movements the term religious nationalism is preferable, as they articulate discourse on the religious community and on the nation.

What kind of secularity do we find in the colonial state in British India of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Religious neutrality was seen as essential, first for trading purposes, and later for British rule in India. The British East India Company resisted direct support for missionary projects. The company's

¹² See Martin Marty and Scott Appleby, eds., *The Fundamentalism Project*, 6 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991-1996).

neutrality, however, did nothing to prevent attempts to reform Indian society through education, an endeavor fully supported by the utilitarian anglicists. Education, however, turned out to be a field in which evangelical missionaries were extremely active. Whatever the debates between evangelicals and utilitarians — and they were considerable — none of them would have denied that civil society and the forms of knowledge on which it was based were ultimately part and parcel of Christian civilization.

Despite their official policy of religious neutrality, the British interfered with every aspect of Indian religion and society. Considering the nature of the colonial project, there was actually no choice but to do so, and the tropes of withdrawal, secularity and neutrality were only used to mask that necessity. Let us, for instance, look at the British project of identifying and classifying communities in Indian society. This project is immediately relevant to the religious nationalist movements introduced in the beginning of this paper.

The Khalistani movement of today cannot be understood without looking at the colonial recruitment of Sikhs in the Indian army. After the Mutiny of 1857, the British disbanded the Bengal army and shifted their recruiting to the Punjab. In their recruiting policy they acted upon a notion of martial races, and the Sikhs were not only counted among these races, but were considered the superior example of it. The British were still impressed by the military resistance they had encountered from the Sikhs during their earlier advance into the Punjab. They introduced in the recruitment process the idea that there was a clear boundary between “pure” Sikhs and “not quite” Sikhs and stipulated that only pure Sikhs should be recruited. Pure Sikhs were those who belonged to the Khalsa and wore the five signs of Sikhism, including the unshorn hair (and thus the turban), the dagger and the steel bangle.¹³ Clearly, this boundary already existed in the pre-colonial period, but it was now reinforced by the secular state in the crucial process of providing labor opportunities. Baptism in the Sikh Khalsa meant eligibility for entry into the army. There can be little doubt that the colonial reinforcement of Khalsa identity provided a basis for later mobilization to defend the purity of Sikh faith in the Singh Sabha movement and for the postcolonial de-

¹³ The Khalsa is the Sikh brotherhood, founded in 1699 by the 10th and last guru, Gobind Singh.

velopment of Sikh mass politics around the symbols of purity.¹⁴

Even more important for the British than identifying who was a Sikh and who was not, was the imperial notion that India was divided into two large nations, one Hindu and the other Muslim. Again, Hindu nationalism, as we know it today, is largely a product of that notion and the colonial projects connected to it. Most importantly, the British set out in the eighteenth century to codify Hindu law and Muslim law. The secular principle of equality before the law was thus replaced by a principle of differential legal treatment of religious communities. This codification of communal difference had significant postcolonial consequences. For example, in 1986 a major political crisis broke out in India about the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill.¹⁵ The new legislation was the Congress government's answer to agitation by Muslim leaders who protested a decision of the Supreme Court in the Shah Banu case. This case arose out of an application made by a Muslim woman, Shah Banu, for maintenance under section 125 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. The woman had been separated from her husband and demanded a monthly allowance.

The new legislation is based on the assumption that Muslim personal law derives straight from immemorial religious law, as codified in the *sharia*, conveniently forgetting that this immemorial law, as codified in civil law, is in fact a colonial construction. The government action was immediately condemned by the BJP as an attempt to appease the Muslim minority, as indeed it was. This created the curious situation in which Hindu nationalists asked for the secular application of a uniform civil code for all Indian citizens, while the secular Congress Party wanted to protect the minorities from this uniformity. This irony can possibly be explained by the historical fact that the Hindu personal code, derived from the *dharmashastras*, has never gained the foundational value for the Hindu community that the *sharia* has gained for the Muslim community. This, in turn, has to do with the nature of textual authority in Hinduism as well as with the construction of the Hindu identity. In the Muslim case, the law has become the public symbol of the integrity of the Muslim community and is

¹⁴ For further explanation, see Richard Fox, *Lions of the Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

¹⁵ Zakia Pathak and Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan. "Shahbano," *Signs*, 12, no. 3 (1989) pp. 558-582.

thus directly linked to the political treatment of a minority, either in terms of protection or in terms of appeasement. This has ossified Muslim personal law in India to an extent unknown in Muslim states like Pakistan and Bangladesh. It provided Muslim leaders with an issue for which to fight. At the same time, it gave BJP politicians an issue which they could use to show the backwardness of the Muslim community, especially in its treatment of women, and also to show the willingness of the Congress Party to pamper the Muslim minority in order to win their votes. The extent to which the political terrain for this was already laid out in the colonial period is striking.

The colonial construction of the Hindu community did not proceed along the lines of homogenization, as in the Muslim case, but along those of differentiation. The Hindu majority was seen by the British as endlessly fragmented and diverse. In their documentation of these differences the colonial authorities created long lists of castes, ethnic groups which were hierarchically linked. These hierarchical listings led to widespread agitation and the formation of caste associations on an all-India basis, whose main purpose was to enhance the status of their respective castes. In southern India much was made of the racial distinction between Aryans (Brahmins) and Dravidians (Non-Brahmins) which led to the formation of Dravidian parties which continue to dominate politics in Tamil Nadu even today.¹⁶ In the rest of India, caste consciousness was also raised by the colonial project of enumerating the different castes.¹⁷ This has resulted in an ongoing dialectic of caste politics against the politics of Hindu unity (*sangathan*) until the present day.

The greatest threat to Hindu unity was the possible formation of a separate, huge community of "Untouchables." Outside of the caste hierarchies were large groups which were Untouchable outcastes, groups with culturally despised occupations, such as sweepers and scavengers, as well as tribes, groups mainly living

¹⁶ One of the most important racial-linguistic theories of the nineteenth century was that there existed in India a division between Aryans and Dravidians. The Aryans were seen as having invaded the South and converted the indigenous, Dravidian population to their Brahmanical religion. This theory, especially as espoused by the missionary Robert Caldwell, became foundational in the formation of an anti-Brahmin Dravidian political movement in the twentieth century.

¹⁷ See Arjun Appadurai, "The Politics of Numbers," in Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer, eds., *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993) pp. 314-39.

outside of peasant economies in hill regions and jungles. In the twentieth century the British gave these groups special, preferential treatment to redress their immense social disadvantages. This was immediately seen by Hindu nationalists as a policy to weaken Hindu unity. In particular, the British decision in 1932, made under pressure from the Untouchables, to create separate electorates for them was strongly resisted by the leader of the Congress Party, Mohandas K. Gandhi, who undertook a fast unto death to have it revoked. The legal historian Marc Galanter argues that "it is evident that Congress opposition, if not Gandhi's personally, was inspired by fear that the great Hindu base of Congress support would be weakened."¹⁸ The result of Gandhi's fast was that Ambedkar, the Untouchable leader, stopped his campaign to create separate electorates for Untouchables. Instead he accepted Gandhi's proposal for a system of reserved seats which is still in force today. The importance of Untouchable participation in Hindu nationalism has to be seen in light of Hindu-Muslim conflict and competition. Their votes were and continue to be crucial to Hindu majoritarianism.

Again, colonial (secular) interventions set the stage for postcolonial politics. The ante was raised by extending the principle of preferential treatment and distributive justice from the so-called scheduled tribes and castes to a new category, the Other Backward Castes (OBCs). This came to occupy a large part of the political arena, as, for example, in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, OBCs included all castes except Brahmins. The new policy led to caste warfare, especially in Gujarat, but also in other states. The 1989 decision of the Singh government to implement the the recommendations of the Mandal Commission for massive reservations for OBCs in the public sector, universities and elsewhere, led again to the pitching of caste against Hindu unity.¹⁹ This was well expressed in the slogan, commonly heard throughout northern India in this period: Mandal or Mandir (temple), meaning that one was either for this policy of reservation or one was a Hindu nationalist striving for the building of the Rama temple in Ayodhya.

However, this general analysis of the colonial history of

¹⁸ Marc Galanter, *Competing Equalities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) p. 31.

¹⁹ Chaired by Justice Mandal, the Mandal Commission was a commission established to study the relative opportunities of different castes in society.

secularism and the secular production of religious politics cannot explain fully the role of the secular state in the 1984 happenings. Why indeed 1984, or better, why the 1980s? There are a few general features in the development of Indian politics which can contribute to the events of 1984 and their aftermath. Many political scientists have argued that the 1970s showed the decline of the Congress system which had governed India since independence.²⁰ Mrs. Gandhi had to fight off her rivals for the succession of her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, who had made India into a largely one-party system. She definitely succeeded in doing so, as her landslide victory of 1971 shows, but only at the cost of a further centralization of power in Delhi and the weakening of rivals by playing them off against their opponents. This strategy led increasingly to a decline of the ability of the Congress Party to govern India. The precariousness of Mrs. Gandhi's rule became evident when she decided to dispense with democracy, declaring a state of emergency, after her seat in Parliament was challenged in court by the opposition. The Emergency of 1975 to 1977 politicized the police and the powerful civil service and led to a general erosion of the credibility and legitimacy of the Congress Party and the state itself. Many politicians, including leaders of the BJP, were arrested and jailed.

There can be little doubt that the distrust Hindu nationalists feel towards the Congress Party's secularist and progressive posturings was much strengthened in this period. Mrs. Gandhi was soundly defeated after her decision to return to democracy in 1977. However, the coalition that succeeded Congress for three years under the name Janata Dal was too internally divided to be an alternative to the Congress system, which at least had a long history of containing and balancing various factional strife. In 1980, Mrs. Gandhi again won the parliamentary elections and came back to power, but now more than ever, her government had a feeling of being embattled, of presiding over a system which was falling apart.

In the case of the Punjab there can be little doubt that the political strategies employed by Mrs. Gandhi's Congress Party were a major element in creating the Khalistani separatism of the

²⁰ See the essays collected in Atul Kohli, ed., *India's Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); see also Francine Frankel and M.S.A. Rao, eds., *Dominance and State Power in Modern India*. 2 vols. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990).

1980s.²¹ Since independence, the Congress Party and the leading Sikh Party, Akali Dal, have been the main contenders for power in the Punjab. While Congress has been the dominant party over much of this period, the 1977 and 1980 elections were won by the Akalis. It is widely said in India that Bhindranwale was used by Congress in this context to weaken support for the Akali Dal. Evidence for this comes from the fact that Bhindranwale's men ran as candidates against Akalis in the elections for the committee that manages all Sikh shrines in the Punjab and is the main resource in Sikh politics. To many analysts this explains also why Bhindranwale was soon released after his arrest in connection with the murder of Lala Jagat Narain in 1981. Interestingly, the Punjab provides also an excellent example of the way Mrs. Gandhi divided her own party at the regional level in order to prevent challenges to her central power. She appointed the leader of one faction of the Punjab Congress Party, Giani Zail Singh, to the position of home minister in the Union government and then later president, while she put his opponent, Darbara Singh, at the head of the Punjab government. These maneuvers explain at least partly the inability of the state to deal decisively with the growing separatist militancy in the Punjab until the moment that the army was brought into the Golden Temple, a self-defeating action by all accounts.

Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state with more than 100 million inhabitants, shows a similar picture of divisive politics and a growing willingness of all political parties, including Congress, to see religious nationalism, in this case Hindu nationalism, as a possible unifying force. The main contenders for ruling Uttar Pradesh were the Congress Party, Janata and the BJP. The Congress Party had lost its dominance in Uttar Pradesh in the 1970s, just as it had in the Punjab. Uttar Pradesh in this period is a good example of the mobilization of the OBCs, led by the middle peasantry. The short-lived Janata government, which ruled Uttar Pradesh after the Emergency, implemented reservation policies favoring these OBCs. The BJP, however, saw this kind of policy as dividing the unity of the Hindu nation. As discussed earlier, the politics of caste reservations and of Hindu nationalism played them-

²¹ See Paul Brass, "The Punjab Crisis and the Unity of India," in Kohli, pp. 169-213; see also Paul Wallace, "Religious and Ethnic Politics: Political Mobilization in Punjab," in Frankel and Rao, pp. 416-82.

selves out in the politics of the 1980s and Uttar Pradesh was one of the crucial arenas. Congress could not stay out of this conflict, even if it had wanted to, and, as in the Punjab, ultimately favored religious nationalism. The crucial decision in 1986 to open the mosque in Ayodhya for the Hindu public could not have been made without direct assent of the Congress leadership. This was clearly done to gain political advantage by acting according to Hindu populist sentiments, although this backfired in the end by giving the BJP more momentum.

The Religiosity of Nationalist Movements

There is a common fallacy that religion and politics are two different fields of social activity. This leads observers sometimes to speak of the politicization of religion, and to say that this is against the original intent of the founder of religion, or God himself. Undoubtedly, there are movements which try to steer away from the official political arena and call themselves apolitical, but even in these cases this withdrawal can be seen as political. Much clearer, however, is the political nature of the movements with which I began this paper — the Khalistani movement and the Hindu nationalist movement. Both movements attempt to create new nation-states to replace the current one. In these cases the common question is not whether these movements are political, but whether, or to what extent, they are religious. It is largely spurious to come up with old or new definitions of religion, culture or politics. It is more useful to look at the imagined common history, territory and identity which characterize these movements, and to recognize the extent to which this imagination is rooted in religious institutions and sacred scriptures, and is formulated by religious leaders. The following section will address these issues in both Sikh and Hindu nationalism.

The Khalistani Movement

The Sikh tradition was founded by Guru Nanak in the fifteenth century and exemplifies a particular form of religious thought in India which is devotional, but does not wish to use images in worship. The Sikh brotherhood (*khalsa*) emerged out of that tradition in the eighteenth century. The current Khalistani movement is a radical faction in that brotherhood. Its ideas can be traced partly to the Singh Sabha movement in the colonial

period. The first Singh Sabha was established in 1873 and preached the purification of the Sikh brotherhood from Hindu practices.²² One of the key issues was thus the assertion of boundaries between Hindus and Sikhs, clearly in reaction to reformist activities on the part of the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reformist movement which tried to "convert" Sikhs to Hinduism.²³ A major victory for the Singh Sabha movement occurred in 1905, when Hindu images were removed from the Golden Temple in Amritsar. In the early decades of the twentieth century the Singh Sabha movement increasingly turned its attention to the management of Sikh temples (*gurdwaras*), the places of congregational worship. These temples were, under British law, the property of priestly families whose moral and ritual behavior did not conform to the purist standards of certain reformists who originated in the Singh Sabha movement. These families called themselves Akalis. *Akal* is the term in Sikhism for the ultimate, timeless reality. The most important campaign of the Akalis was a struggle for the control over the temples. In 1925 the agitation succeeded in placing the temples under the authority of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, a representative body of the Sikh brotherhood. This success led to the formation of the Sikh political party, the Akali Dal. The control of the temple-committee has become the most coveted prize in the factional politics of this party.

The slogan of the Singh Sabha was that Sikhs were not Hindus. The boundary between members of the brotherhood and those followers of Sikh traditions who were not members of the brotherhood was now transformed in a boundary between pure Sikhs (members of the brotherhood with beards, turbans and the rest of the markers) and Hindus. Religious groups, such as the Nanakpanthis, the Nirankaris and the Namdharis, who followed the Sikh teachings but did not accept the brotherhood, were asked to declare that they were not Sikhs, but Hindus which, of course, they refused to do. The guiding fear behind all this seems to have been (and continues to be) that the Sikhs would lose their sense of a separate identity and simply become one of the many sectarian movements in Hinduism. One of the main grounds for this abiding fear is the practice of many Punjabi families to initiate only one son into the brotherhood, while the rest of the family is

²² See Rajiv Kapur, *Sikh Separatism: The Politics of Faith* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1984).

²³ See Kenneth W. Jones, *Arya Dharm* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

clean-shaven and follows Sikh and Hindu teachings as they see fit. The boundary between Hindus and Sikhs is thus constantly negotiated in the day-to-day practices of a large portion of Punjabis who are only potentially pure Sikhs.

It is striking that the Khalistani movement began, in fact, not as a separatist movement, but as a protest movement of a purist faction of the Sikh brotherhood against privileges given to the Nirankaris. According to the tradition of the Sikh brotherhood, there have been ten Sikh gurus; since the last one, Sikhs have had to rely on the sacred sayings of these gurus (*gurbani*), collected in the sacred book of Sikhism, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and, in the event of a dispute, to trust the opinion (*gurmatta*) of the brotherhood. The Nirankaris, however, continue to have a living guru. This is considered blasphemy by the brotherhood. On the day of the big festival of Vaisakhi, 13 April 1978, the Nirankaris staged a large procession in Amritsar and were confronted by a group of radical members of the brotherhood. Thirteen Sikhs and two Nirankaris were killed. The Akali Dal government of the Punjab registered a case against the Nirankaris, but they were later found to have acted in self-defense. This verdict is often quoted by Khalistanis as a sign that true justice could not be expected from a Hindu government.²⁴ In April 1980 this led to the assassination of Gurbachan Singh, the Nirankari guru. The immediate origin of the Khalistani movement lies therefore in a conflict about religious orthodoxy, framed in the narrative of true or false Sikhs, and in the failure of the state to protect pure Sikhism, or worse, in the alleged conspiracy of the state to use the Nirankaris against the brotherhood.

An important role in the attack on the Nirankaris was played by the Damdami Taksal, a religious institution under Bhindranwale's leadership. Bhindranwale felt strongly that the Sikh religion was under mounting pressure. After the assassination of the Nirankari guru, he was suspected of involvement in the 1981 murder of Lala Jagat Narain, editor of the largest Hindu-owned newspaper of the Punjab, the *Punjabi Kesari*. Bhindranwale was arrested, which led to the hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane by Khalistanis who demanded his release. His arrest made him a

²⁴ Cynthia Mahmood has interviewed a number of refugee Khalistani in the United States for her forthcoming book, entitled *Beyond Violence: Faith, Nation and Meaning in Sikh Militancy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

rising star in the growing separatist movement in the Punjab, and after his release he quickly became its leader. He and his followers entrenched themselves in the Golden Temple, and from there launched terrorist attacks on Hindus and on state institutions. This ultimately led to the events of 1984.

The narrative of Khalistani aspirations is framed in terms of history, territory and identity. The history of the Sikhs as popularly seen and told by themselves is one of constant struggle against foreign state power. Early on it is a struggle against the Mughals, later against the British, and finally it is a struggle against the Brahmins of the dominant Congress Party. In these struggles the Sikhs are portrayed as the courageous minority who fight against overwhelming state power. The stories dwell on massacres and martyrdom, but also on ultimate superiority and victory. The events in the Punjab in the 1980s could have been scripted along these lines. The Khalistani challenge to the central state elicited a growing involvement of the central state in the affairs of the Punjab. It led to a police state in which the prisons were filled with young Sikhs, innocent or not, who were subjected to torture and numerous atrocities, setting the stage for a civil war. Finally, the attack on the Golden Temple and the killing of Bhindranwale made him into a textbook martyr for the Sikh cause and demonstrated to his followers that he had been right all along about the bad intentions of the Indian state.

A major feature of nationalism is the politics of space. Bordered territory symbolizes the fixity, stability and sovereignty of the nation-state, so that borders have become contested sites for international warfare, refugees and immigration policies. Those who see themselves as a nation often seek a spatial, territorial expression of their nationhood. The Indian Muslim League spoke of a "homeland" for Muslims when it demanded Pakistan in the 1940s. This expression was adopted by Sikh leaders when the Punjab region was cut in two by the partition of 1947, but it did not play a significant role in the negotiations that led to Indian independence. In the 1960s Master Tara Singh, the leader of the Akali Dal, began a movement demanding a separate state within the Indian Union, with a Sikh electoral majority. Not religion, but language (Punjabi) was the basis of this demand, since language had been generally adopted as the marker for deciding state boundaries within the Union. This movement succeeded in 1966 when the Punjab was divided into the largely Hindi-speaking (and Hindu) state of Haryana and the largely Punjabi-speaking (and

Sikh) state of Punjab. As we have seen, however, a separate state within the Indian nation-state proved to be not quite enough for some in the 1980s.

While these territorial strivings are typical for all nationalisms, some of them at least are grafted upon pre-nationalist senses of sacred space. According to Harjot Oberoi, Sikhs were not bound to the territory of the Punjab, but to the lineage of gurus and then to the scriptural guru, that is the words of the guru in the *Guru Granth*. In his view, the territorial demand is entirely a modern, nationalist demand which has nothing to do with religion.²⁵ This transterritorial aspect of Sikhism made it easy to travel beyond the Punjab and to build temples wherever they had a large enough community. It is, at the same time, true that this religious transcendence of local belonging makes it possible to tie religious identity either to nationalism or to transnationalism. Both possibilities are fulfilled in the Sikh case, which has produced both a Punjabi territorial nationalism and a transnational diaspora. Both nationalism and the transnational diaspora are tied to the Punjab, however, in the center of Sikhism: the Golden Temple in Amritsar. There is no place which expresses so strongly the existence of a global Sikh community as the Golden Temple. That is why the attack on the Golden Temple by the Indian state proved to many Sikhs that they need a territorial nation-state to protect their sacred center.

Identity politics is, obviously, the main element in the Khalistani movement. As argued earlier, the guiding fear among Sikhs of the brotherhood is that they may backslide into Hinduism. This fear is clearly expressed in the exhortation to young people to show the visible markers of being a Sikh, as in this speech by Bhindranwale: "If you do not want beards then you should ask the women to become men and you become women. Or else ask nature that it should stop this growth on your faces. Then there will be no need for me to preach, no need to break my head on it."²⁶ This passage also shows the extent to which religious identity is tied up with gender identity, as Veena Das rightly observes in her comments on Bhindranwale's speech. The message is that to be a real man one has to be a visible member of the brother-

²⁵ Harjot Oberoi, "From Punjab to 'Khalistan': Territoriality and Metacommentary," *Pacific Affairs*, 60, no. 1 (Spring 1987) pp. 26-41.

²⁶ Bhindranwale is quoted in Veena Das, *Critical Events* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 127.

hood. That allows one also to wear the dagger and protect the honor of the Sikh community against attacks from outside. The idea that Sikhs need their own state to be able to maintain the social and symbolic boundaries which distinguish them from Hindus is not only found among extremists like Bhindranwale. In the 1960s, the period of agitation for a separate Sikh Punjab within the Indian Union, the acclaimed Sikh writer, historian and long-time member of the Congress Party, Khushwant Singh, wrote in the conclusion of his two-volume history of the Sikhs: "The only chance of survival of the Sikhs as a separate community is to create a state in which they form a compact group, where the teaching of Gurmukhi and the Sikh religion is compulsory and where there is an atmosphere of respect for the traditions of their Khalsa forefathers."²⁷ Khushwant Singh, writes about a separate state within the Indian Union and he is anything but a Khalistani, however one still sees in this quotation the common ground shared by extremists and moderates.

The Vishva Hindu Parishad

The Vishva Hindu Parishad was founded in Bombay on an auspicious day, the birthday of Lord Krishna, 29 August 1964. One hundred fifty religious leaders were invited to Sandeepany Sadhanalaya, the center of a Hindu missionary movement headed by Swami Chinmayananda. The host had been instrumental in organizing the conference and became its president. Shivram Shankar Apte, a worker of the militant Hindu Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, was elected as its general secretary. The aim of the new movement was to strengthen Hindu society and spread Hindu values, not only in India itself but also abroad. The VHP's primary aim is to formulate a modern Hinduism as a common religion of the Indian nation.²⁸ For its first 15 years, it had only limited success, but this changed drastically in the 1980s. The VHP received a considerable boost when an Untouchable subcaste in Meenakshipuram in southern India converted en masse to Islam in 1981. Conversion and petro-dollars are the major concerns of Hindu nationalists who believe that their nation is under threat

²⁷ Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966) p. 205.

²⁸ See Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

from Islam. In historical terms Islamic aggression is seen by the VHP as the cause of many Hindus leaving their religion and converting to Islam. In its view, the unity and integrity of the ancient Hindu nation has been most fundamentally threatened by conversion by the sword. Indian Muslims are therefore constantly exhorted to realize their fundamental Hindu nature. While these conversions happened in the past, the Meenakshipuram case was seen as proof that the Middle East used its oil wealth to continue the conversion project. Although the Meenakshipuram conversions were insignificant in terms of overall numbers, this case has become the most publicized issue in the VHP's defense of Hinduism. Its propaganda about the Islamic threat led to the organization of the highly successful nation-wide "Sacrifice for Unity" in 1983, which in turn became the basis for the events in 1984, described above.²⁹

Hindu nationalism, as found in the VHP, also expresses itself in terms of history, territory and identity. Like their Khalistani counterparts, Hindu nationalists describe Hindu history as a story of oppression by Muslim rulers, followed by British Christian rulers, and now by Indian pseudo-secularists. Their story is less one of militant rebellion against foreign rule or martyrdom, although these are not entirely absent from it, but rather it is a story emphasizing Hindu tolerance and spiritual superiority in their relations with their oppressors. At the same time, however, the VHP argues that Hindus have been taken advantage of because of their tolerance and should now stand up to claim what is their right, namely the Hinduization of the Indian nation-state. The VHP condemns the Congress Party, which has ruled India for most of the period since independence, as a pseudo-secularist party. The Congress Party's Nehruvian program of reducing the salience of religious beliefs and practices in politics, as well as the state's projected neutrality toward religious difference, which it inherited from the colonial state, are both seen to be contradicted by policies that pamper the minority. More specifically, the Congress Party and the state are viewed as using the Muslim community as a vote bank and dividing the Hindu majority by pitting the Untouchables against the rest of the Hindus. Independence, as VHP ideologues keep reminding their audience, has not brought freedom

²⁹ See Lise McKean, *Divine Enterprise: Gurus and the Hindu Nationalist Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

for the Hindu majority. They believe that the state should express the Hindu values of purity and incorruptibility as found in the divine realm of the God-king Rama and that history books should be rewritten to convey the proud heritage of Hindu civilization and the wrongs inflicted upon it by "foreigners."

The territory of the Indian nation-state is also in the VHP's conception of Hindu sacred space. This notion of nationwide Hindu sacred space is based on the existence of Hindu centers all over the country connected to each other by intersecting pilgrimage routes. These routes have been utilized for the VHP's processual agitations and most elaborately in the "Sacrifice for Unity" in November and December 1983 when 3 large processions and at least 47 smaller processions traversed the country. Processions of temple chariots are an important feature in Hindu temple festivals. The VHP made use of brand-new trucks, named temple chariots, which carried huge waterpots filled with Ganges water and smaller pots of local sacred water. In this way, all rivers and sacred waters of India were symbolically connected to the Ganges as the unifying symbol of Hindu India.

The "Sacrifice for Unity" laid the groundwork for the ritual processions aimed at the destruction of the mosque in Ayodhya. The VHP's plan to destroy this mosque as the first of a series of similar mosques, allegedly placed on Hindu sacred spots, is an attempt to map out the national territory in such a way that India is a country for Hindus only. Advani's campaign of 1990, which ended in his arrest in Bihar and the downfall of Singh's government, started in Somnath, perhaps the best known of Hindu temples destroyed by Muslim conquerors. After independence a new Hindu temple was built there by Hindu activists, led by major Congress politicians. Advani's message was clear: What had been done in Somnath by Congress should have been followed up in other places, and the BJP-VHP alliance was going to do just that.

The identity politics of the VHP movement are complex in nature. On the face of it Hindus do not have to worry, as the Sikhs do, that they will fade away. They are a comfortable majority, but, to use Stanley Tambiah's phrase, they have a minority complex.³⁰ Part of this can be explained by the fact that before partition the Hindu majority was not at all secure, considering the

³⁰ Stanley Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) p. 58.

presence of a large number of Muslims and the unclear position of Untouchables as second-class Hindus. Part of it also involves the very basis of the formation of a Hindu majority, namely Hindu identity. The term "Hindu" refers to a very wide-ranging and divergent set of beliefs and practices which are not easily translatable from region to region. The minority complex of this insecure majority is particularly expressed in the fear that Untouchables will convert to Islam. This is shown in the success of the VHP propaganda about the Meenakshipuram conversions which blew up this incident to unbelievable proportions. The pre-independence political rivalry and mutual antagonism between India's two major communities, Hindus and Muslims, is given new political life by the VHP. While conflicts between the two communities had been confined to particular cities and localities since the creation of Pakistan, the VHP succeeded in making it again into a nationwide phenomenon. The other side of Hindu identity politics relates to the long-standing fear that the Untouchable communities, which make up a crucial percentage of India's population, may decide that they are not part of the Hindu nation. Policies which focus on these disadvantaged communities are portrayed by the VHP and its political ally, the BJP, as trying to divide the Hindus against themselves. They are said to be a threat to unity. This is why for Hindu nationalists the debate about affirmative action is closely related to their cause of unifying the nation under a Hindu banner.

Conclusion

Religious nationalism in India went through important changes in 1984. Operation Blue Star fulfilled the hopes of Khalistanis by creating a very real divide between Hindus and Sikhs in the country. That year saw the beginning of the agitation which led to the destruction of the Babar mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 and to a new phase of intercommunal enmity between Hindus and Muslims in India. Both of these conflicts have an international dimension because of the inimical relations between India and Pakistan. India accuses Pakistan of assisting Sikh terrorists in their actions in the Punjab which borders Pakistan. Pakistan follows closely what happens with their fellow Muslims in neighboring India. This situation is obviously made worse by the tense standoff in Kashmir, where Muslim militants want a separate state. Ultimately, the international tension between Pakistan and India

must, of course, be seen as the result of a partition of the subcontinent, caused by religious nationalism. It shows that separation, eagerly sought by Khalistanis, does not necessarily solve political problems. It only changes their definition from national to international.

Since India's independence many political scientists have predicted that the country would fall apart. This mood was perhaps best captured in the title of Selig Harrison's 1960 book, *India: The Most Dangerous Decades*. A similar sense of impending doom is expressed by the subtitle of a recent book by Atul Kohli: *India's Growing Crisis of Governability*.³¹ Kohli rightly calls attention to the politicization of the main institutions of the state, including the police and the civil service. He also emphasizes the gradual decline of the Congress system, which previously contained various regional and social conflicts. A major element in this, and Kohli acknowledges this, is the success rather than the failure of mass politics in that a growing number of groups have become involved in the political system. Their mobilization has taken shape in two types of mass movement: the backward caste movements and the religious nationalist movements. Unfortunately, this enhanced participation has also led to a growth in political militancy and violence. The change in the political arena is undoubtedly among the most important elements in explaining the growth of religious nationalism among both Sikhs and Hindus in the 1980s. The phenomenon itself, however, is not explained by it. For that we need a long-term perspective which analyzes both the secularity of the state and the religiosity of social movements. ✻

³¹ Atul Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).