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By Anuja Bose

Abstract

An important question that gets frequently asked about Hindu nationalism in India is “why the secular and civic nationalism of Jawaharlal Nehru degenerated into the ethnic nationalism of the Hindutva ideologues?” An answer to this question is typically articulated by looking at crucial transformations in Indian politics. For instance, the decline of the Indian National Congress in the late 1980s, and the gradual erosion of democratic structures are the two most common reasons given to explain the rise of the Hindu nationalist party, Bharatiya Janata Party, to power. However, these explanations do not probe into why religious identity was particularly prone to politicization in India. To that end, the prevailing explanations for the rise of Hindu nationalism leave some fundamental questions unanswered.

This paper seeks to understand why religious identity in particular has the propensity for mass appeal in India. It delves into a popular debate over secularism in India to answer this question. This debate provides important insight into the relationship between secularism, modernity and the politicization of religious identity. It will be argued that the institutional practice of secularism and the processes of modernization made religion a political category that was particularly prone to politicization.

Hindutva and the Politicization of Religious Identity in India

The 2004 general elections marked a crucial turning point in the career of Hindu Nationalism in India. The main political party voicing Hindu Nationalist concerns, the Bharatiya Janata Party, was voted out of office with the reins of power passed to a broad coalition of center-left parties determined to stop the BJP's ascendancy to power. The defeat came as a shock to the BJP who had been riding on the waves of India's economic boom and religiously divided atmosphere. However, it seems premature to predict whether the defeat marks the end of Hindu Nationalism in Indian national politics. As Amartya Sen has pointed out, "The BJP's powerful role in mainstream Indian politics and the might of the Hindutva movement are parts of the new political reality in India. Even though the BJP is no longer dominant, in the way it was over the last few years, it remains a politically powerful force, and is working hard to return to office."¹ Thus, an understanding of the history and issues relating to the emergence of Hindutva and its principle representative in the electoral arena, the BJP, remains crucial to understanding the future of Indian politics.

More specifically, anticipating the future direction of Indian politics requires a clear understanding of why the secular and civic nationalism of Jawaharlal Nehru degenerated into the ethnic and chauvinistic nationalism of the Hindutva. Numerous attempts have tried to provide a convincing answer to this question. This paper will begin with a review of these attempts, which tend to emphasize crucial transformations in

1. Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, (New York: Penguin, 2005), 50-51.

Indian politics as the source of the BJP's rise to power. However, it will be argued that a clear understanding of why civic nationalism degenerated into ethnic nationalism requires a deeper examination of how religious identity was politicized. An explanation for this question will be sought by looking into a popular debate in India over the viability of secularism.

Hindu Nationalism is by no means an alien force in India's political landscape. As a political and ideological force, its origins are rooted in the reification of religious communities under the colonial government, the acceptance and reversal of these colonial identities by Hindu revivalist movements of the early 20th century, and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's elaboration of Hindutva in *Essentials of Hindutva* (1922), which provided the ideological foundations of Hindu Nationalism.² Originally conceptualized as a social and religious movement, Hindu Nationalists soon set out to transform their movement into a political force in opposition to the Congress party and Muslim League. The result was the institutionalization of Hindu Nationalism with the establishment of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).³

However, the earlier manifestations of Hindu Nationalism never acquired the political clout of the BJP in the late 1980s. Created after a regrouping of the main political organizations sustaining Hindu Nationalism, the BJP rose to power at a remarkable pace. In the Lok Sabha (the lower house) of the Indian parliament, the BJP had just two seats in 1984. In 1989, it won 85 seats. By 1991, it had managed to get 119

2. Stuart Corbridge and John Harriss, *Reinventing India*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 179-180.

3. *Ibid.*, 182.

seats. Finally, the steady rise in support culminated in 182 seats in 1999.⁴ While, that was still a minority, in a house of 543 seats in all, it was adequate for the BJP, as the largest single party, to be the leading partner of a coalition (National Democratic Alliance) that ruled India until 2004. The swift upsurge of support for the BJP has been subject to investigation by a wide array of social scientists. Broadly, the explanations have looked at the social and political conditions which allowed the BJP to project itself as an attractive political choice for Indian voters. Ashutosh Varshney and Rajni Kothari present the most widely accepted explanations for the BJP's meteoric rise to power. They emphasize some important transformations in the Indian political scene as the source of this ascendancy to power.

Varshney regards the most significant transformation of the Indian political system to be the decline of the Congress Party in the late 1980s. In his article, "Contested Meanings: India's National Identity, Hindu Nationalism and the Politics of Anxiety", he describes the Congress Party as, "once a powerful organization associated with the founding and building of the nation, is today a rusty, clay-footed, colossus."⁵ Such a deterioration in the image and performance of the Congress is largely attributed to the reign of Indira Gandhi, who he argues suspended intraparty democracy and debate by quelling opposition from party members at the national and state level.⁶ The subsequent loss of confidence in the Congress party created an ideological and organizational

4. Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 50.

5. Ashutosh Varshney, 'Contested Meanings: India's National Identity, Hindu Nationalism, and the Politics of Anxiety', *Daedalus*, Summer 1993: v.122, 242.

6. *Ibid.*, 243.

vacuum in Indian politics which opposing parties such as the BJP and the CPI(Communist Party of India) could seize to propagate their ideological positions. The ultimate victory of the BJP is attributed to its 'ideological cohesion and organizational discipline' and the "inherent limitations in class-based mobilization" which made the electoral expansion of the CPI difficult beyond certain pockets of India.

Rajni Kothari situates his explanation for the communalization of politics in the general erosion of democratic procedures. In his book *Communalism in Indian Politics*, he contends, "The political structure that evolved in the first twenty years was very fragile. It was vulnerable in many spots and above all, produced an elite which slowly began to lose ideological discipline and a larger sense of purpose and, instead, started conceiving its interests in narrow mechanical terms which ultimately made it liable to fall prey to, or feel tempted to make use of, divisive tendencies."⁷ Thus, democratic politics degenerated from an instrument for societal transformation to a mechanical means of retaining power. It changed the political arena into a numbers game where elections became increasingly about soliciting the support of particular ethnic groups. Unlike Varshney, Kothari does not attribute this deterioration of politics to the reign of Indira Gandhi or the Congress party. Instead, he argues, rather contentiously, that the ethnically divisive phase of Indian democracy "is not an aberration but something that is part of the system, a direct outcome of its inherent logic"⁸ Thus the communalization of politics,

7. Rajni Kothari, *Communalism in Indian Politics*, (Ahmedabad: Rainbow Publishers, 1998), 16.

8. *Ibid.*, 15

according to Kothari, is a product of the democratic system which is prone to cycles of degenerative politics where normative content and ideological conviction are sacrificed for survival in political office.

The authoritarianism of the Congress party under Indira Gandhi, and the degenerative processes of electioneering were crucial transformations of the Indian political system during the 1980s. Varshney and Kothari draw a strong link between these political transformations and the rise of Hindu Nationalism in India. They argue that these transformations allowed the BJP to project themselves as a credible force in Indian politics and garner the support of large sections of the disillusioned electorate. Absent from this analysis however is a coherent account of the salience of religious identity in Indian politics. After all, one must ask why religious nationalism in particular had such rallying potential in the climate of political disillusionment of the late 1980s? Varshney and Kothari both provide elaborate accounts of the processes that created this disillusionment, but ultimately provide an inadequate explanation for why the BJP was able to seize this political opening to promote the ideology of Hindutva. Any account which attempts to explain the degeneration of civic nationalism into ethnic nationalism must adequately theorize the reasons why a particular ethnic identity has the propensity for mass appeal and politicization.

This paper intervenes into the discussion of the rise of Hindu Nationalism in India at this juncture. It seeks to critically examine why religious identity in India became so rapidly politicized in the 1980s. The most systematic treatment of the politicization of religious identity in India is to be found in the lively debate about the prospects of

secularism as a viable mechanism for religious accommodation. As the scale and intensity of religious conflict increases, and religious minorities feel insecure about their position within the Indian polity, some critics have begun to question the effectiveness of secularism as a mechanism of religious accommodation. Some have concluded that secularism lacks the potential to deter religious conflict in India, and even go so far as to claim a direct causal link between the conceptual structure of the doctrine of secularism and the re-emergence of problems concerning religious and inter-communal relations. Consequently, the debate over the possibility or desirability of secularism in India provides an interesting account of the politicization of religion in India. The debate probes into the ways in which the institutional arrangements and ideological underpinnings of secularism result in the politicization of religious identity. My main investigative question is situated within the parameters of this debate. It looks at the relationship between secularism and the resurgence of religious identity, in order to provide a convincing account of the politicization of religion in India. It will ultimately be argued that the practice of secularism in India produced religious identity as a dominant political category that could be seized by political parties for strategic interests. Hindu Nationalism emerged as a particularly powerful force in this context for two reasons. First, it was able to tap into and exploit the feelings of 'threat' exhibited by the dominant Hindu community and second, it was able to adapt to the processes of technological and economic modernization, making Hinduism more relevant to capitalist modernity.

The Debate over Secularism in India

The theoretical framework for this paper attempts to review, assess, and synthesize some of the explanations that have been put forward for the politicization of religion in India. These explanations are derived from prominent critiques of Indian secularism put forward by Pierre Van Den Berghe, Ashis Nandy and T.N Madan. Berghe, Nandy, and Madan have all sought to make a strong connection between the practice and ideology of secularism and the politicization of religion in India. However, it will be shown that some of the connections made in these theories are tenuous, if not mistaken. Thus, Thomas Blom Hansen's work on modernization and the rise of Hindu Nationalism in India will be used to reinforce and repudiate some of the connections between secularism and the politicization of religion.

Some conceptual clarifications of secularism are in order before delving into theoretical framework of this paper. Secularism has generally been understood to mean the separation of religion from the policy and practice of the state. However, there has been debate about precisely what this 'separation' entails. For some, the secularity of the state requires that no support be given to religion in any form, while for others it entails supporting all religions to the same degree. In India, secularism takes the latter form where the state assumes a more interventionist role in the religious domain. For example, it has attempted to promote reform and progress within religions so that discrimination, conflict, and persecution are prevented.⁹

9. Rajeev Bhargava, *Secularism and its Critics*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 8.

I have also found it useful to utilize a distinction between secularism and secularization from Achin Vanaik's book *The Furies of Indian Communalism*. By secularism, he means the specific practices and policies the state uses to assert its independence from the religious domain. On the other hand, secularization is used to refer to a more general process of decline in religious influence and religious identity in modern life.¹⁰ I find that the critics and supporters of secularism are concerned with these two aspects of the phenomenon when theorizing its relationship to Hindu Nationalism.

Pierre Van Den Berghe presents a strong critique of policies that seek to recognize ethnic communities through the conferral of group rights and special privileges. In an article titled "Multicultural Democracy: Can it work?", he uses India as a primary example of a functioning multicultural democracy, which "has become a vast cacophony of groups clamoring for state recognition, and organizing for the achievement of special rights and the defense of collective interests."¹¹ He argues that such a predicament has "generated a spiral of escalating stridency and frequently, violence. India has become the country where caste and communal violence are the most routine, institutionalized order of the day."¹² It is important to note that Van Den Berghe is

10. Achin Vanaik, *The Furies of Indian Communalism: Religion, Modernity and Secularisation*, (New York: Verso, 1997), 103-105.

11. Pierre L. Van Den Berghe, "Multicultural Democracy: Can it work?", *Nations and Nationalism*, 8(4), 2002, 438.

12. *Ibid.*, 439.

13. *Ibid.*, 440.

making an indirect critique of the interventionist practices of secularism in India. He draws a link between the Indian secular practice of recognizing religious identity on the basis of group rights and the escalating levels of religious violence, since ‘ethnic consciousness is increased and social cleavages deepened’¹³ by such policies. He would advocate a policy of non-interference rather than the Indian practice of equal intervention which results in the recognition of collective rights for various religious groups. In that sense, this line of critique would see the policies and practices of secularism as responsible for the increasing politicization of religious identity in India.

The second group of critics focuses less on the practice of secularism and more on the values that underlie the doctrine. In some ways, this critique is much more fundamental than Van Den Berghe’s. The two main protagonists in this camp, T.N Madan and Ashis Nandy, direct their critique towards the consequences of *secularization* on Indian society. Nandy’s critique of secularization can be more aptly characterized as a critique of the effects of modernization on traditional societies. He insists,

“Many Indians see the society around them – and often their own children- as leaving no scope for a compromise between the old and the new, and have to opt for a way of life which fundamentally negates the traditional concepts of a good life. These Indians have now come to sense that it is modernity which rules the world and that religion-as-faith is being pushed to the corner.”¹⁴

Secularization is thus characterized as a process that purges modern life of traditional and religious ways of conceptualizing the world, resulting in the alienation of large parts of

14. Ashis Nandy, “The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance” in *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia* ed. Veena Das (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 79.

the population. Nandy argues that this sense of alienation from modern, secular life is a fertile mindset for intolerance and aggression. He contends, “Much of the fanaticism and violence associated with religion comes today from the sense of defeat of the believers, from their feelings of impotence, and from their free-floating anger and self-hatred while facing a world which is increasingly secular and de-sacralized.”¹⁵ Thus, the crux of Nandy’s argument is that secularization, as a part of the larger processes of modernization, fuels resentment and anger that then gets channeled into an aggressive politicization of religious identity.

T.N Madan’s critique of secularization is also in many ways a critique of modernization; however, Madan is keen to emphasize the specificity of secularism as a Western idea. He claims that

“the idea of secularism, a gift of Christianity, has been built into Western social theorists’ paradigms of modernization, and since these paradigms are believed to have universal applicability, the elements that converged historically to constitute modern life in Europe from the sixteenth century onwards, have come to be presented as the requirements of modernization elsewhere, and this must be questioned.”¹⁶

In fact, he questions the transferability of secularism to societies in South Asia by positing the idea that “once a cultural definition of a phenomenon or of a relationship (say between religion and politics, or society and state) has crystallized, it follows that subsequent formulations of it, whether endogenous or exogenous, can only be re-

15. Ibid.

16. T.N Madan “Secularism in Its Place” in *Secularism and its Critics* ed. Rajeev Bhargava, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 307-308.

definitions. In other words, traditions have deep roots in memory.”¹⁷ Although, he appears to be making a culturally deterministic argument, he resists the charge by acknowledging the role of creativity and adaptation. Ultimately, however, Madan sees the cultural core of South Asian societies as profoundly religious and a secular framework that cannot acknowledge this character will politicize religious identity in dangerous ways as it becomes a source of resistance to the alien, secular world-view.

Van Den Berghe, Nandy and Madan offer compelling accounts for why religious identity was susceptible to politicization in India. However, there are serious deficiencies in their accounts that need to be addressed before constructing a sound theoretical argument for the politicization of religion in India. The most serious deficiency with Van Den Berghe’s account is that he generalizes the extent to which institutionalized identity has resulted in ethnic conflict. For instance, he cannot explain why it is the institutionalization of religious identity, rather than linguistic or caste identities that have resulted in a nationalist movement. It is true that state recognition of special rights to minority groups has politicized these cleavages to some extent, but it is important to note that linguistic conflicts are far less pronounced in India than Hindu-Muslim violence for example¹⁸. Thus, Van Den Berghe cannot explain why the institutional recognition of some identities has proven to be more dangerous than others.

17. Ibid.,309.

18. Through out this paper, I use the Hindu-Muslim conflict as the primary example of a religious conflict situation in India. I chose the Hindu-Muslim example because of the intensity and frequency of violence between these two religious groups. However, it is important to note that conflicts between Hindu Nationalists and other religious minorities also occur on a regular basis.

Nandy and Madan's explanation for the resurgence of religious conflict as related to processes of secularization also reveal some serious problems. Both view secularization as a process that is incompatible with Indian society, which results in the progressive devaluation of religion in public life, and by way of a reaction, the increase in support for fundamentalist and extremist religious organizations and political parties. However, such a position assumes that religiosity is an inherent attribute of Indian society and is problematic in so far as it is significantly ahistorical. Missing from this analysis is a recognition of the significant accommodations and adjustments which were made in India's encounter with modernity. While a critique of the deeply dislocating and disenchanting process of modernization is warranted, it will be shown that the suggestion that India is unable to adapt and accommodate to the demands of modernization due to its inherent religiosity is unsupported by evidence.

Although, there are serious problems with the explanations provided by Van Den Berghe, Nandy and Madan, their arguments cannot be repudiated completely. In fact, aspects of their critique will be retained and modified in light of an insightful and important work on Hindu Nationalism by Thomas Blom Hansen. Hansen's account of the emergence of Hindu Nationalism in his book *The Saffron Wave* has allowed me to modify and synthesize the critiques of secularism and secularization so as to provide a clearer and more complete account of the politicization of religious identity in India. He locates his explanation for the rise of Hindu Nationalism in "a broader democratic transformation of both the political field and the public culture in post-colonial India."¹⁹

19. Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 4.

Hansen elaborates on this transformation as an “intensification of political mobilization among the lower castes and the minorities” and “the rise of ambiguous desires of consumerism in everyday life and the exposure to global cultural and economic flows.”²⁰ He argues that these developments in the political field and public culture of contemporary India “fractured social imaginings and notions of order and hierarchy, prompting millions of Hindus to embrace Hindu Nationalist promises of order, discipline, and collective strength”²¹

The strength of Hansen’s account lies in its ability to evaluate and synthesize the critiques of secularism and secularization put forth by Van Den Berghe, Nandy and Madan in a more sophisticated manner. Van Den Berghe for instance had critiqued the institutional practices of secularism as responsible for the politicization of religious identity and the intolerance and violence that followed. Hansen does not discard this argument since he also argues that the mobilization of the lower castes and religious minorities through India’s policies of official recognition were a deep source of anxiety for the dominant upper-caste Hindu community. However, he is careful to emphasize that the politicization of the Hindu identity was a majoritarian backlash from privileged Hindus who wanted to seek security and recognition under the Hindutva ideology of cultural pride, order, and national strength. This point is crucial because it stresses the ways in which a perceived ‘threat’ to the identity of the dominant group often has the

20. Ibid., 5.

21. Ibid.

most dangerous consequences of persecution, conflict, and violence. Therefore, in trying to understand the conditions under which the politicization of ethnic identity escalates to violent conflict, it would be judicious to keep in mind which groups feel threatened because of their pre-established dominance in society.

Hansen's theory has also proven to be productive in complicating and synthesizing Nandy and Madan's arguments. Both Nandy and Madan are keen to emphasize that secularization, as a part and parcel of the modernization process, is the source of religious conflict in India. They argue that the de-legitimization of religion in public life represses an essential character of South Asian society, which returns in perverted forms of fanaticism and bigotry. In a similar vein, Hansen maintains his focus on modernization as a central category of analysis, but questions the notion that religion has been 'repressed' in modern society. Instead, he puts forth the argument that religion has become more prominent in modern life because it has shown a remarkable capacity to adapt and adjust to the different dimensions of modernity. For instance, he argues that the Hindu Nationalist movement often "acknowledges the powerful attractions of Western consumerism and modern technology but emphasize that the prerequisite for developing a sovereign national modernity is the cultural unity and purity of the Hindu nation."²² Thus, modernization has not accelerated the pace of secularization in society as Nandy and Madan contend, rather religion found new ways of existing in modern India by adapting to the technological and consumer revolution.

22. *Ibid.*, 13.

Two corollaries can be gleaned from this theoretical discussion of the rise of Hindu Nationalism in India. On the one hand, the interventionist and reformist policies of secularism threatened the dominant Hindu community and caused them to react by turning to the ideology of Hindutva for security and recognition. This reaction will be explored in the next section of this paper by looking into the issue of Muslim personal laws and the Mandal Commission's report of 1992. Both issues exemplify how policies of official recognition created anxieties around citizenship for the dominant Hindu community, and also how these anxieties were instrumental in politicizing religious identity in India.

On the other hand, Hindu Nationalism's ability to adapt and adjust to the processes of economic and technological modernization strengthened its appeal to a growing Hindu middle class which envisioned a modern and prosperous India fully integrated into the global economy. The means by which Hindu Nationalism adapted and adjusted to the processes of modernization will be explored in more detail in the forthcoming section on "Modernity and Religion". This part of the paper will seek to show how Hindu Nationalism made itself politically relevant in an era of accelerated modernization.

The preceding theoretical discussion sought to bring together and assess a variety of explanations for the politicization of religion in India. It drew on some important critiques of Indian secularism to understand how religion came to be such a dominant force in Indian politics. However, some of the central assertions made by the critics of secularism were reworked or entirely rejected in light of Thomas Hansen's work on

Hindu Nationalism. In what follows I argue that the politicization of religion in India is the result of the simultaneous anxieties and possibilities created by modern life. The anxieties are rooted in the institutional practice of secularism in India which sought to alleviate the inequality between social groups. The possibilities are created by the technological and economic advancements made by modernization. I substantiate the argument with examples from the manipulation of the mass media for religious ends and state policies that heightened ethnic consciousness.

Secularism and the Anxieties of Citizenship

The relationship between the state and religion in India has often been perplexing and unclear. While, secularism in India has often resulted in interventionist policies of social and religious reform, they have not always been consistently applied to all religious communities, nor easily accepted by the dominant groups within a religious community. Thus creating a common citizenship in India has always been a rather complicated task. These problems are best exemplified in the debate over instituting a Uniform Civil Code and the ferocious protest by upper-caste groups to the findings and recommendations of the Mandal Commission in the 1990s.

The debate over the Uniform Civil Code(UCC) arises from a tension between two notions of rights in the Fundamental Rights section (Chapter III) of the Indian constitution. It is a common tension to be found in liberal democratic societies between the individual's rights to equality and freedom, and the rights of religious minorities to religious, cultural and educational autonomy. This tension has become most apparent in

the personal laws which govern religious communities in matters of marriage, inheritance and legal guardianship over children. While, the personal laws of religious communities have been considered instrumental for protecting the rights of religious minorities, they have also often discriminated against the fundamental rights of women as individual citizens.²³

This tension came to the fore in the Shah Bano controversy. Shah Bano was the long-time wife of a Muslim man who divorced her and denied her alimony. She appealed to the Indian Supreme Court to overrule her husband's claim that Muslim personal law exempted him from having to pay her alimony. The court ruled that, despite the existence of the Muslim personal law, her husband was indeed obliged to make alimony payments since Articles 14-24 of the Indian constitution guaranteed gender equality in matters of marriage, inheritance and guardianship over children.²⁴ However, the court's decision angered many Indian Muslims and leading Muslim politicians stridently took up the cause of protecting the community's personal law, leading to a surge in political mobilization among Muslims nationwide. Sumit Ganguly makes the argument that this upsurge of Muslim mobilization also had to do with the increasing economic prosperity of the Muslim community during the oil-boom of the 1970s and 1980s. Ganguly contends that the opportunities of acquiring high-paying jobs in the Persian Gulf resulted in an increasing readiness to assert claims of community at home. As a result, Rajiv Gandhi, the ruling prime minister during the crisis, felt compelled to use his parliamentary

23. Nivedita Menon, "State, Community and the Debate on the Uniform Civil Code in India" in Mahmood Mamdani, ed. *Beyond Rights Talk and Culture Talk*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000), 77.

24. Sumit Ganguly, "The Crisis of Indian Secularism", *Journal of Democracy*, V14(4), October 2003, 17.

majority to appease the growing Muslim ferment by overturning the Supreme Court's verdict.²⁵

The decision to overturn the Court's verdict created deep resentment among Hindus. The resentment stemmed from the fact that Hindu personal laws had been subject to significant reform in matters related to marriage and inheritance without serious dispute. For example, as early on as 1952, monogamy was enforced among Hindus and untouchability was abolished as a measure of social reform by Article 25, which professed "that the state may interfere with the right of a citizen freely to profess, practice and propagate religion so as to legislate social reforms."²⁶ However, the inconsistency in how Article 25 was applied made Hindus feel that they were the victims of unfair 'discrimination'. The BJP added fuel to this grievance by insisting that the demands of 'other' communities to maintain their retrogressive personal laws was threatening a sense of common citizenship and consequently, the integrity of the nation itself. By playing up the notion of 'threat' skillfully, the BJP planted potent seeds of insecurity, which allowed them to steadily politicize religious identity as a major force in Indian politics.

Another source of anxiety around citizenship stemmed from the crucial events of the 1990s when V.P Singh announced the implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission. Since independence, India has always taken the principle of positive discrimination, or affirmative action, as a useful measure to rectify the

25. Ibid., 18.

26. Donald E. Smith, "India as a Secular State" in *Secularism and its Critics* ed. Rajeev Bhargava, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 199.

subjugation of lower castes in the past. The state has often actively sought to ensure that the religious customs once practiced within Hinduism do not compromise values of equal citizenship enshrined in the constitution. The Mandal Commission, set up in 1978 by a non-Congress governing coalition, was an expression of this desire to redress the past injuries of caste discrimination. It identified some major hurdles to social mobilization among lower castes (known as Other Backward Castes and Scheduled Castes and Tribes) and recommended that the quotas reserved for this group in government positions and public universities be increased from 27% to 49.5%.²⁷

The implementation of the Mandal Commission's recommendations is often referred to as the "Mandalization" of the political field where the poor and lower-caste majority began to assert their rights against centuries of tyranny by the upper castes.²⁸ The subsequent visibility of lower caste groups in the public realm resulted in mounting resentment from upper-caste and middle class communities. Anti-reservation movements were organized in many parts of North India, with some protests reaching the heights of self-immolation by upper-caste college students.²⁹

The sense of security and status which the upper caste groups had enjoyed for centuries was suddenly shattered by the Mandal Commission's findings and recommendations, heightening their sense of vulnerability within the Indian polity. In this context, the BJP's communalist discourse became especially appealing to the socially

27. Christophe Jaffrelot and Thomas Blom Hansen, *The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 11.

28. Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 144.

29. Stuart Corbridge and John Harriss, *Reinventing India*, 129.

disenfranchised groups who felt that their world was being encroached on by lower caste communities. Although the BJP did not object to the implementation of the Mandal commission, its antipathy to some aspects of the report was well known.³⁰ More importantly however, the BJP's rhetoric of India as an endangered nation needing cultural purification and social harmony tapped into the sentiments of upper caste Hindus who turned to BJP to protect their social interests.

The provision for religious communities to abide by their own Personal laws in matters relating to marriage and family; and the recommendations put forth by the Mandal Commission in the 1990s to redress past injustices are two ways in which secularism is put to practice in India. On the one hand, the provision for Personal Laws is meant to ensure that the numerical supremacy of the Hindu community does not result in the persecution of religious minorities. In addition, the Mandal commission's report expresses the desire to ensure that discriminatory practices within a certain religion do not trump the fundamental values enshrined in the constitution. In that sense, the secular state attempts to maintain an active role in promoting religious diversity, while ensuring the social progress of religions in India, albeit not always with consistency.

Importantly however, the difficulty in instituting a Uniform Civil Code in place of the system of Personal Laws, and the ferocious resistance to implementing the recommendations of the Mandal Commission substantiate Pierre Van Den Berghe's argument that official state recognition and support for ethnic groups politicize and

30. *Ibid.*, 128

entrench these cleavages in society. Yet, these issues also confirm Thomas Hansen's argument that the BJP politicized the dominant Hindu identity by shoring up the notion of 'threat' to the nation-state by 'pseudo-secular' policies that 'pamper' religious minorities and lower castes groups. Hansen's emphasis on how the dominant community is often politicized by a 'perceived threat' is essential because it provides a better explanation for why conflicts between Hindus and Muslims have been particularly frequent and violent in India. Thus, in addition to addressing the ways in which policies of state recognition create an atmosphere of heightened ethnic consciousness, it is also important to identify the dominant groups in society who are likely to feel most threatened by the policies of recognition.

Modernity and Religion

The relationship between modernity, religion and the emergence of Hindu Nationalism is complex and often difficult to articulate. Ashis Nandy and T.N Madan view religion and modernity as opposing forces. They argue that the accelerated pace of modernization has resulted in the repression of religion in public life and its subsequent perversion into fanaticism and bigotry. However, Thomas Hansen does not attribute the development of religious fanaticism to the repression of religion in modern life. Instead, he argues that religious nationalism thrives in contemporary India because of its capacity to adapt and accommodate to the processes of modernization. The next section looks at the ways in which religion was able to find new avenues of expression and carve out new spheres of influence in modern life.

Hindu Nationalists in India have employed a variety of methods to disseminate their ideological agenda. Stanley Tambiah has put particular emphasis on the ways in which media is utilized to promote religious nationalism. He asserts that,

“mass politics and mass religious fervor in many places now make efficacious and explosive use of communication media and high-tech devices. Aside from radio and films, followed by television, perhaps the most sensational recent development is the use of VCRs and audiocassettes, by means of which both villagers in remote rural areas and the unlettered in cramped urban slums can hear messages and see visual images propagated by leaders and ideologues from metropolitan centers”³¹

The ability to use mass media in this manner provided Hindu Nationalists with the opportunity to spread a national issue to hundreds of local towns and villages. Most importantly, Tambiah claims that it has allowed for a process of *nationalization* and *parochialization* where a national cause such as the building of a new temple to Ram in Ayodhya could be reproduced in diverse, local places in multiple context-bound ways.³² Local media have been especially vital in parochializing national issues so that it unfolds in a way that is sensitive to local fault lines and power alignments.

Stuart Corbridge and John Harriss in *Reinventing India* have also emphasized the centrality of mass mediated images in promoting Hindu Nationalism. For instance, they call attention to how “the cause of Hindu Nationalism was boosted by the decision of the state-owned television network, Dordoorshan, to screen weekly installments of a serialization of the *Ramayana*. The television version of the *Ramayana* used the personal narrative of Rama’s discovery of himself and his birthplace, to forge a broader

31. Stanley Tambiah, *Levelling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia*, (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1996), 260.

32. *Ibid.*,257.

narrative of a return to origins and Hindu revivalism.”³³ The upsurge of energy for the Hindu Nationalist project during the 1980s and 1990s is thus strongly linked to the use of mass media such as television. It is also an interesting example of the ways in which religion was able to adapt to the demands of technological modernization so that it could play a more prominent role in public life.

Hindu Nationalism in India also made itself relevant by cautiously embracing the rising consumerism and expansion of markets advanced by capitalist modernity. Thomas Hansen has observed that,

“The BJP and other parts of the Hindu Nationalist movement do not take any clear stand against foreign investments as such. Instead, they seem to negotiate an ambivalent attitude through a peculiar double discourse that at one level expresses self-depreciation: ‘we are reduced to beggars’, and simultaneously articulate a tough self-assertion: ‘the West needs India’.”³⁴

The double discourse catered to a growing middle class which was anxious to integrate into the global economy without losing their cultural integrity. The protection of culture integrity was most effectively carried out through a revival of Hinduism. Sunil Khilnani has vividly captured the amalgamated life of religious piety and consumerist fervor which ensues from this reinvention of Hinduism. He asserts,

“For many in India, modernity has been adopted through the conservative filters of religious piety, moralism, and domestic virtue. This has spawned a novel Hinduism, where holographic gods dangle on well-used key chains and cassettes of devotional ragas are played in traffic jams.”³⁵

33. Stuart Corbridge and John Harriss, *Reinventing India*, 190.

34. Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 233.

35. Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 186-187.

This innovative Hinduism has a newfound ability to combine the demands of capitalist development with the duties of religious observance, allowing it to persevere in modern life as the moral arbiter of what is and is not permissible about the pleasures offered up by modernity.

The use of mass media technology and the selective integration of India into the global economy are two striking examples of Hindu Nationalism's ability to exploit the processes of modernization to expand its sphere of influence. Mass media was fundamental to spreading its reach to far-flung villages and towns across India, while global economic integration was essential to capturing a growing middle class vote. Thus, contrary to the claims made by the anti-secularists such as Nandy and Madan, the processes of modernization did not successfully repress the role of religion in public life. Instead, certain aspects of modernization proved to be a crucial vehicle for expanding the reach of Hindu Nationalism. As a result, an analysis of modernity and religion that puts emphasis on secularization as the primary explanation for the emergence of Hindu Nationalism is wrong-headed. It is clear that religious identity was able to gain the imaginative hold over Hindus in India by adapting and adjusting to the processes of modernization.

However, Madan and Nandy's articulation of the relationship between modernity, religion, and the emergence of Hindu Nationalism, does prompt us to ask why modernization did not lead to increased secularization of society, as it had in the West. One possible answer to this question could be related to the highly technological and capitalist modernization that India underwent without having sufficiently undergone a

democratic revolution that ensured meaningful freedoms and social equality. Thus, the incomplete democratic revolution meant that the spread of reason and mass literacy could not fully facilitate the process of secularization in society.

The Future of Hindu Nationalism

This paper began by identifying a lacuna in prevailing attempts to explain the rise of Hindu Nationalism in India. Specifically, Ashutosh Varshney and Rajni Kothari's accounts of the emergence of Hindu Nationalism were taken up in this paper. They both direct their focus on a specific set of transformations in Indian politics that had given rise to widespread disillusionment towards political life and argued that the success of Hindu Nationalism lay in its ability to seize this disillusionment of the masses as an opportunity to promote religious nationalism. Yet, there is something missing from this account. This paper contends that Varshney and Kothari do not provide an adequate explanation for why religious identity in particular has such immense rally potential in the Indian context. It argues that an account of how religion was politicized is central to understanding why Hindu Nationalism was able to gain such momentum in India.

The debate over secularism in India proved to be a valuable site for investigating the politicization of religion in India. Pierre Van Den Berghe, Ashis Nandy and T.N Madan provided important contributions to this debate. Although, they provided important insights for understanding the politicization of religion, their accounts had considerable shortcomings and Thomas Hansen's arguments on the rise of Hindu Nationalism was used to modify and synthesize their accounts.

The final synthesis of the different accounts on how religion came to be politicized had two parts. The first part called attention to the role of policies of ethnic recognition in heightening ethnic consciousness, but was careful to put particular emphasis on how the dominant community tends to feel most ‘threatened’ by these policies. The politicization of Hinduism was thus shown to be a reaction to the ‘perceived threats’ created by the democratic revolution. The second part highlighted the ways in which Hindu Nationalists made religion politically relevant by adapting to the demands of technological and economic modernization.

Although Hindu Nationalism has had considerably less sway over Indian political life since the victory of the Congress Party in 2004, the future of Hindu Nationalism is not clear. The BJP and RSS have been vocally debating the best strategies to regain power in the general elections of 2009. Many in the BJP believe that with a narrow ‘Hindu-only’ approach, the BJP will never occupy a dominant position in Indian politics. However, other party members and RSS leaders argue the exact opposite: that the problem was that, in office, the BJP was not Hindu enough.³⁶ Thus, it is clear that there is a debate within the Hindu Nationalist movement about the judiciousness of politicizing religion as the central organizing category. Although, a lack of internal cohesion with respect to ideology and strategy is a clear obstacle to the further expansion of the movement, the likelihood of a resurgence is not out of the question. If Hindu Nationalism is able to find new ways of exploiting the anxieties, insecurities and possibilities created by modernization, it will continue to play a prominent role in Indian politics.

36. The Economist, “Is Hindu Nationalism Tearing itself Apart?”, August 4, 2005

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