Culture, Religion & Politics in india : Rise of Hindu Cultural Nationalism

1. Introduction

Today, possibly more than earlier time in the history of Independent India, we need to know about the communal forces which threaten to rupture Indian society. On December 6, 1992, the Babri Masjid was destroyed. This was not simply the consequence of spontaneous vandalism. Behind the action lies a long history of Hindutva politics which celebrates aggression and violence, declares war against other communities, and scorns at legal and democratic norms. Tamil Nadu which was a peaceful State for a long time has been turned into a place of violence today with the emergence of religious fundamentalism. This article studies the cultural context of the emergence of Hindu fundamentalism.

2. The Cultural Controversy Between Two Ideas of Nationalism

During its almost five thousand years of history, the vast Indian subcontinent has nourished the growth of a great civilisation, characterised by the diversities of many cultural and racial groups, castes, religions, and languages, and vitalised through crosscultural contacts. In the early stages of Indian civilisation, unity was achieved by recognising this plurality and the autonomy of various groups (see Kothari, 1988 : 2223). Thus, the unifying force of Indian civilisation was the acceptance of multiculturality and linguistic diversity rather than political ideology.

The Enlightenment philosophy of the West began to have its impact on the newly Western-educated Indians during the colonial period. It gave rise to the "Indian renaissance." This challenged the presuppositions on which the orthodox Hindu system of conduct was based. With ruthless self-criticism the new Western-educated elite

sought to lay the basis for a total social transformation, to weld science and rationality of Indian culture, to recreate India.

The beginnings of this social revolt can be easily identified with the thought of Rammohun Roy (1772-1833). Roy vividly described the degraded state of society and ackowledged without embarrassment the virtues of Western learning, liberal, legal and social institutions, and the Western social ethic (see Joshi 1975; Kopf 979; Damle and Aikara, 1982:77). His reasonable familiarity with the basic teachings of Islam, and his much closer study of the Christian Gopels, provided him with many key ideas for the reform of Hinduism and Hindu society (see Crawford, 1986: 52-69). He founded the Brahmo Samaj in 1843 to restructure Hindu culture in terms of modernity. The aim of Brahmo Samaj was to eradicate erroneous religious beliefs and degenerate social practices among the Hindus, and of pomoting the idea of a universal religion comprising a theological consensus among the followers of major world religions (see Madan, 1997:205). Roy's revolt against the living Hindu society and his appeal to Indians to purify their religion and reconstitute their social institutions echoed throughout the century after his death.

Thus, the efforts of Roy and his successors are inconceivable without the challenge of Christianity and the Western lifestyle, which were seen as positive influences in some respects but primarily as threatening (Madan, 1997:208).

3. Indian Nation Built on Aryan Vedic Culture - The Roots of Hindutva Movement

While Rammohun Roy held a vision of an Indian society ultimately renovated by centuries of exposure to Western science and Christian morality, Dayananda Saraswathi (1824-1883) urged a regeneration of Hindus through adherence to a purified "Vedic faith." The Vedic Aryans are described by Dayananda as a primordial and elect people to whom the Veda has been revealed by God and whose language-Sanskrit-is said to be the 'Mother of all languages' (Dayananda, 1981:249). They

would have migrated in the beginning of the world from Tibet- the first and to emerge from the Oceans-towards the Aryavarta. This territory, homeland of the vedic civilisation, covered the Punjab, Doab and Ganges basin. From this position, the Aryas would have dominated the whole world till the war of the Mahabharata, a watershed opening a phase of decadence. The national renaissance implied precisely, for Dayananda, a coming back to the vedic Golden Age.

The chief object of the Arya Samaj he founded in 1875 was to bring about social and religious reform through the renaissance of early Hindu doctrines, its favourite mottoes being "Back to the Vedas" and "Aryavarta for the Aryans" (Smith, 1938:57). This view simply equated Indian culture with Hinduism and Hindu culture; all non-Hindu aspects were regarded as contaminating influences. The Arya Samaj is probably the first movement in India defining nationalism in terms of ethnicity: in Dayananda's writings, the Hindus are clearly the descendents of the Aryas.

Dayananda Saraswathi's attack on other religions like Christianity and Islam was very vigorous. The Arya Samaj which he founded had two programmes: Shuddhi, meaning purification, which was the term for the ceremony by which non-Hindus were converted to Hinduism, and *Sangathan*-literally meaning union-by which the Arya Samajists meant the promotion of solidarity among the Hindus. In short, the Arya Samaj wanted to establish a Hindu nation by establishing a common religion and culture in India and converting others to Hinduism through the *Shuddhi* movement (see Jordens, 1978).

The idea of world domination by the Hindus was elaborated around that time by another Arya Samajist based in the Rajasthani British enclave of Ajmer, Har Bilas Sarda (1867-1955). In the second chapter of *The Hindu Superiority* (1906), entitled "Hindu colonization of the world", this author rejects the Central Asia theory of emigration and asserts that the Aryavarta was the birth place of a race which spread and settled in Egypt, Ethiopia, Persia, Asia Minor, Greece, Rome, Turkistan, Germany, Scandinavia, Hyperborean countries, Great Britran, Eastern

Asia and America (Sarda, 1975:109-163). According to Sarda most of the civilisations originated in the Hindus-Aryas, a race which colonised the whole world before the *Mahabharat* war (Sarda, 1975).

Vivekananda's thought marked the culmination of the 19th century social thought on India. He founded the Ramakrishna Mission for the dissemination of Hinduism and for social service. He believed that India alone had a spiritual message whereas the West was steeped in sensuality. "Up, India, and conquer the world with your spirituality" (Vivekananda, 1975:600).

Thus, there are two predominant versions of nationalism in India: Indian nationalism and Hindu nationalism. The basic question behind these nationalistic movements is "What should be the foundation of the Indian nation?" The proponents of Indian nationalism were mainly western-educated Indian elite, secular and utilitarian in their approach. In the words of Heimsath, "having at its base an anti-traditional, liberal, democratic, secular and politically oriented concept of the nation the early nationalism developed an ideology which could properly encompass all Indian cultures and religions" (1964:39). Hindu nationalism developed as a reaction against Indian nationalism.

A second stage in the modern development of Indian nationalism emerged in 1885 with the foundation of the National Congress by Allan Octavian Hume. The Indian National Congress tried to define a new India in terms of borrowed ideas from European political experience and Western social ethics. Most of the leaders of the Congress understood the need for a truly all-India nationalism which would rise above regional and communal loyalties (see Smith, 1963:88).

By the end of 19th century there was a mighty struggle for the control of the Congress. The two factions, the moderates and the extremists, held radically different views as to the proper ends and means of the nationalist movement. While the moderates in the National Congress such as Dadabhai Naoraji, Madhava Govinda Ranande and Gopal Krishna Gokhale promoted reforms in Hindu culture, the

extremists glorified Hindu culture and opposed any kind of reform in it. While the liberals envisioned a modernisation of India through the adoption of the Western parameters of justice, order, rationality and the secular state, Tilak glorified the deeds of Vedic civilisation (Parvate, 1959:463). He became the proponent of Hindutva ideology of his time. Tilak in his second book, *The Arctic Home in the Vedas* (1903) claimed that the Aryans had their original home near the North Pole in palaeolithic times and that they migrated from this place southwards into Asia and Europe because of changes in climatic conditions (see Karandikar, 1957:193).

Tilak's over-all consideration was the promotion of solidarity among the Hindus, and so he emphasised the superiority of their religion, encouraged revivalism, politicised the Ganapati festival and converted Shivaji into a cult figure, thus serving both religious and political objectives (see Michael, 1986: 185-197). Tilak effectively invoked the spirit of a resurgent Hinduism to fight the nationalist cause, but at the inevitable cost of alienating the Muslims.

The leaders of the Hindu nationalist movement based on a revival of Hindu culture openly acknowledged their identification of nationalism with Hinduism. Tilak at one time put the matter this way: "The common factor in Indian society is the feeling of *hindutva* (devotion to Hinduism)" (see Wolpert, 1962:201). The style of the revivalists was more aggressive and tended to reflect a *kshtriya* (warrior) world view. The partition of Bengal in 1905 created a Muslim-majority areas, widened the breach between the Hindu and Muslim communities, and gave further stimulus to extremist activities.

In Bengal, the Hindu goddess"Durga" was identified as the symbol of Mother representing India, as a result the concept of India as divine Motherland. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's poem *Bande Mataram* ("Hail to the Mother") soon became the great Congress nationalist song throughout India. The country was the Mother, but not a defenceless female: "Thou are Durga (the Goddess Mother), Lady and Queen, with her hands that strike and swords of sheen" (Smith, 1963:90).

Some of the most passionate statements of the extremist creed came from Aurobindo Ghose."Liberty is the fruit we seek from the sacrifice and the Motherland the goddess to whom we offer it", he wrote in 1907."Nationalism is not a mere political program; nationalism is a religion that has come from God", he declared (Ghose, 1965:135).

The cult of Durga or Kali, with its tantric ritual and animal sacrifices, quickly became associated with revolutionary terrorism in Bengal. A pamphlet printed in a secret press called upon the sons of India to rise up, arm themselves with bombs, and invoke Mother Kali:"What does the Mother want? A coconut? No! A fowl or a sheep or a buffalo? No!..... The Mother is thirsting after the blood of Feringhis (foreigners) who have bled her profusely" (Quoted in Griffiths 1952:296; also in Smith 1963:91).

The famous Arya Samajist nationalist leader Lala Lajpat Rai published some articles by Lala Lalchand in the paper *Punjabee* on how to build a Hindu Country: "This can only be achieved by asserting a purely Hindu interest, and not by an Indian propaganda. The consciousness must arise in the mind of each Hindu and that he is a Hindu, and not merely an Indian, and when it does arise the newly awakened force is bound to bring its result". In another article Lala Lalchand wrote: "The point I wish to urge is that patriotism ought to be communal and not merely geographical".

4. Reaction to Hindu Nationalism: The Muslim Response

The monopoly of the nationalis t movement by the Hindus who had a culture different from that of the Muslims, created nervousness among the Muslims as to the future of their own identity should the Hindus succeed in attaining Independence. Moreover, the large-scale participation by the Hindus in the nationalist movement inevitably put a stamp of its own on the movement. The various symbols used for promoting the nationalist movement like the national anthem *Bande Mataram* were suggestive of Hindu culture. A historical figure like Shivaji was a political hero to most Hindus;

but to many Muslims he was the political opponent of Muslim rule in India.

All this drove a wedge between the Muslims and the Hindus and became more acute with gradual politicisation of religion. The vacillations of Sir Syed Ahmed, an early leader of the Muslims, amply exemplify this. At first an ardent nationalist, he affirmed that Hindus and Muslims in India formed one nation. At the same time, however, he opposed the Congress movement from its inception, urged the Muslims to stay away from it, and set up organisations with a view to opposing it, all because he feared that the Hindus as the majority community would ride roughshod over the interests of the Muslims. This fear continued to dominate the minds of the Muslim leaders thereafter and shaped their political perceptions and programmes of action in subsequent years.

Like the parallel movements among the Hindus, these Islamic movements tried to assert the superiority of their religion, their culture and their past and succeeded in at least spreading the idea that their religion, culture and philosophy of life were not inferior to others.

Sir Syed Ahmed who was the spokesman of the Muslims maintained that his advice to the Muslims not to join the Indian National Congress was based on the following consideration. He held that its aims and objectives were based upon an ignorance of history and the present reality, and that the Congress did not take into consideration the fact that India was inhabited by several nationalities. Then again, because India lacked homogeneity, the result of differences in educational background and political consciousness, it would not be in the interest of the Muslims to cast their lot with the Congress which was largely dominated by the Hindus.

Thus the consciousness of a separate identity and the different problems which confronted the Muslims led them to political consciousness, and this may be regarded as the beginning of their politicisation on the basis of religion (see Haq 1992).

When Mohandas Gandhi, publicly emerged on the Indian political scene after World War I as the Mahatma, he received widespread revivalist support. Indeed, many believed him to be one of them.

While Gandhi had much in common with revivalists, gradually many came to oppose him as they became better acquainted with his ideas. Gandhi strove unceasingly for Hindu-Muslim unity, convinced that ultimately both religions were true and valid (see Gandhi 1949). Hid deepest conviction was that God, Truth and *Ahimsa* (non-violence) were all one and the same. *Satyagraha* (truth-force non-violent resistance) was based on Gandhi's personal religious faith.

The revivalists were disturbed by Gandhi's *non-kshatriya* (ascetic) style of leadership, his definition of *dharma* as the non-violent pursuit of "truth", and his assimilationist conception of the Indian nation, which he saw as a brotherhood or a confederation of communities.

Dr. Kurtakoti, *Sankaracharya* (a hindu spiritual guide) of Karvir peeth, expressed the views of many revivalists when he wrote in the 1920s that Gandhi's use of *ahimsa* in the non-co-operation movements would "uproot the very principle of Hinduism and Aryan philosophy" (*Maratta,* Pune, 29 October 1922). He claimed that *ahimsa* as employed by Gandhi undermined Hindu self-respect and encouraged the Muslims to dominate the Hindus. Moreover, he maintained that "passive and nonresisting sufferance is a Christian and not Aryan principle." He implored Hindus to return to the militancy advocated by Tilak, Vivekananda, and Gose. Many other revivalists were in agreement, and when Gandhi took control of the Congress in the 1920s, the stage was set for a revivalist search for new forms of protest (Anderson and Damle, 1987:20).

As a result of the intensification of Hindu-Muslim tension between 1921-1923, the dormant Hindu Mahasabha, formed in 1915 as a forum for a variety of Hindu interests (e.g. cow protection, Hindi in the Devanagari script, caste reforms, etc.) was revitalised (ibid. 28).

It is in this setting of Hinduism-in-danger that a new influential Hindu militant organisation known as the *Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh* (RSS) was established in 1925 by Dr. Keshab Baliram Hedgewar who was deeply influenced by Tilak. The RSS purports to defend Hinduism against its so-called antagonists. Its avowed objective is the unification of the Hindu community and the inculcation of a militant awareness of its common heritage and destiny.

V.D. Savarkar a close associate of Tilak was probably the most influential ideologue of Hindu nationalism in the 1920-1940 period. His book *Hindutva-Who is a Hindu?* has been recognised as a treatise of Hindu identity by many followers, published in Nagpur in 1923, it was one of the influences which prompted Hedgewar to create the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). This book shares the perspective of those written by Swami Dayananda and Tilak. Savarkar had been given a grant to study in England by the influence of Tilak. Savarkar inherited the Hindu revivalist ideas of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but he extended them and developed their Aryan racial aspects. According to Savarkar Hindutva refers to a people united by a common country, blood, history, religion, culture, and language. This idea became the foundation of the RSS's organisational activities. In the late 1930s soon after his liberation from jail in 1937, Savarkar expressed a certain attraction for European fascism. In 1938, the year after he became president of the Hindu Mahasabha, he congratulated Hitler during a public meeting at Delhi for having 'liberated' the Sudetans who shared the 'same blood and same tongue' as Germans (see Hindu Outlook, 1938:13). At the same time, *Hindu Outlook* (the Hindu Mahasabha mouthpiece) and *Mahratta* (one of Tilak's newspapers,edited by N.C Kelkar, an active Hindu Sabhaite, praised Franco and Mussolini, as well as Hitler (see Hindu Outlook, 2 November 1938, p.5; 30 November 1938, p.7; Mahratta, 6 January 1939, p.10).

While rejecting politics as the means to attain its particular objectives, the RSS has nevertheless in the past supported the political work of the Hindu Mahasabha, and has been closely linked with the Jana Sangh and Bharatiya Janatha Party.

6. The Hindutva Vision of Indian Nationhood

According to Golwalkar, who succeeded Hedgewar, the founder of RSS, the Hindu nation has existed for 8,000 to 10,000 years, and Hindusthan has been in the possession of the Hindus for at least that length of time. In fact, the Hindus are not immigrants but indigenous sons of the soil, whatever scholars say to the contrary. At the heart of the Hindu culture is Hindu religion, and at the heart of Hindu religion is the noble ideas of the Vedas of the Aryan race. Golwalkar states that every race develops a language of its own. The diverse languages of India are offshoots of Sanskrit, the dialect of the gods.

Drawing his inspiration explicitly from 'Western political scientists', Golwalkar distinguished five criteria as defining a nation: land, race, religion, culture and language. Among those, by contrast with Savarkar's *Hindutva*, the racial factor is given more prominence than territorial. Race is a population with a common origin and with one culture. Therefore, the maintenance of racial unity in a nation necessitates the assimilation, or inextricable fusion, of foreign populations in it into the mother race-in other words, they would merge fully into an original national race not only economically and politically but also religiously, culturally, and linguistically. Race is by far the most important of the five ingredients is a nation. He openly suggests that minorities can hardly be assimilated and, therefore, must be eliminated. Hindustan, suggests Golwalkar, can learn and profit from Germany, where racial pride led to the attempt to eliminate the Jews because deep-rooted racial differences prevented their total assimilation into the German race.

Golwalkar makes it crystal clear that India is a Hindu nation. Others like Muslims and Christians, though born in this country, do not feel that they are the children of this land, ever since they changed their faith. He goes on to suggest that such people should be placed behind bars during the time of national crisis.

Golwalkar reiterates that secularism is not his path for national integration; it should come through Hinduization. His idea of the best solution to the minorities problem is contained in one word-assimilation. According to him they should be "wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment -not even citizen's rights" (Golwalkar, 1947:55-56). G. Pandey characterised Golwalkar's praise of the *varna vyvastha* as 'an upper-caste racism' (1993:252).

In an interesting speech a Hindu Mahasabha leader attempted to list the cultural changes which Indian Muslims would have to undergo in order to become acceptable nationals of the Indian (Hindu) state of the future. First, they would have to accept the *Ramayana and Mahabharata* as their epics and reject the Arabic and Persian classics. They would have to regard Ramchandra, Shivaji, and Hindu gods Rama and Krishna as their heroes, and condemn various Muslim historical figures as foreign invaders or traitors (Despande, 1949:10; Smith, 1963:375).

For more than sixty years now, the quiet but extremely effective 'cultural' work of the RSS has been spreading these ideas and emotions, till they seem to have been internalised into the common sense of certain social groups in large parts of the country. K.S. Sudarshan, the present Assistant General Secretary of the RSS says, "The country can have only one Hindu culture, and so all must accept Ram - if not as divine, at least as the nation's hero" (see Basu, 1993:7).

The RSS, from its inception down to today, has been overwhelmingly middle class Brahmin or Bania in composition. Linked to the RSS in India are several affiliated organisations (referred to in the RSS literature as the "family"), working in politics, in social welfare, in the media and among students, labourers and Hindu religious groups. The symbiotic links between the RSS and the "family" are maintained by the recruitment into the affiliates of *swayamsevaks* (members) who have already demonstrated organisational skills in the RSS (seeLambert 1959; and Seunarine 1977).

So the river of Hindu revivalism flows on. The origin of Hindutva and its promotion by the Hindu nationalistic groups such as the Hindu Mahasabha, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Ram Rajya Parishad, the Jana Sangh, the Vishva Hindu Parisath, the Shiva Sena, Bajrangdal and Bharatiya Janatha Paty, have their roots in the traditions of late nineteenth-century Hindu nationalism (see Anderson and Damle, 1987; also Malik and Singh 1995).

The formation of Vishva Hindu Parisath (VHP) in 1964 marks a new phase in the history of Hindutva. The VHP was specifically set up to forge a corporate Hindu identity, to unite all Hindu sects in opposition to Islam and Christianity. The VHP uses the latest media technology to exalt Puranic heroes as the model of Hindu character. A bid is being made for a Hindu state ruled by an explicitly 'Hindu' party. To gain power by a majority meant that the untouchables and tribals be subsumed within the Hindu fold, that conversions to the Christian or Muslim faiths be vehemently opposed.

Chinmayananda who played a key role in the formation of Vishva Hindu Parishad was of the opinion that killing one another in the frequent communal riots in India is just one of the many ways by which "nature maintains a certain balance, as the Malthusian theory says" (1984:23). If communal riots in India are justified on these lines and are looked upon as natural, the fate of minorities in India is at stake where over 80 percent of the population is reckoned Hindu.

In a meeting of the *Sannyasins* (Hindu religious leaders) held in Delhi on April 6th and 7th, 1984, under the patronage of Swami Chinmayananda, it was decided that the *Sannyasins* have to actively involve in politics especially in guiding the Hindus in their voting at elections (1984). The events of December 6 and after re-affirm that the RSS and the VHP dictate the politics of the Hindu Right, they define the limits within which the Bharatiya Janata Party can manoeuvre.

7. Hindutva Politics

The rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with its emphasis on Hindu nationalism, at the centre stage of Indian politics has to be seen in the ideological debate on Indian nationalism vs Hindu nationalism. While, backward castes and classes are in search of a culture based on egalitarian social and economic order with greater political participation; upper caste Hindus, on the other hand, are equally strong in trying to retain control of their present position of privilege and dominance by reasserting ancient hierarchical Brahminic Hindu values. Thus, culture in India has become polarised by the contrasting interests of the upper and lower groups, the former vigorously clinging to their traditional status, and the latter fighting for justice, equality and human dignity.

8. Communal Violence in Tamil Nadu

For a long time, the Hindutva ideology was confined to the northern regions of India. South India was less affected by this ideology due to Justice Party and the Dravidian movements. Today there is a consistent effort to break the Dravidian ideology by the Hindutva organisations. This is clearly seen from the happenings in Tamil Nadu in recent years. Tamil Nadu had a tradition of communal harmony since long. This is changed today. It has turned to be one of the communally sensitive states in India. This change began about two decades ago.

The growth of communal violence in Tamil Nadu dates back to 1980. The RSS with a Tamil name Hindu Munnani began to mobilize the Hindus with regard to the conversion of a few Dalits to Islam in a small remote village Meenakshipuram in Tamil Nadu. Vans with images of Gods were taken out into the Dalit villages and some of the converts returned to the Hindu fold. According to some reports, the Hindu Munnani then had the backing of then chief minister, M.G. Ramachandran (see Das, 1998:9).

The Hindu Munnani spread down south to Nagercoil where they countered the Christian fisherfolk and wooed the Hindu community.

The RSS also made their presence felt in Coimbatore and Tiruppur. With the rise of Hindu Munnani there arose a parellel growth of Islamic forces. Palani Baba formed the Jihad committee. In the same year as the Babri Masjid was demolished (1992), Kovai Pasha (B.A. Batcha is his original name) formed the Al Umma (The community) in Coimbatore. Today Tamil Nadu has turned to be one of the bloodiest States in India. Tamils have been used as a group by politicians and religious fundamentalists within the state and outside to settle their score. The Tamil image is projected as that of weak, sensitive and emotional which could be used as an instrument of manipulation by the interested parties for their advantage within Tamil Nadu and outside.

9. Conclusion

India is a nation which is multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-ethnic. With the Hindutva politics spreading in the country there is a deep schism caused within Indian society. Majority and minority communalism feed upon each other. They obstruct a genuine secularisation of Indian society which is a must if we are to enter the twenty-first century more reconciled and genuinely pluralist. Restraint and compassion are qualities which will always be necessary for human society to survive. Any attempt to homogenise India will create unnecessary problems and conflicts. This will ultimately hinder the economic, social and cultural progress of this nation. To conclude I may quote the words of Gandhi who said, "Let no one commit the mistake of thinking that Ramrajya means a rule of the Hindus. My Ram is another name for Khuda or God. I want Khuda Raj, which is the same thing as the Kingdom of God on earth" (February 26, 1947).

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