Religious Nationalism in India in the 1980s-90s: the context of its rise, its manifestations and some causes

The last week we saw the relative deepening of democracy during what we called India’s third electoral system. However, in drawing attention to the continuing problems, I remarked that the growth of religious nationalism has been one of the definitive processes of this system/period. Since the 1980s, religious nationalism, and that has taken on a Hindu idiom in contemporary India, threatens not only the secular basis of that nation, but also calls into question the broader nature of the state and its conceptual and empirical links with its citizens. Hindu nationalism has often been identified as the single biggest threat to the unity and integrity of the country, making a study of its contemporary resurgence extremely relevant.

[What does secularism mean in India: Of course, that the state does not represent any religious belief, or accept the supremacy of one over the others. Procedurally, the Indian state is not guided by any religious elite, nor does it exist to protect or promote the virtues and values of any specific religious group. But not necessarily a complete separation of church and state: it is not uncommon for Indian prime ministers of government to be actively associated with the plethora of religious observances - often in public. Rather, secularism taken to mean ‘maintaining equidistance from all religions’, not their delegitimation.]

Hindu nationalism represents a majoritarian, chauvinistic, cultural nationalism: Hindu religious identity is recreated as the basis of nationalist identity; excludes Muslims and other religious ‘minority’ communities. Hindu nationalism does not seek to revive the fundamentals of religious faith, but aims to resurrect the supposed core of a religiously defined civilization or culture – and create an ethnicized religious identity.

Political expression: BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party: Indian Peoples’ Party) and its various affiliate organizations, who often speak different languages, but share the same grammar – together called the Sangh Parivar or United Family. Rapid political ascendance in the 1980s, leading to significant electoral success and formation of national governments in the 1990s.

Political ideology of the Hindu nationalists: the BJP at the vanguard of a ‘conservative revolution’

1. The uses of the language of ‘modern’, democratic politics to strengthen the Indian nation; it uses the language of electoral majorities and of establishing what it calls a genuine variety of ‘secularism’ that does not discriminate against or in favour of any groups of citizens. For decades, it demanded the establishment of a uniform civil code, the full and complete integration of the State of Jammu and Kashmir within India, and a complete ban on cow-slaughter and beef-eating, in accordance with Hindu views, beliefs and principles. It mobilized much of its support through vigorously campaigning for the construction of a temple to the Hindu god-king Ram at a site in northern India which was supposed to have been his birth-place. According to Hindu nationalists, there existed a grand temple once upon a time, which was destroyed by Mughal invaders and a mosque was constructed in its place.
The Hindu nationalists asked the plot to be “returned” to them, so that the grand temple could be re-built, presumably by destroying the mosque.

2. BJP’s view of the state: the state is strong, disciplined itself and able to enforce social discipline, ‘clean’ in the sense of being non-corrupt, able to maintain law and order, centralised, militarised state

3. In terms of the state and the economy: it has supported a lean state, private sector involvement in industry and development, and the preeminent role of Indian capital. On liberalization in terms of providing access to foreign capital, the party has been more ambivalent. Though it espouses the rhetoric of economic nationalism, in practice while in power, it has been extraordinarily indulgent vis-a-vis foreign capital

4. Upholding an organic view of society where order, discipline and harmony, based on indigenous values, such as the caste hierarchy, occupational segmentation and patriarchy; needless to say, their program is marked by the absence of references to any questions of ‘poverty’ in the political agenda

5. Arguments against secularism; defining a cultural identity and ethical underpinning for the state and polity. Establishing a state that would govern in accordance with Hindu principles, where the Hindu cultural ethos would be supreme, and where Hindu values would be synonymous with national values.

6. The nation as Hindu and the Muslim ‘other’- an assertion of the sacred geography of India dotted with pilgrimage towns that were, simultaneously sites of Hindu devotion and Islamic aggression. These towns were connected by well-publicized political performances/ automobile processions that sought to emphasize the spiritual unity of India, grounded in Hindu beliefs and brought to life through religious iconography.

The social and political context of the resurgence of Hindu nationalism and the rise of the BJP:

[Briefly note that Hindu nationalism has been like an awkward dinner guest ever since the growth of Indian nationalism- the earliest Hindu-based political parties date back to 1915. The ideological fountainhead of the present Hindu nationalist parties established in central India in 1925. They were widely believed to have engineered Gandhi’s assassination, having miscalculated the negative impact of that act, which gave the Congress the excuse to ban the party, following which it was in the political wilderness for several decades. However, recent scholarship claims that the only reason it was in the wilderness was because post-Independence, the Congress appropriated much of the space it would have occupied.]

1. As you will recall from last week’s lecture, the 1970s saw the increased centralization of power and its concentration in the persona of the Prime Minister, who wilfully undermined existing institutions, both national and sub-national ones, in order to consolidate her own position. Ironically of course, this centralization of power actually reflected the powerlessness of the centralizers. Nonetheless, her authoritarian populism, ushered in the deinstitutionalization of the political process, and a crisis of legitimacy as far as the Indian state was concerned, including its attendant ‘mythologies of rule’, namely socialism and secularism.

2. This transformation went hand in hand with the emergence of ‘New social movements’ in the 1970s. Paradoxically, the BJP benefits from the challenges to the state posed by NSMs, yet also gains support due to the backlash against political pluralism and agitational or movement politics that NSMs represent. It did not help that these these movements often
sought to undermine— and they did so successfully— the power of the state institutions. Important opposition movements called for, as you will recall, the moral renewal of politics, rather that the reinvigoration of existing party and bureaucratic institutions.

3. The politicisation of the caste question, especially as affirmative action was sought to be extended to the so-called ‘backward castes’ as well as the political assertion of OBCs themselves (tying in as it did with the farmer’s movements I described last week), which threatened both the supposed unity of the ‘Hindu family’ and in particular the entrenched positions and privileges of the upper castes.

4. ‘Democratisation of public culture’ and reactions against it. The widespread anxiety among hitherto influential social groups who found their positions threatened and potentially eroded.

5. The ‘rightward’ shift of the Congress in the 1980s, neo-nationalist rhetoric, emphasis on national integration, ‘competitive chauvinism’ to outdo the BJP. For instance, the Congress deployed the language of ‘Hindus in danger’ to mobilize electoral support in Hindu-dominated areas of Muslim-majority States. During that decade, the Congress actually appealed to the electorate in the name of Ram, the Hindu god-king, who has been the mascot of the Hindu Right for the last two decades. Viewed demands for federalism emerging from States with suspicion and painted these as threats to the national security: the conflict in the Punjab couched in religious terms while at the same time the Congress patronized the more radical minority groups to undermine the moderately religious parties that were governing the State, and which had refused to kowtow to the government. Folded neatly with a ‘majoritarian’ nationalist discourse.

6. Communal conflicts of the 1980s and the targeting of religious minorities, where the Congress perpetrated a genocide of several thousand members of the Sikh community in the capital city, within the span of a few days. The violence was legitimised by members of the Congress Party, in full knowledge of the ‘modernizing’ Prime Minister calling on Hindus to teach religious minorities a lesson.

7. Changing context of economic policies of the state. Increasing concessions made to businesses. Stirrings of economic liberalization. Abandon even the rhetoric of development.

8. Rise of the middle classes, reflected in the veritable consumer goods revolution: middle class aspirations- on the one hand, viewed the state’s appeasement of backward and scheduled castes as leasing its own potential. Wanted a state that would allow the unleashing of its economic potential. Moreover, they had acquired economic status, but not corresponding social status. They found the joining and enactment of religious gatherings to be a useful way of channelling their newly-acquired status to register a public presence. In addition to being a sign of religious assertion, it was a means of proclaiming social involvement and gaining community experience: middle classes grew among all communities, but more so among the Hindus.

9. Political mobilisation by the BJP: Building on the ruins of the Congress, attempting to occupy the space left by the Congress, which had been in retreat, as we saw last week, since 1967 and somewhat more decisively in 1977. This was the period when the sacred cartographies were being etched out through several performances/ the automobile processions, the horse-driven carriage processions, processions led by Hindu nationalist leaders who literally walked days and days over their designated routes- the enactment of spectacles of power, aggression and reclamation- resulting in inter-religious violence throughout the 1980s, across northern and western India. Protests were registered against alleged instances of appeasement of Muslims by the state, as well as a general mobilization
against anyone perceived to be anti-Hindu. Images of the “angry Hindu” were flashed and of Hindu women who claimed to be as destructive as the fire were diffused among the public, along with outlining of stereotypes of and supposed threats posed by non-Hindus to the country, especially the Muslims.

**HOW DO WE ACCOUNT FOR THE SUCCESS OF HINDU NATIONALISM?**

There are those who believe that Hindu nationalism emerged because of the decline of the dominant Indian National Congress party and the loss of legitimacy of the post-colonial secular, development state (critique of the state and government came from the left and the right, and through social movements). Yet other explanations have centred on what has been called ‘neighborly incommunication’- the inability or unwillingness of the ‘modernizing elite’ to extend their secularizing ideologies to the ‘pre-modern’ irrational bulk of the population. Others have pointed to the nature of state-formation itself, which is inherently homogenizing and hegemonizing: in this reading, Hindu nationalism represents the triumph of ‘religion as ideology’ over ‘religion as faith’. Its success as an explicitly political interpretation of pan-Indian nationalism paradoxically entailed the negation and rejection of Hinduism as a complex of faiths: Hindu nationalism was not a residual category, but concomitant with the process of modernization, rationalization and- paradoxically- secularization. A more historically modest, but politically far-reaching argument has been that Hindu nationalism was in fact inherent in the way the Congress implemented (or, much rather, failed to implement) its nation-building project, and must carry as much of the blame as other factors do.

**The process of state formation in independent India; the changing conceptions of the state, nation and polity:**

The Hindu nationalists drew on existing discursive registers. For instance, they turned to their advantage the gradual ascendance of the ideas of:

(a) Broad-based, if imprecise disgruntlements and anxieties against the Indian state & the practice of democracy. Democracy needed to be purified of ‘casteism’, disorder and instability. The hindu rightists promised to stem the rot in politics, and make it a virtuous vocation. In fact, when the instances of corruption were uncovered, the top rung of the movement blamed it on the peasants and the lower castes.

(b) Non-interventionist, minimalist state in place of the developmental state. Technocratic mode of governance- e.g Rajiv’s project of taking India into the 21st century

(c) Self-reliance of India’s economy and global economic dominance, led by indigenous private capital, and not through a closed economy and state controls;

(d) Rejection of a ‘western’ trajectory of social change (possessive individualism, hedonism) and celebration of authentic (per Orientalist construction of authentic) Hindu communitarian values and authentic culture. However, not a rejection of ‘modernity’ and the ideas of modernisation, progress and development;

(e) Authoritarian, strong, law and order, centralised, militarised state, that ensures political stability, work ethic, discipline, efficiency and a merit based society and economy. Also, to counter the mobilization of peasant groups;
(f) Military might as the basis of the development of the nation as a superpower; national security state; self-perception of a weak state which was not taken as seriously as it deserved to be

(g) Shift from secularism to religious chauvinistic nationalism; perception that Hindus were being weakened and enfeebled by the Government & by more ‘aggressive’ religious minorities- specific episodes and the coverage to these by the national media enflamed the chauvinistic feelings even further- e.g. the conversions of a few hundred Scheduled Castes to Islam in southern India, the intervention of the Central Government in favour of the Muslim religious orthodoxy, etc. At the same time, the Government sought to maintain the balancing act by adjudicating in favour of the Hindus on a long-standing dispute over a contested plot of land, which many Hindus hold to be the birthplace of the god-king Ram;

(h) Growing middle-class fascination with the presidential model of government-parliamentary instability on the one hand, with political pluralism and the numerous failures of coalition governments to both complete their tenure in office or to effect ‘strong’ policies; the de facto presidential/ dictatorial style inherent in the persona-based on the high-profile framing & implementation of centralized schemes bypassing all intermediary regimes;

(i) Democracy based on community representation (not individual citizenship rights); majoritarianism; a very limited vision of democracy- permanent & unassailable majorities, not undecidable/ shifting majorities. Ironically, this community-centred technology of governance received a fillip when the Central Government sought to extend the provisions of affirmative action in education to the so-called ‘backward caste’ bloc.

The process of class formation and the changing nature of the middle classes, in particular

Gradual expansion of the middle classes in India since the 1980s. Middle classes and upper castes form the core support of the BJP (electoral and survey data show this). Why?

(1) BJP’s support for Indian capital: increasingly aggressive (in terms of economic muscle) Indian capitalist class, which needed protectionist policies, but by the 1980s was ready to compete and to discard the protection that now hemmed them in. Found the Congress too accommodative of disparate interests- not adequately supportive of its entrepreneurial spirit.

(2) Middle class ‘nationalist fantasies’ in a globalised world. On the one hand, there was the consumer revolution. This led, on the other hand to ‘foreign technology fetishism’ and a concomitant perception that India was sliding, sharpening the sense of frustration and anger that provided the acerbic tone of the movement.

(3) Merit-based economy and society (anti-reservation/anti-affirmative action) appealed to the urban middle class/ the entrepreneurial spirit of these classes.

(4) Religion expected to enable a smooth social transformation in the context of rapid economic transition [economic liberalisation in India was gradually introduced from the 1980s, with 1991 marking a decisive break with the past]; Hindu norms of gender and generational hierarchies, communitarian and family values; social conservatism and patriarchy
Democratic politics, democratization and backlash against it: Do the Hindu nationalists represent the forces of democratization, as they claim; or do they represent a conservative revolution, an elite revolt?

The Hindu nationalists have never claimed to be anti-democratic. They argue, and follow a respectable tradition of argument, against individualist democracy/parliamentary democracy. Draw on the distinction within contemporary Indian political philosophy between high politics (rajniti) and popular politics (lokniti), and claim to espouse, like Gandhi and two generations of popular revolutionary critics, the latter. In the past, they have supported the devolution of finances and responsibilities to village communities, and claimed to be sympathetic and supportive of the village republic, which supposedly formed the crux of Indian political life.

However, the limits to this espousal of democracy become apparent when we take a closer look at the conception of democracy that Hindu nationalists have propagated. They follow Gandhi in critiquing parliamentary democracy as being a western import, and dream of resurrecting consultative/consensual decision-making forums that is supposed to have characterised monastic governance in ancient India. Outrageous as that might sound, in at least one of the States where the Hindu nationalists hold power, they have instituted rewards for villages that ‘elect’ village council chiefs on the basis of consensus. However, it would be misleading to think that the Hindu nationalists have in mind some sort of communicative or rational deliberative democracy—all discussions are to be ultimately tempered by the authority and knowledge of the local elite, whose natural qualities place them in a better position to rule.

The Hindu nationalists are also clearly against the individualistic conception of democracy. Individualism is seen to be an imitation of the west, it is not an authentic Indian value. By being antithetical to order, deference and an organic division of labor, its espousal subverts the very basis of Indian culture. The community is taken to be a more authentic marker of the constituent units of Indian democracy. These could be sub-castes, occupations, etc. But overarching division within Indian society is that based on religion. The Hindus as the majority community—meaning numerically preponderant—have a right to rule. Given the logic of ‘rule by community’, this would mean an unassailable permanent majority to the Hindus. As you know, such a conception of democracy contradicts both the liberal/procedural notion of democracy as a competition among elites and the more substantive notion as a means of challenging power equations.

For all their emphasis on government by discussion, which is supposed to have taken place in an idealised ancient India, that discussion was to be held away from the plebeians/masses, among nonelected elites. Here again, they sought to recreate the notion of kingship that is supposed to have prevailed in ancient India, where temporal power was separated from spiritual authority and guided by it: consultations for the Hindu nationalists meant that the elected heads of the government would deliberate with the nonelected spiritual advisers, who were neither accountable to the electorate nor did they shoulder any responsibilities. For several years, they claimed to be the only party that was practising inner-party democracy. However the truth was that the elections were merely cosmetic and procedural. Party elections were always consensual
affairs. Where there appeared to be the possibility of a serious contest, inner-party elections tended to be ‘postponed’ indefinitely, as in the State of Madhya Pradesh.

Finally, the BJP’s social basis betrays its claims to represent the forces of democracy. Traders and industrialists tend to dominate its ranks. A disproportionately higher support among the upper castes and the upper middle and middle classes. This has the impact that the BJP’s two-fold agenda has consistently been the defence of the social hierarchy and economic deregulation. These classes in particular influenced the discourse on social order and orderly day-to-day discipline which, they argued, was a prerequisite for economic development.

Somewhat mechanistically perhaps, authors have referred to the resurgence of Hindu nationalism as providing a cover for upper caste control. ‘Elite Revolt’ (Corbridge and Harriss) and a ‘conservative revolution’ (Thomas Blom Hansen), against ‘participatory electoral upsurge’ (Yadav) and lower caste political mobilisation.

Two episodes
1. Hindu nationalism appeared to have scored a decisive victory when, in 1992, it occupied the disputed plot of land and destroyed the existing mosque which was allegedly desecrating the birthplace of their mythical god-king. However, the predictions of an electoral sweep based on the polarization of communities were proved wrong, as the BJP suffered electoral reverses due to poor governance in the States it ruled.
2. Formed the government at the center, heading a multi-party coalition that significantly tied its hands, and forced it to put contentious issues in the backburner

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*Congress + Allies = United Progressive Alliance (UPA) – after 2004 elections
For further data on the BJP’s electoral performance and support base in 1999, see:
*Frontline*
Nov 5, 1999: Analysis of electoral gains and losses for various parties
Nov 19, 1999: Analysis of the BJP’s support base

For further data on the BJP’s and Congress’s electoral performance in 2004, see:

For further data on the BJP’s and Congress’s electoral performance in 2009, see: